

# History of the Sovereignty Movement in Québec

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Last Updated: March 2003

## Introduction

Although little is reported about Canada in the U.S. media, almost everyone has heard something about Québec — that it is a French-speaking province that has considered separation from Canada for some time. However most people, including many Canadians, do not understand why the Québécois want to separate or the historical reasons leading to that decision.

The aim of this module is to give students a background in the history of Québec so that they will understand the roots of the separatist movement today. Because the module attempts to tie the story of the French in Canada to U.S. history, students should also gain a greater sense of the interrelatedness of the histories of both countries. The module begins with some simple geography exercises allowing students to connect the province of Québec to North America and to the world.

The module will cover 1) the first European colonies in Canada and the U.S.; 2) the Expulsion of the Acadians to the American colonies; 3) the fall of New France and the impact of the American Revolution on English colonization; 4) the Louisiana Purchase; 5) the massive migration of French-Canadians to New England in the 19th century; and, 6) the similarities between the Quiet Revolution and Civil Rights movement.

Students will need pencils, paper, and an atlas or wall maps of Canada, North America, and the world. Simple exercises using time lines, math, and maps will be suggested throughout the module.

## Québec geography

Have the students locate Québec on a map of the world and study its relation to the rest of the world and to their state.

The students may already know that most of the people in Québec speak French because their ancestors came from the country of France. Have the students locate France on a map of the world and draw a line connecting Québec to France. Ask the students to compare the size of the two countries and to see if they can guess, without measuring, how many times the country of France would fit into Québec. After guessing, have them figure it out mathematically.

France is approximately 547,000 square kilometers in size. Québec is approximately 1,541,000 square kilometres (both France and Canada use kilometres and not miles). Before using pen and paper, encourage the students to divide the numbers approximately in their heads. If they round the numbers off to the nearest 100,000 and are told to make the answer a whole number, the equation should be fairly easy. (France fits into Québec three times.)

Have the students use their maps of North America to figure out, visually, which is the largest province in Canada (do not include territories) and the largest state in the U.S. (Québec is the largest province in Canada and Alaska is the largest state in the U.S.) Which

country has the largest state or province? Have the students compare Québec to Alaska on the maps and make a guess. (The two are very close in size but Alaska is slightly larger.)

One thing these exercises will illustrate is that Québec is a huge province. Certainly, if Québec decides to separate from Canada, it would make a large country all on its own, larger than France and many other European nations.

### **New France – the first European colony in Canada was French**

Most of the people in Québec speak French — in fact over 80% have French as their first language. The Québécois are almost all descendants of the very first colonists to Canada. Between the first settlement in 1608 and the defeat of the French armies by the English in New France in 1759, approximately 10,000 French immigrants came to Canada. At the time of the fall of New France over 60,000 French-speaking people were living along the St. Lawrence. After the French army abandoned the settlers in New France, French immigrants stopped coming to Canada making those early colonial years the roots of Québec's history today. Interestingly, there are some parallels between the history of New France and the Thirteen Colonies.

Have the students draw a time line from 1500 to the year 2000. At the year 2000 they might want to write their names and the school they attend. Remind them that Christopher Columbus opened the Americas to colonization by the Europeans in the late 1400s. Columbus landed in the Caribbean in 1492 and from that point forward the Spaniards began to colonize South America. Have the students draw a line from Spain to the Caribbean on their world maps. Columbus didn't plan to open settlement to the Americas. In fact, he didn't even realize he'd come upon an entirely new country. He thought he was in Asia. In the 1500s the European countries were looking for a shorter route to Asia to make it more profitable to trade goods for spices. They hoped that there might be a route through the North American continent to save sailing all the way around the southern tip of South America.

Have the students look at a world map and trace a line from western Europe to Asia by traveling around Cape Horn. Now have them imagine how much shorter it would have been if the Europeans could have found a way through the North American continent. This desire for the Northwest Passage has much to do with early European exploration and settlement in the New World and everything to do with why the French first settled in what is Canada today.

Shortly after Columbus landed in the Caribbean, another Italian, John Cabot, sailed along the East Coast (1497). Some think that he may have landed in Newfoundland. Cabot was sailing for the King of England and was the first European to come to the Americas and know that he wasn't in Asia. Cabot knew he was in a new land and claimed what he "found" for the King of England. Have the students draw a line from England to Newfoundland. Cabot opened the doors for the English to start a major fur trading company in Canada and to colonize and settle on the land.

Shortly after Cabot landed in Newfoundland a Frenchman, Jacques Cartier, landed in present-day Québec (1534). Have the students draw a line from France to the mouth of the St. Lawrence River (on the east coast of Canada). Cartier, like Columbus and Cabot, was looking for a shorter route to Asia. Because the mouth of the St. Lawrence is so wide, Cartier was sure the river would continue to the other side of the continent. There were Iroquois villages along the St. Lawrence River, but Cartier nonetheless erected a 30' cross at Gaspé and claimed the land for the King of France. This opened the doors to French

settlement in the Québec area. Have the students add the voyages of Cabot and Cartier to their time lines.

In the early 1600s the English settled on the east coast of the United States and the French settled in Nova Scotia (which at that time also included New Brunswick) and Québec. The English were the first Europeans to settle in the U.S.; and the French, the first to settle in Canada.

Jamestown, in present-day Virginia, was the first permanent English colony in the United States settled in 1607. Just one year later the first permanent French settlement was founded at the site of an Iroquois village called Stadacona, or today's Québec City. European Americans are proud to say that theirs was the first settlement in North America, while European Canadians have claim to the oldest street in North America in Québec City. Have the students locate both Jamestown (just up the James River from Norfolk, Virginia) and Québec City and draw a line connecting these early settlements to their mother countries in Europe.

France called the new colony, "New France". Have the students mark the period from 1600 to the 1759 on their time lines and label it "New France". During this time period France built a modest colony in Canada which thrived until the fall of New France and the take-over by the English.

### **Why did the English want the French colonies?**

Canada is such a large country that it is difficult to imagine that the English and French would even have to fight for land or resources. However, given the cold climate and the lack of rich agricultural land, there wasn't as much space as there might seem. Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had very good farmland, but in Québec the only good land was along the St. Lawrence River. Space was limited and there was reason for competition. Beginning with the Expulsion of the Acadians, the English began to lay claim to New France.

### **The Acadians – forefathers of the Cajun people from Louisiana**

In the mid-1700s there was a substantial French colony in what is today Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. Have the students highlight the major areas of French settlement — the provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Québec along both sides of the St. Lawrence to Montréal. Now have the students locate Louisiana on their maps and find New Orleans. New Orleans was also a French colony established in the early 1700s. There is a strong connection between the French in the Maritime provinces (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) and those in Louisiana.

In the mid-1700s there were about 13,000 French-speaking people living in the Maritimes called the Acadians. The Acadians had worked hard to establish farms in the area and to build solid communities. In the mid-1700s English colonists demanded that the Acadians give up their Catholic religion and claim allegiance to the Crown of England. The Acadians refused and so were pushed off their farmland and ordered out of the area. Some were imprisoned for not claiming allegiance to the English Crown; some were put onto boats and sent back to France; and about 4,000 Acadians went south to the American colonies, a few making it as far as the French colonies in Louisiana.

On their time lines have the students mark the Expulsion of the Acadians at 1755. Now have the students measure the distance between the Maritime provinces and Louisiana and round the number off to the nearest 1,000. They should come up with approximately 2,000 miles between the two points. This is the distance the Acadians had to walk when the English forced them to leave the Maritimes. Now have the students figure out how many months it

would have taken the Acadians to walk to Louisiana if they covered 10 miles per day. Given the winter months it may have taken the Acadians as long as a year to have made the trek. Years later, after the English once again allowed the Acadians back to the area, many of those who traveled to Louisiana returned. Today there is still a strong Acadian culture in the two provinces. These are the descendants of the Acadians who traveled all the way to Louisiana and back again.

If the students have a good map of the southern States, they may be able to find Lafayette, Louisiana. It is just west of New Orleans or Baton Rouge. Lafayette was founded by the Acadians in the mid-1700s. The Cajun people in Louisiana today are descendants of the Acadians. The word Cajun comes from Acadian. It was likely a miss-pronunciation of the name by the English-speaking people in Louisiana. They may have pronounced it A-ca-jun and later it became Cajun.

One of the most famous American poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem about the Expulsion called, "Evangeline". This became one of his most famous poems. Through the work of this famous American poet, French-Canadian history has become part of the story of European settlement in the U.S.

### **The fall of New France and the impact of the American Revolution on the French**

Have the students locate Québec City and Montréal on their maps and mark 1759 by Québec City and 1760 at Montréal. These are the dates that the English defeated the French armies in New France. This defeat marked the end of New France in Canada and the beginning of English rule.

Have the students mark the fall of New France on their time lines. At this point the French lost political power and all ties to France. In fact, after the mid-1700s almost no French immigrants came to Canada. Most of the French-speaking people in Canada today have histories that go back to the early colonial period.

There were two small islands that were not handed over to the English — St. Pierre and Miquelon. In North America it is possible to travel to France without ever leaving the continent! Have the students locate Newfoundland on their maps. Now have them find the peninsula on the southern part of Newfoundland pointing south. Just off the peninsula, 15 miles from Newfoundland, are St. Pierre and Miquelon —two tiny remnants of New France. They are just a two-hour ferry ride from Newfoundland. The people there speak French, use French currency and stamps, and are actually still part of the country of France.

Even today the Québécois have not forgotten the fall of New France. In fact, the Québec license plate reads, "Je me souviens" or "I remember" referring to the defeat of the French armies in New France in 1759/60. Some people think that 200+ years is too long to hold a grudge and that the Québécois ought to "get over it" and look forward instead of into the past. This is too simplistic. The French in Canada are not just remembering that they lost a battle; they are remembering their culture, their language, and their identity as a people. Ever since the mid-1700s the French in Canada have had to fight for their survival as a culture. Remembering is part of keeping a culture alive.

The American Revolution, which occurred just 15 years after the fall of New France, had a direct impact on how the English in Canada treated the French in the early years of colonization. During the time of the fall of New France, there were already rumblings on the American side of the border about wanting independence from Great Britain. Once the Revolution began the Americans, though they were fighting the British, were nonetheless

nervous about the English in Canada. In order to protect themselves, they tried to get the French in Canada to join their cause.

At the same time the English in the North were concerned about the independence movement spreading to Canada. Because their numbers were so much smaller, the English in Canada had to find ways to get as many people on their side as possible. Approximately 50,000 Americans who wanted to stay loyal to the Crown were given free land in Canada (they were called the United Empire Loyalists). Another 3,500 Black slaves were promised freedom as well as land and provisions if they claimed allegiance to Great Britain. In addition, the English had to find a way to keep the recently conquered French on their side and to convince them that they were better off under the thumb of the English than being dominated by the Americans.

In the early years of colonization, the English allowed the French to use their language and to practice their culture and Catholic religion. In this way the French were able to live pretty much as they had before the English took over except that they didn't have any political power. Because they were given many rights, almost all chose to stay on the English side during the American Revolution fearful that they would have fewer freedoms with the Americans. In this way the American Revolution had a significant impact on the history of the French in Canada. The English continued to allow the French many freedoms until the threat from the U.S. was over.

It wasn't until 1839 when the Governor of Canada, Lord Durham, wrote the Durham Report that assimilationist strategies began to be used on the French. He declared in his report that the French were "a people with no literature and no history" and that they ought to be fully assimilated into English Canada. For a period of time the French language and culture were less tolerated than before.

### **The Louisiana Purchase and the loss of hope for a French empire in North America**

Though New France had been taken over by the English in Canada, France still laid claim to a huge portion of land in the U.S. until the early 1800s. The Thirteen Colonies and the new United States of America only included the land east of the Mississippi River. The central continent, from the Mississippi River to the foot of the Rocky Mountains, still belonged to the French. This was the time of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe and the costs to France were high. The country simply couldn't afford to hang onto land in North America. In the early 1800s President Thomas Jefferson gave France 15 million dollars for that land. Napoleon Bonaparte was disappointed — France had just given up any hopes of having an empire in the New World. But Jefferson was elated — overnight the size of the U.S. had doubled!

Have the students look at their maps and identify the area included in the Louisiana Purchase. First, have the students draw a line from the mouth of the Mississippi River at New Orleans up river or north to Duluth on the west side of Lake Superior. Now have them move west across the Canadian/America border to the Rocky Mountains at Montana. Have them draw a line from Montana to New Mexico. They don't need to be exact and these boundaries are not precise, but nonetheless this will give them a good indication of the land involved in the Louisiana Purchase. Have the students mark the Louisiana Purchase on their time lines at 1803.

Today, the Québécois say that they are an island in a sea of English-speaking people. There are approximately 7 million French-speaking people in Canada today out of almost 300 million Canadians and Americans total. These figures alone show that maintaining a language and culture in such a minority situation would be a challenge.

### **New England roots in French Canada**

Today, over 5 million people in New England are descendants of one of the greatest diasporas in North American history — the migration of almost 1 million French-Canadians to the U.S. from the mid-1800s to the Great Depression in 1930.

Have the students locate the New England states on their maps (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, and Connecticut). Have them draw arrows between the province of Québec and this area. On their time lines have them mark the period from 1850-1930 as "La Grande Hémorragie". In English this means "the great hemorrhage". Overcrowding and increased stress on the land forced thousands of French to move south in search of new opportunities.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, new shoe and textile factories began to open in the New England area providing thousands of unskilled-labor jobs. Entire families started to relocate to the U.S. This was a sad time for the Québécois because whole communities were emptied out in the process. However, these Franco-Americans, as they are called, adapted well to life in the U.S. setting up "little Canadas" in the cities and maintaining some semblance of their culture. Today those with French ancestry in the New England area form a direct link between the histories of Canada and the U.S.

### **The Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and the Quiet Revolution in Québec**

Between the 1930s and the 1960s the French-Canadians remained undereducated, mostly rural, religious, and mainly laborers for the English-owned businesses. It wasn't until the 1950s that the intellectuals in the community started to speak out against Church control over their lives and English dominance politically and economically. In 1960 a new premier was voted in in Québec, Jean Lesage, who sparked a political movement in Québec similar to the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. The new government started to take back ownership of Québec businesses from the English and to set up policies and laws to protect the French language and culture. The popular slogan of the time was, "Maître chez nous!" In English this means, "Masters in our own house!"

In both the U.S. and Canada the 1960s were a dynamic time when all people who felt oppressed — Native Americans, African Americans, women, the French in Canada — started to fight for fairer treatment and equality. In the U.S. the African American movement was called the Civil Rights movement while the battle for French language and culture in Québec was called the Quiet Revolution. On their time lines have the students mark these two movements during the 1960s. In Québec the battle for more freedoms had to do primarily with the control the Catholic Church over the lives of the French Canadians.

Both the African Americans and the Québécois went through a cultural revival during this time — music and literature were being performed and written as never before. At last, after centuries of oppression, both groups were gaining a voice and were not ashamed to express themselves. This was also a time when names for ethnic groups were being changed. In the U.S. "Negro" was replaced with the name "African American" to acknowledge the ancestral and cultural link to Africa. In Canada the French replaced the name "French-Canadian" with "Québécois" in an effort to define themselves more by the province of the first colonists than by that of the country of Canada. This was also the time when the province instituted language laws to protect the French language.

The Quiet Revolution wasn't entirely quiet though. During the 1970s a group formed called the Front de Libération du Québec (The Québec Liberation Front) or, more popularly, the FLQ. This was a small terrorist group that set bombs in garbage cans and eventually kidnapped a diplomat and provincial politician murdering the politician. This event caused an

uproar in Canada. The War Measures Act allowed the government to arrest without a legal warrant anyone they suspected. Compared to the U.S., Canada fortunately saw relatively little violence during this period.

### **Québec and the Constitution of Canada**

The most recent issue between Québec and the rest of the country has been the absence of Québec's inclusion in the Canadian Constitution. Shortly after the American Revolution, the Thirteen Colonies drew up a Constitution to which all agreed. This did not happen in Canada. First, until 1982 the Canada's Constitution was in Great Britain. In that year the Prime Minister brought the Constitution home calling for certain amendments. Just as all members of a club have to agree on the rules of membership, all Canadians (or all provinces) had to agree on the rules, laws, and statements made in the Constitution. All the provinces did agree — except Québec. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister, rather than working with the issue until it was resolved, went ahead and amended the Constitution without Québec's signature. This was very upsetting to the Québécois because, once again, they felt that the English Canadians would rather bully them than include them as partners. Though Québec abides by the Constitution, it does not feel that it is properly represented.

There have been many meetings and efforts since to include Québec in the Constitution, but all have failed. In 1995 the Premier of Québec had a vote to see if the Québec people wanted to leave Canada. By less than 1% the Québécois decided to stay in the country. It was a very emotional time. Hundreds of English Canadians travelled across the country to a huge rally in Québec just to tell the Québécois how much they wanted them to stay in Canada. It was really like brothers and sisters from across the country letting their siblings know that they didn't want them to leave home and that they cared.

Every time the government makes an effort to amend the Constitution, somebody is unhappy. Either the other provinces think that giving Québec special status is unfair, or other minority groups think that if Québec has special status in the Constitution so should they, or Québec isn't pleased with the changes.

### **Conclusion**

It is very difficult to say what will happen in Québec. Some Québécois think that a separate country is necessary to protect their language and culture; others think this protection can be obtained within the Canadian federation. Many English Canadians are tired of the discussion and don't understand why the Québécois feel so protective of their culture. Many English Canadians think the Québécois have too many rights already. Many First Nations people in Québec, who have been treated even worse than the Québécois and who have had to struggle even harder to protect their languages and cultures, are tired of listening to the complaints of a group so much more powerful than themselves. Many people in the States don't understand the problems in Canada and think that if the Spanish speaking people in the U.S. are allowed language rights, that the U.S. will have the same problems as Canada. Other Americans think that Québec is a model for keeping a minority culture and language alive. This is a very complex issue that has no easy answers.