

Exploring the Explorers

JACQUES CARTIER

Excerpts from the biography of Jacques Cartier by Marcel Trudel

REFERENCES

Print: Trudel, Marcel. "Cartier, Jacques." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. I. University of Toronto Press. First published 1966. Revised 1979.

Online: Trudel, Marcel. "Cartier, Jacques." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. I. University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003– ,
http://biographi.ca/en/bio/cartier_jacques_1491_1557_1E.html.

N.B. When a name appears in **small capitals** in the biography/biography excerpts, that indicates that the person also has a biography in Volume I of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography/Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*.

When a name has an **asterisk (*)** behind it, that indicates that the person has a biography in another volume of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography/Dictionnaire biographique du Canada*.

BASIC FACTS

(to be distributed to all students)

CARTIER, JACQUES, navigator of Saint-Malo, first explorer of the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1534, discoverer of the St. Lawrence River in 1535, commander of the settlement of Charlesbourg-Royal in 1541–42; b. probably some time between 7 June and 23 Dec. 1491 at Saint-Malo (Brittany), where he died in 1557.

EXCERPT 1: EARLY LIFE

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... Cartier had no doubt been going to sea since his youth, but nothing is known of his career before 1532....

In 1519 he had married Catherine Des Granches, daughter of Jacques Des Granches, *chevalier du roi* and constable of Saint-Malo; she died in April 1575. They seem to have had no children. It was a nephew, Jacques NOËL, who was to try to carry on Cartier's work.

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... The commission granted to Cartier in 1534 has not been located, but an order from the king, in March of the same year, enlightens us as to the objective of the voyage: “to discover certain islands and lands where it is said that a great quantity of gold, and other precious things, are to be found.” The 1534 account suggests a second objective: the route to Asia....

Cartier set off from Saint-Malo on 20 April 1534, with 2 ships and 61 men. Favoured by “good weather,” he crossed the Atlantic in 20 days. He visited places already known and named, from the cape of “Bonne Viste” to the Baie des Châteaux; then he entered the bay which had been set as the first stage in his journey.... One hundred miles to the west of Belle-Isle, Cartier encountered a ship from La Rochelle; he directed it back on to its course. Cartier was not yet in a totally unknown world, but he freely assigned names to the geographical features of the north coast: Île Sainte-Catherine; Toutes-Isles; Havre Saint-Antoine; Havre Saint-Servan, where he set up his first cross; Rivière Saint-Jacques; Havre Jacques-Cartier. For the land which he saw he had the utmost contempt: “along the whole of the north shore, I did not see one cart-load of earth,” it was “the land God gave to Cain.” On 15 June he steered “towards the south” and entered unexplored regions. He went along the west coast of Newfoundland, distributing French names, and reached what is today Cabot Strait, but he did not perceive that it was a navigable channel and turned westward....

... On 14 July he entered the Baie de Gaspé (which remained unnamed in 1534). He stayed there for a considerable time, until 25 July, which permitted him to establish some very important contacts with the Indians.

They were not the first natives whom he had encountered. On 12 or 13 June he had seen Indians in the “land of Cain”; they had come from inland to hunt the seal, and they have been identified by some as Beothuks, who are now extinct. At the beginning of July he had seen others on the Prince Edward Island coast, and on 7 July, in the Baie des Chaleurs, he had traded in furs with natives, probably Micmacs. Those whom he met at Gaspé were Laurentian Iroquois, who had come down in great numbers for their annual fishing. This nation was master of the St. Lawrence and was to assume historical importance. The Iroquois gleefully accepted small gifts, and an alliance was concluded, with dancing and jubilation. On 24 July Cartier erected a cross 30 ft. high, bearing the arms of France, at Penouille Point. If the crosses at Saint-Servan and on Île Brion were rather in the nature of landmarks or beacons, this one was much more: it is clear from the importance of the ceremony that the cross was intended to indicate that the

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territory was being taken possession of in the name of François I. Chief **DONNACONA** protested; he approached Cartier's boat with his brother and three of his sons to harangue the strangers. A pretence was made of offering him an axe. As he was about to take it, the French held on to his craft and forced the Iroquois to come on board the ship. Cartier reassured them and obtained permission to take away with him two of Donnacona's sons, Domagaya and Taignoagny, promising to bring them back. There was feasting, followed by a most cordial leave-taking. Cartier left the Baie de Gaspé on 25 July with these two Indians, who would be able one day to act as interpreters....

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... In 1534 Cartier had had only 2 ships and 61 men; in 1535 he had 3 ships and a crew of some 110 men.... Domagaya and Taignoagny were on the voyage also. During their eight and a half months' stay in France they had learned French, but had not yet been baptized.

Cartier left Saint-Malo 19 May 1535 and reached the gulf once more after a long, 50-day crossing. He immediately resumed his quest, sailing along the north coast.... Finally, on 13 August, following the instructions of his two native guides, he passed the crucial point. There before him was the whole geography of the region: the Indians showed him "the way to the mouth of the great river of Hochelaga and the route towards Canada," which narrowed continually as one went on; its waters, first salt then fresh, came from so great a distance that there was no record of any man ever having seen their source. Here at last, concluded Cartier, was the passage he was seeking.

He went up the river, examining the two shores as he advanced. He perceived on his right a "very deep and rapid" river which his guides told him was the route to the Saguenay, a kingdom where there was copper, and about which Donnacona was to tell wonderful tales. On 7 September Cartier reached the archipelago of Orléans, which was "where the province and territory of Canada begins," the name Canada being applied then only to what is now Quebec. After feasting with Donnacona, Cartier decided to lay up his ships in the river Sainte-Croix (Saint-Charles), at the mouth of the stream called Lairet. Opposite rose the cape of Stadacona, where there was a village which was probably unfortified, after the Montagnais fashion, although it was inhabited by Iroquois.

Cartier was eager to get to Hochelaga, but the two native interpreters had already begun to scheme against the French. There was also some anxiety at Stadacona about this trip. Donnacona wanted to secure for himself the monopoly of the trade which would develop, since he hoped to escape from the domination exercised by Hochelaga over the Iroquois of the valley.... Cartier, however, set out on 19 September on the *Émérillon*, but without interpreters, which greatly lessened the usefulness of his trip.... On 2 October he arrived at Hochelaga, a town enclosed and fortified after the Iroquois style, near a mountain which he named Mont-Royal....

When Cartier returned to Stadacona, he found his men building a fort. The natives feigned joy on seeing him again, but their friendliness had vanished; new intrigues by the

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interpreters soon brought about a complete rupture. Relations were resumed only in November, in an atmosphere of mutual distrust.

Then came winter, the Laurentian winter which the Europeans were experiencing for the first time, and which furthermore was a severe one. From mid-November to mid-April the ships were icebound. The snow reached a height of four feet and more. The river froze as far as Hochelaga. Still more terrible than the winter was scurvy, which appeared among the natives of Stadacona in December; despite an attempt to set up a sanitary barrier against it, it attacked the French. By mid-February not more than 10 of Cartier's 110 men were still well; 8 were dead, including the young Philippe Rougemont, on whom an autopsy was made. And the evil continued its ravages; 25 persons, all told, eventually died.... At last, by skilfully questioning Domagaya, who had had scurvy, Cartier learned the secret of the remedy: an infusion made from *annedda* (white cedar). The crew was quickly cured....

When spring came they prepared to return to France....

Before leaving, Cartier wanted to strengthen the position of the French; the ethnic, linguistic, and political unity of the Laurentian valley already gave them an advantage, which was however endangered by the conduct of Donnacona and of his two sons. Cartier learned that a rival, Agona, was aspiring to power. A plan for a revolution became clear: to eliminate the ruling party on behalf of Agona. Cartier cunningly took advantage of a religious ceremony – the erection of a cross on the festival on 3 May – to capture Donnacona, the interpreters, and a few other natives. He appeased the crowd by promising to bring back Donnacona in 10 or 12 months, with lavish presents from the king.

On 6 May he left Sainte-Croix with his two ships and about ten Iroquois, including four children who had been given to him the previous autumn. In his cargo were a dozen pieces of gold and some furs.... On 16 July 1536 he arrived back in Saint-Malo, after an absence of 14 months....

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EXCERPT 4: THE THIRD VOYAGE

... Immediately on his return Cartier presented a report to François I....

However, the Saint-Malo navigator could not resume his explorations immediately. War broke out between François I and Charles V....

It was not until 17 Oct. 1540 that the king gave Cartier a commission for a third voyage. The discoverer was named captain-general of the new expedition, and he was to proceed to “Canada and Hochelaga, and as far as the land of Saguenay,” with individuals of “all kinds, arts and industries,” including some 50 men whom he was authorized to take from the prisons; exploration was to be carried out, and they were to live with the natives “if need be.” ...

... Cartier made his will on 19 May and on 23 May put to sea with five ships, including the *Grande Hermine* and the *Émérillon*. A Spanish spy put the crew at 1,500 men.... None of the Iroquois whom [Cartier] had brought to France in 1536 returned to Canada; they had all died, except for a little girl.

On 23 Aug. 1541 Cartier reappeared before Stadacona. The Indians received him with numerous demonstrations of joy. Cartier announced Donnacona’s death, but stated that the other Iroquois were living in France like lords and did not want to return, which must have delighted Agona. The friendly relations nonetheless did not last....

... As the account of this voyage breaks off suddenly, we do not know exactly what happened during the winter season....

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EXCERPT 5: OTHER DETAILS OF JACQUES CARTIER'S LIFE AND LEGACY

... [After his return to France in 1542], Cartier apparently concentrated upon business and upon the exploitation of his estate of Limoilou. He acted as godfather, or served as a witness at court on various occasions. Cartier was no doubt a man who liked to do himself well; a note in a registry of births, marriages, and deaths associates him with the “hearty tipplers.” The documents of this period usually designate him as a “noble homme,” which places him in the well-established *bourgeoisie*. He died 1 Sept. 1557, probably at the age of 66 years.

No authentic portrait of Cartier is known....

... Cartier discovered one of the greatest rivers in the world, and he marks the starting-point of France's occupation of three-quarters of a continent.