



History 101

Jacques Cartier

Jacques Cartier (December 31, 1491 – September 1, 1557) was a Breton explorer who claimed what is now Canada for France. Jacques Cartier was the first European to describe and map the Gulf of Saint Lawrence and the shores of the Saint Lawrence River, which he named "The Country of Canadas", after the Iroquois names for the two big settlements he saw at Stadacona (Quebec City) and at Hochelaga (Montreal Island) .

In 1534, Cartier was introduced to King Francis I by Jean Le Veneur, bishop of Saint-Malo. Le Veneur cited voyages to Newfoundland and Brazil as proof of Cartier's ability to "lead ships to the discovery of new lands in the New World".

On April 20, 1534, Cartier set sail under a commission from the king, hoping to discover a western passage to the wealthy markets of Asia. On April 20, 1534, Cartier set sail under a commission from the king, hoping to discover a western passage to the wealthy markets of Asia. In the words of the commission, he was to "discover certain islands and lands where it is said that a great quantity of gold and other precious things are to be found".

It took him twenty days to sail across the ocean. He explored parts of Newfoundland, areas that now comprise the Canadian Atlantic provinces and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. On the shores of Gaspé Bay with a party of St. Lawrence Iroquoians, on July 24, he planted a cross to claim the land for France. Cartier returned to France in September 1534, sure that he had reached an Asian land.

Jacques Cartier set sail for a second voyage on May 19 of the following year with three ships, 110 men, and his two Iroquoian captives. Reaching the St. Lawrence, he sailed up-river for the first time, and reached the Iroquoian capital of Stadacona, where Chief Donnacona ruled. Ready to return to France in early May 1536, Cartier decided to take Chief Donnacona to France, so that he might personally tell the tale of a country further north, called the "Kingdom of Saguenay", said to be full of gold, rubies and other treasures. After an arduous trip down the St. Lawrence and a three-week Atlantic crossing, Cartier and his men arrived in Saint-Malo on July 15, 1536, concluding the second, 14-month voyage.



On May 23, 1541, Cartier departed Saint-Malo on his third voyage (this time as chief navigator) with five ships. All thought of finding a passage to the Orient was forgotten. The goals were now to find the "Kingdom of Saguenay" and its riches, and to establish a permanent settlement along the St. Lawrence River. Cartier left for France in early June 1542, convinced his vessels contained a wealth of gold and diamonds (actually quartz crystals and iron pyrites). He arrived there in October, in what proved to be his last voyage.

Cartier spent the rest of his life in Saint-Malo and his nearby estate. He died at age 65 on September 1, 1557, during an epidemic. Cartier is interred in St. Vincent's Cathedral.

