

Example of essay on french interaction with american indians in the 15th century

[Parts of the World](#), [Europe](#)



European encounters with American Indians have long been a point of interest among historians, ethnographers, and anthropologists. The moment of contact with the indigenous western peoples forever changed the face of the globe. Perhaps the most infamous period of interchange between those of European descent and those native to North America is the one after the establishment of the United States. During this latter period American Indians population began to dwindle, much of the esoteric cultures of now lost tribes were obliterated, and the contention between the American settlers and American Indians could only with great magnanimity be referred to as 'bloody'. The great renown of this historical reality has thus implanted an impression in the minds of most people that relations with Native Americans were near always contentious and that the settlers of the New World from Europe universally held the native tribes in contempt, regarding them as savages, from the time of their arrival in North America. By looking at sources contemporary to the time period, one can see clearly the erroneousness of such a supposition.

Noted historian of the American Indians Francis Jennings writes that the measure of the indigenous peoples was taken by Europeans using European values as the basis for evaluation. He explains that deviation from European dress was seen as a lack of civility as were variations in traditional gender roles. While these notions certainly imbibed in the European settlers an image of savagery, the many virtues of the American Indians shifted the impression to one of a 'noble savage,' savage in deviation from the purported superiority of Europe but noble in their very nature and proprietary traditions.

This sentiment was seemingly very powerful in the French areas of colonization in the Northeast regions of North America. It is important to note that the French never intended to set up colonies in this region, preferring instead to establish trade alliances with locals. An additional motivation for many was the allure of expedition or else the drive to save the souls of the American Indians. This latter motivation brought a large number of Jesuit priests to American shores, many of these individuals proving to be astute observers and adroit chroniclers. In 1634, French traveler Paul Le Juene wrote concerning his interactions with the Montagnais Indians. He wrote extensively of their physical fortitude and beauty, noting that they were strong and able bodies and their visages were reminiscent of the Roman busts of the emperors. Le Juene then discusses how they are a people slow to anger, valuing patience and mental fortitude. Perhaps surprisingly he writes, “ Whoever professes to get angry out also to make a profession of patience. The Indians surpass us to such an extent in this respect that we ought to be ashamed.” This piece supports a notion that French settlers had an incredibly positive opinion of the American Indians, so positive in fact that they were willing to note their superiority, not of wealth or beauty, but of moral fiber!

An interesting discussion of American Indian constructs of law and government further elucidates the European impression of the advancement of their civilization. Jean De Brebeuf, as the leader of a missionary group in the New World, is noted as a close observer of Huron culture; he is also a canonized saint of the Catholic Church. De Brebeuf grew up in France but spent the majority of his adult life living among the Huron Indians and thus

was uniquely placed to provide his chronicle of American Indian life through the lens of the consummate European. In his Relation of 1636 De Brebeuf speaks of the tribal councils of the Huron nations during which all peoples are given license to speak on given issues and offer council while annually elected captains lead the smaller sub-sets of their society.

A captain must always be ready to heed the call of duty. If a council is held five or six leagues away for the affairs of the country, he must go . . . These captains do not govern their subjects by means of command and absolute power, as they have no force at hand to compel them to their duty. Their government is only civil, and they merely represent what is to be done for the good of the village or of the whole country. . . . Once a year, in the springtime, these resuscitations of captains takes place, unless some special cases delay or hasten the matter. I should here like to ask those who have a low opinion of the Indians, what they think of this method of conduction affairs.

De Brebeuf specifically addresses the strength of their system of governance. He points to the conduction of affairs in the interest of the common good, the methodology by which poor leaders are removed from power, and a democratic system that allows for the input of all citizens. De Brebeuf seemingly admonishes those Europeans who castigate the American Indians for their lack of civilization with these immensely powerful proofs of a refined culture. This is an important source for those studying European engagement with American Indians as it clearly shows a positive impression of their culture by esteemed members of the European community.

As a final piece for consideration, the supposed savagery of the American

Indians shall be considered in the most direct measure of civility, that of discourse pursuant to peace. During the early half of the 15th century, the Iroquois Nation warred almost constantly with the northern tribes. This warfare was interrupted by brief periods of peace. One such, being held from 1645-1647, was negotiated at the French fort of Three Rivers. Present at the negotiations was Father Barthelemy Vimont, a Jesuit and a noted expert in rhetoric. American Indian scholar Allan Greer writes that the Jesuit expertise in rhetoric was such that praise from one in the manner of rhetoric is considered “ the appreciation of a master.” Father Vimont’s account of the Mohawk emissary, Kitseaton’s, discourse reveals that Vimont believed Kitseaton to be extremely well cultivated. Kitseaton spoke upon his arrival the following:

My brothers, I have left my country to come and see you, and at last I have reached your land. I was told, on y departure, that I was going to seek my death . . . But I have willingly exposed my life for the sake of peace. I come therefore to learn the intentions of the French, of the Hurons, and of the Algonquin. I come to make known to you the thoughts of all my country.

The fact that Vimont lauded this speech by the Mohawk emissary testifies to the fact that the leaders of at least this European community regarded the civility of this American Indian leader to be prime. This fact lends new perspective to our contemporary impression of the understanding of our forbearers and their relationships with their co-inhabitants in North America. Through a basis in primary sources, one can see that relations between American Indians and new settlers to their lands were not always hostile. These examples show only very briefly though very succinctly that the

European impression of the American Indians, at the very least with regard to Frenchmen, was one of great esteem. This deviates smartly from the common contention that Europeans and American Indians clashed by way of rote. Very often relationships went beyond cordiality even into forming alliances and treaties such as seen with the Mohawk emissary Kitseaton. The esteem with which the Europeans held the American Indians reflects strongly in their written chronicles and lends a unique perspective on their anthropological development.

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