The pre-conquest population of New Spain has been roughly but credibly estimated at about 25,000,000. In 1532, when the second audiencia was trying to systematize the assessment of tribute and to restrict encomiendas, it had probably declined to some 17,000,000. So large a decline could not have been caused simply by ill-usage and over-work; though these were common enough, especially in the feverish rebuilding of the city of Mexico. The number of Spaniards was then small and their penetration of the country uneven. Most of them were settled in hillland areas, especially in the central valley, in or near Mexico City. In the coastal lowlands Spanish settlers were much fewer. Many areas, even fertile areas with large Indian populations, were hardly touched by Spanish settlement. The extent of the decline in the Indian population, as might be expected, varied greatly from one region to another. It was far more drastic in the coastal lowlands than on the plateau; on both the Gulf and Pacific coasts the available evidence suggests a decline of about one-half between 1519 and 1532. Even in areas where there was, as yet, no permanent Spanish settlement, and no obvious and direct relation, therefore, to the amount of Spanish activity; it was caused chiefly by pestilence, by contagious diseases introduced by the invaders, against which the natives had no immunity.

The progressive decline of the Indian population caused marginal land to be abandoned and much even of the relatively fertile areas to be left untilled. The vacuum so caused was filled, for the most part, by grazing animals, horned cattle chiefly in the lowlands and valleys, sheep in the highlands, horses, mules and goats almost everywhere. These animals were all alien to the Americas and were introduced by the Spaniards. Imports of livestock were particularly numerous in the 1530s; and, once introduced, the beasts multiplied prodigiously on land which had never before been grazed. They brought a new diversity into the economy of New Spain, and caused a major revolution in the use of land.

In settled New Spain, in the 100 years between 1520 and 1620, the viceroyt crescent made formal land grants totaling more than 17,000 square miles for cattle estancia, almost all to Spatians, and more than 12,000 square miles for sheep farms, some to Indians, but the greater part to Spaniards. In addition, at least 2,000 square miles were granted to Spaniards for arable purposes; for the production, that is, either of crops such as wheat intended for Spanish consumption, or of fodder for animals. Well over 30,000 square miles, therefore, were officially converted to new uses. Most of this great area at the time of the conquest had been farmed by Indians and had subsequently either been taken from them or, more commonly, vacated by them because of the diminution in their numbers. In the course of the sixteenth century, then, a vast agrarian revolution took place; a wholesale substitution of an animal for a human population. The destructive effect of this revolution upon traditional Indian agriculture was in fact far greater than the figures suggest, for flocks and herds grazed over much bigger areas than the official grants. The area actually grazed by Spanish stock was probably two or three times as great as that comprised in the official grants. The animals strayed freely through the peripheral belts and into Indian cultivations beyond. In Spanish practice this unrestricted grazing at certain times of year was customary and necessary. In Spain the law required most arable land to be opened to grazing after the harvest was gathered. In New Spain the same rule was enacted; but in practice vast, half-wild, untended flocks and herds, on unfenced range, might invade cultivated land at any time. Indians constantly complained to the courts about the resulting damage to their crops, [and] seeing their crops repeatedly destroyed by great herds of grazing, trampling beasts, abandoned their cultivations in despair.

A declining Indian population was expected to support, by its tribute and its labor, both its own nobility and an increasing Spanish population. By the middle of the century, decline had reached a point where the exaction of tribute and services was causing severe hardship to the surviving Indians. A thirst for detailed information on the population and resources of the Indies was a characteristic of Philip II’s government. The assessments, reports and relaciones of the 1560s and 1570s which have survived are much fuller and more precise than any evidence for earlier years, and from them the movements of population can be traced in some detail. By 1568 the Indian population of New Spain was probably under 3,000,000. In 1576-9 another major epidemic, probably smallpox, swept through the colony. Contemporary accounts all agree that the rate of mortality in this visitation was heavier than in 1545-6. The Indian population in 1580 has been estimated at about 1,900,000.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the settled Indian population of New Spain was little more than a million and a quarter. The white and near-white population was increasing steadily and may already have reached 100,000, most of whom contributed little directly to production and were, economically considered, so many mouths to be fed. Indian food production was quite inadequate for provisioning the Spanish towns; it became more and more necessary and more and more profitable to grow food crops on large multi-purpose estates, Spanish-owned and Spanish-managed. The proprietors of these haciendas, like the operators of manufacturing establishments, much more than the operators of mines, found themselves less and less able to rely on the official system of recruiting labor. More and more they were obliged to turn to free hired labor, to gañanes, peones, gañanes or laboríos. In the acutely depressed conditions of Indian society in the early seventeenth century individual Indians were much more willing to take wage-earning employment than they had formerly been; and haciendas paid much higher wages than those fixed for repartimiento labor. Much of the labor required was casual, fluctuating with the seasons; but every hacienda needed also a permanent labor force, available at all times and preferably resident on the estate. Hacienda residence had its attractions for depressed Indians, hard though its conditions might be; at least they had a regular wage and, at need, a source of credit, and their employers, from self-interest, took steps to protect them from the demands of repartimiento and other community obligations. An hacendado, however, naturally wished to retain his labor force for his own exclusive use, and a peón who became resident on an hacienda often had difficulty in leaving it. Often, indeed, he had nowhere else to go. In the more fertile areas, haciendas tended to enlarge their holdings by purchase of other means, until their boundaries were contiguous; or else to press so closely upon the holdings of neighboring Indian communities that no spare land was available for the extension of Indian cultivation. Apart from vagabondage and probable starvation, the peón had to stay where he was, or seek employment on another hacienda.

The Crown never seriously discouraged peonage. It legislated against the more serious abuses of the system, limited the extent of credit and forbade the use of coercion to get Indians to incur debts; but in general, on theoretical grounds, it wished to replace forced labor by free wage-earning labor, especially in the mines, and saw no compelling reason why debts should not be used to hold men to useful employment. Officials hunted down runaway debtors and returned them to their employers without criticism, overt or implied, from the viceroyt crescent governments or from the Council of the Indies. Peonage became an indispensable feature of the colonial economy, and a characteristic feature of social life of New Spain. It removed many Indians from the continuing centers of Indian culture and settled them in centers of Spanish influence, where they tended to adopt Spanish as their language, intermarry with other tribes or with mixed bloods and to become absorbed in an emerging hybrid society. It continued in Mexico and Central America into the twentieth century and in many parts of Spanish-speaking America it persists to this day.
French Expansion in North America

Author: Cornelius J. Jaenen
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French interest began with the Breton fishermen who are recorded as having reached North America in 1504, but Normans and Bretons probably frequented the Grand Banks to harvest cod and visited the mainland to hunt walrus decades earlier. In 1508, Thomas Aubert, a navigator from Dieppe in the service of the prominent ship-owner Jean Ango, reconnoitered the northern American coastline and brought back the first Amerindians seen in France. Their costumes, arms and canoes caused great excitement in Rouen, where they were baptized with great pomp. It marked the beginning of French missionary interest in the New World. The Crown became interested in economic possibilities, employing a religious civilizing mission as justification, after 1524 when Giovanni da Verrazzano, a Florentine navigator in the service of Francis I, reconnoitered and mapped the coasts from Florida to Cape Breton. Jacques Cartier was then sent to claim land for the crown and raised the French flag on the Gaspé Peninsula at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River in 1534. In two subsequent years he explored the St. Lawrence valley as far as the present Montreal, a site which he named.

Settlement was first attempted at Quebec in 1541 by La Rocque de Roberval, a Protestant nobleman named lieutenant-general in charge of colonization, evangelization and mining exploration for Jacques Cartier's third expedition. Famine, disease and the hostility aroused among the St. Lawrence Iroquois brought the small colony to a rapid conclusion after a particularly harsh winter. Admiral Coligny sponsored two further Huguenot colonies—Charlesfort (in South Carolina) in 1560 under Jean Ribaut and Fort Caroline (in Florida) in 1564 by René de Laudonnière. These were too near to the homeward route of the Spanish treasure fleets to ignore and consequently the settlers were massacred. Thus these Huguenots, or Protestants, had the first opportunity at overseas colonization, but religious wars at home and opposition abroad thwarted these early projects. It was not until 1604-05 in Acadia and 1608 at Quebec, under the leadership of Samuel de Champlain in the employ of the merchant association of Gua de Monts, that permanent settlements were established from which continental expansion followed. Unlike the English who established agricultural seaboard colonies, the French in the seventeenth century established commercial comptoirs administered by chartered companies and merchant associations at Port Royal, Placentia, Tadoussac and Quebec. Cod, whalebone and walrus ivory and oil were the first commodities sought, soon followed by furs and hides, especially beaver pelts. As long as Native American traders would bring the peltries to these beachheads there was little incentive for expansion into the heartland. Iroquois hostility, depletion of game in proximate regions and competition necessitated penetration up the St. Lawrence to establish posts at Trois Rivieres and Ville-Marie (Montreal). Settlement grew slowly after the institution of royal government to replace company rule in 1663. Consequently, an agricultural support base and rural parishes began to take on importance. Montreal became a key military base and staging center for hinterland trade and exploration.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, during the wars of Louis XIV that pitted English and French colonies against each other, Canada took on strategic importance far outweighing its commercial value. For geo-political imperatives, permission was granted by Versailles to found a colony at Detroit in 1701. Canadian settlers moved westwards into the upper Mississippi basin in what became known as the Illinois Country. At the mouth of the Mississippi the colony of Louisiana was settled directly from France. After 1713 Governor Vaudreuil had a band of forts built in the interior to serve as bases for trade and negotiation with Native American peoples and military officers replaced the missionaries in the role of diplomatic agents. In addition to this line of forts that kept the English colonists east of the Appalachian watershed, French traders in competition with the Hudson's Bay Company for hinterland furs moved beyond the Great Lakes onto the western plains, as far as the Missouri Coteau and Athabasca region, establishing their headquarters at Kaminstiquia (Thunder Bay, Ontario) in 1717. To the south they ranged over the area drained by the Missouri, Arkansas and Red rivers. In other words, New France had become a continental colony by the early eighteenth century.

By 1760, there were approximately 85,000 colonists in all of New France, a not unimpressive number if one remembers this population descended from a permanent immigrant base of only 12,000 souls. It included a number of ethnic backgrounds, including even English captives and deserters, Basques and Germans. It is doubtful that any strong Canadian or Acadian nationalism developed in the colonial era, although there were certainly local colonial values and attitudes that differed from those in the metropole. Royal decrees and ministerial instructions from Versailles not infrequently had their origin in some colonial suggestion and request, contrary to the assumption of monarchical and bureaucratic absolutism.

This brings us to a brief consideration of French colonial economies. The wide range of economic directives commonly known as mercantilism was beneficial to Canada in several ways. It offered the colony protected markets within the empire for its limited exports, price controls on imported goods, controls over what could only have been ruinous enterprises such as hat-making in Montreal, and the imposition of the burdens of insurance and losses at sea on the metropolitan merchants and the Crown. On the other hand, Acadia up to its cession in 1713, and Louisbourg up to its capitulation in 1758, profited from trade with New England in spite of the numerous prohibitive decrees. Trade even then followed the price list as often as the flag. Nor can it be assumed that monopolies have detrimental effects on local initiative. The merchants of Montreal and those of Albany engaged in mutually profitable illicit inter-colony trade, thanks in good measure to Iroquoian intermediaries who were not subject to the commercial laws of either New France or New York. The fur monopoly of the Compagnie des Indes required it to accept all the furs arriving at its Quebec warehouse, but by 1696 the company was unable to dispose of all these furs accumulating on the wharves of cities like Rouen, the Parisian hatters refusing to buy beyond their requirements. Two safety valves emerged. One, at Montreal, where about one-third of the furs from the upper country were diverted to Albany, as already stated, to be sold in England by New York merchants, some of them presumably in competition with the Hudson's Bay Company on the London market. A second escape route was through the Dutch connection in France by which furs ended up on the voracious Leipzig market of eastern Europe, and a few also on the London market. Some might argue this was a mere circumstantial occurrence, nevertheless it saved the monopolists from further embarrassment and profited many entrepreneurs, ranging from the Amerindian hunters and their womenfolk who initially prepared the hides and skins, to the chain of merchants from Montreal to the final markets in Western and Eastern Europe. Much of history is circumstantial occurrence.
“‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France”
Author: Brett Rushforth

Paradoxically, the enslavement of Indians succeeded in New France because of, rather than despite, the growing importance of French-Indian alliances. Between 1660 and 1710, cultural, diplomatic, and economic forces within the growing alliance system converged to draw the French and their native allies into the Indian slave trade. First, allied Indians offered captives to French colonists as culturally powerful symbols of their emerging partnership. Although French bureaucrats initially rejected captive exchange as a legitimate token of friendship, many western traders embraced the practice as a means of strengthening trade relations and securing valuable laborers. Second, following the Great Peace of 1701, New France sought desperately to prevent warfare among its Indian neighbors and to keep its native allies from defecting to the English. French officials found that captive exchanges offered one of the most effective means of stabilizing the precarious alliance created by the new treaty. Captives therefore became increasingly available as their exchange grew more central to the maintenance of the alliance system. Finally, as Indian captives passed into New France in greater numbers—especially after 1701—a growing number of French families purchased them as laborers. To protect these investments and to put an end to disputes over the captives’ legal status, colonial officials issued the 1709 ordinance legalizing Indian slavery.

“Europeans and ‘the Wild People’: French-Amerindian Relations”
Author: Peter Moogk
Source: La Nouvelle France

Newcomers from France were culturally self-centered, but they did not see themselves as racially superior. They accepted the Amerindians’ humanity. The presence of Mediterranean people with black hair, brown eyes, and dark skin in France’s population meant that the physical traits of native Indians were accepted as normal. The aborigines fitted into the range of familiar human types. “They are all of an olive color or, at least, tawny like the Spaniards,” wrote Marc Lescarbot. Other Frenchmen thought that the natives looked like the Portuguese or said that they might walk the streets of Bordeaux in European dress without provoking comment. Most European writers admired the natives’ physique and asserted that, if the aborigines shielded themselves from the sun and abstained from greasing their bodies, they would be as white as Europeans. On the matter of intelligence, those who had lengthy dealings with the Amerindians acknowledged their sagacity. Priests, nuns, and royal officials hoped to transform these well-built, intelligent people into French-speaking, Roman Catholic subjects of His Most Christian Majesty, the King of France and Navarre. The 1627 charter of the Company of New France promised every Roman Catholic Amerindian all the rights of a natural-born French subject, such as the right to inherit an estate within the King’s dominion. In 1667 the secretary of state for the colonies, Jean-Baptiste-Colbert, told the intendant of New France, “you must try to draw these [native] peoples, and especially those who have embraced Christianity, into the neighborhood of our settlements and, if possible, intermingle them there so that, with the passage of time, having but one law and the same master [king], they will form thereby a single people of the same blood.

Official approval for intermarriage between the two races is proof that French officials had no racial prejudices against native peoples. Cultural arrogance, however, was evident in the government’s assumption that this one, new people would be a French-speaking, Roman Catholic, farming population. Colbert wrote that the king expected the missionaries, whom he subsidized, to “teach our language, and to raise them in the same customs and way of living as the French.” A common religion would bind the newcomers and their native allies together, and it would prepare the way for total assimilation of the aborigines to the French way of life. Religious conversion had pride of place because it was axiomatic in this period that one’s faith determined political loyalty. Roman Catholic subjects, who adhered to the king’s religion, were assumed to be his most trustworthy dependents. From 1632 until the 1660s the Society of Jesus, or Jesuit Order, had an exclusive patent from Cardinal de Richelieu to carry out the transformation of New France’s Amerindian peoples.