

French and English Approaches to Exploration and Colonization in America: Religious Factors

Suggested Grades: 8-12

Religion was a pervasive and driving force throughout the entire period of European exploration and colonization of North America. Even those Europeans who were chiefly motivated by desire for wealth and economic gain often pursued religious aims, as well. French and Spanish priests and other religious persons journeyed to the “New World” to convert others to their own religion, Catholicism. In contrast, the desire for freedom to worship in ways that *differed* from their country’s accepted liturgies and beliefs brought many of the English settlers to North America.

This lesson uses introductory remarks excerpted from two of the documents included in the *American Journeys* website, to show how religion played a key part in the lives and ideas of Europeans in the early years of their experiences in the “New World.”

The first document, published by a French missionary named Gabriel Sagard in 1632, describes early French exploration along the shores of the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River, and related missionary efforts to convert the Native Americans they encountered. The lesson uses selected passages taken from the book’s three “dedications,” which illustrate the religious purpose and context for Sagard’s 1623-1624 journey. The *American Journeys* web site contains an 86-page excerpt from a 1939 English translation of Sagard-Theodat’s original text. Although the ideas and content of the material may be challenging for students to grasp, the language and spellings should be relatively familiar.

Englishman William Bradford, first governor of the “Plimoth” (now spelled Plymouth) Colony, authored the second document. This lesson draws upon portions of the first chapter of *Bradford’s History: “Of Plimoth Plantation,”* in which Bradford

described the religious persecution that drove him and his followers out of England. The first chapter of his history ends with their decision to go to Holland, where they understood they would have religious freedom. (The Mayflower sailed in 1620 from Holland to the New World, rather than directly from England.) The *American Journeys* web site contains the whole of Bradford’s original text (nearly 500 pages).



Catherine Tekakwitha, an Iroquois convert to Catholicism. From M. de Bacqueville de La Potherie, *Histoire de l’Amerique Septentrionale...* Volume 2, p. 350a. Paris, 1753. (AJ-145)

It appears with archaic and inconsistent spellings typical of the seventeenth century, and it contains many words that we no longer use. This lesson presents the excerpted passages from the original document as they are shown on the website, side by side with a rewritten version using contemporary English that will be easier for students to understand. Looking at the two passages together, students will be able to compare today's style of writing with that of nearly 400 years ago and see how written English has changed. At the same time, they will be able to work from the revised version to more effectively explore the ideas.

Objectives

- Students will be able to explain why Europeans left their homes, risking hardship and possible failure to establish themselves in North America.
- Students will be able to explain the initial stages of religious institutional development in North America.
- Students will be able to compare how European explorers, missionaries, and colonists began to lay the foundations of religious freedom and denominationalism in North America.

Connection with the Curriculum

This lesson meets the following national history standards for grades 5-12:

- Understand the European struggle for control of North America by analyzing the religious motives of free immigrants from different parts of Europe and by comparing the social composition of English and French settlers in the 17th

century. (United States History Standards, Era 2: Colonization and Settlement, 1585-1763, Standard 1A)

- Understand religious diversity in the colonies and how ideas about religious freedom evolved by learning how Puritanism shaped communities in North America. (United States History Standards, Era 2: Colonization and Settlement, 1585-1763, Standard 2B)
- Read historical narratives imaginatively, taking into account what the narrative reveals of the humanity of the individuals and groups involved – their probable values, outlooks, motives, hopes, fears, strengths, and weaknesses. (Historical Thinking Standards, Historical Comprehension, Standard 2E).
- Engage in historical analysis and interpretation by comparing and contrasting different sets of ideas, values, personalities, behaviors and institutions and considering multiple perspectives. (Historical Thinking Standards, Historical Analysis and Interpretation, Standards 3B & D).

Background

In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, French explorers came to North America to search for a fabled “Northwest Passage.” They explored much of the north central part of the continent and achieved notable success in developing relationships with the native peoples who lived in what later became the northern United States and southern Canada. It was not only French explorers or traders who came to North America in those early years; French priests and other religious persons came to the New



World as missionaries, to bring Catholicism to the Indians.

One such French missionary was Gabriel Sagard, author of the first document used in this lesson. Sagard's origins are obscure. By 1604, he was a Recollect¹ monk, so he was presumably born in the late sixteenth century. In 1615 he expressed a desire to work among Native American peoples in New France and finally got an opportunity to do so in 1623 when his order sent him "to accompany Father Nicolas [Viel], an aged Preacher, in order to go to the help of our Fathers in their mission for the conversion of the peoples of New France."

Sagard and Father Nicolas left Paris on March 18, 1623 and arrived in Quebec on June 28th of that year. Less than three weeks later, Father Viel and Sagard joined with a third missionary to go up the river to the

annual fur trade rendezvous. After the Indians and French had concluded their business transactions, the three men accompanied their Indian hosts into the wilderness. Sagard went to Lake Huron, where he spent most of the next twelve months with the Hurons at their village, called Ossossane, on the southern shore of Georgian Bay near present-day Collingwood, Ontario. Sagard kept meticulous notes on all that he saw and did, and his observations of Huron life form one of the most comprehensive written records of their culture from the early years of white contact.

In the spring of 1624, Sagard traveled with the Hurons on a trip to Quebec to trade the furs they had collected over the winter. Sagard intended to bring back supplies to the mission in the Huron village. In Quebec, however, he found correspondence from his French superiors awaiting him, instructing him that he was to return home to Paris instead of going back to the mission at Ossossane.

Eight years after he returned to France, Sagard published the account of his 1623-1624 North America travels, as *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons* (Paris: Denys Moreau, 1632). The book included a lengthy dictionary of Huron words for later French missionaries to use. As French missionary activity increased during the 1630s, a new edition was needed, and Sagard re-wrote and expanded *Le Grand Voyage*... In 1636, he published his new edition under the more general title of *Histoire du Canada [History of Canada]*. Both versions remained very rare until they were reprinted in Paris in 1865-1866. In 1939 *Le Grand Voyage*... was translated into English for the first time, as *Long Voyage to the Country of the Hurons*. The *American Journeys* website contains an 86-page excerpt from the 1939 English translation,

Canadian wearing snowshoes going to battle.
From M. de Bacqueville de La Potherie, *Histoire de l'Amerique Septentrionale*... Volume 1, p. 50a.
Paris, 1753. (AJ-145)

¹ The Recollects were a branch of the Catholic Franciscan Order. Sagard's religious name was Brother Gabriel Sagard-Theodat. *Brother* indicates that Sagard was a member of the religious order but was not a priest. Theodat means "God-given."

in which Sagard describes his out-bound trip from Paris to Canada. (AJ-129) The full text of Sagard's account of his stay with the Hurons is available online from the Champlain Society at www.champlainsociety.ca/cs_bibliography.htm.

This lesson focuses on three pages of excerpts from Sagard's "dedications" or "preambles." Before beginning the body of the text, Sagard wrote three statements that, taken together, illustrate how his religious beliefs had shaped his goals and actions in 1623-24, as well as his later assessment of the success or failure of his mission, from the vantage point of nearly a decade later. He first addresses "The KING OF KINGS And Almighty Monarch of Heaven and Earth, Jesus Christ, Saviour of the world,"² even before his dedication to his secular leader, Prince Henry of Lorraine.³ In all three statements, including the third and final one which he dedicated simply "To the Reader," religious considerations are paramount. Even though Sagard gathered an impressive body of knowledge about the land and its people, he was disappointed because there were still so many unconverted people in New France, especially as compared to the success of his religious order in the East and West Indies.

During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England, there was a great deal of religious conflict and turmoil. During the reign of King Henry VIII, England split from the Catholic Church and became Protestant (Anglican, or Episcopal). After Henry's death, the country went back and forth between Catholicism and Protestantism, as the rulers changed. Henry's son Edward was a Protestant, but he did not long outlive his father. When Henry's daughter Mary, a staunch Catholic, became queen

she persecuted, killed, or banished many non-Catholics. A few years later, Mary died and her Protestant sister Elizabeth became Queen. Elizabeth recalled Protestants who had been banished or fled the country under Mary's rule, but Bradford and his fellow-believers still suffered. There was a schism between the country's official Protestant church (Anglican) and other Protestants (referred to as "non-conformists" or "Puritans") who had different ideas about how God should be worshipped. The Anglican Church clergy and England's political leaders would not tolerate these divergences from accepted behavior and belief, and so non-conformists were often subject to the same kind persecution, imprisonment or banishment that all Protestants had experienced when Mary was queen. Some reformers, including William Bradford and his followers, chose to leave England in search of a place where they could have freedom to worship in their own way.

William Bradford (1589/90-1657) was born in England. In 1609, he led a group of 125 nonconformists from England, where they had been persecuted, to Holland, where they had heard there was more religious freedom. Bradford prepared for the "pilgrime" expedition to America, to create a separatist religious colony. In 1620, he became the leader of a group of nonconformist Protestants who established the "Plymouth Plantation" in Massachusetts. Once in America, Bradford was chosen the governor of Plymouth Colony and served as its leader for most of the rest of his life.

Bradford led 41 "pilgrims" to America on the *Mayflower*, along with 61 other passengers, including servants, merchants, and a handful of adventurers. The ship arrived in Cape Cod Bay on November 11, 1620, near

² Sagard described how hard he and other missionaries had worked in their attempts to Christianize the Huron people, in spite of lack of support from France.

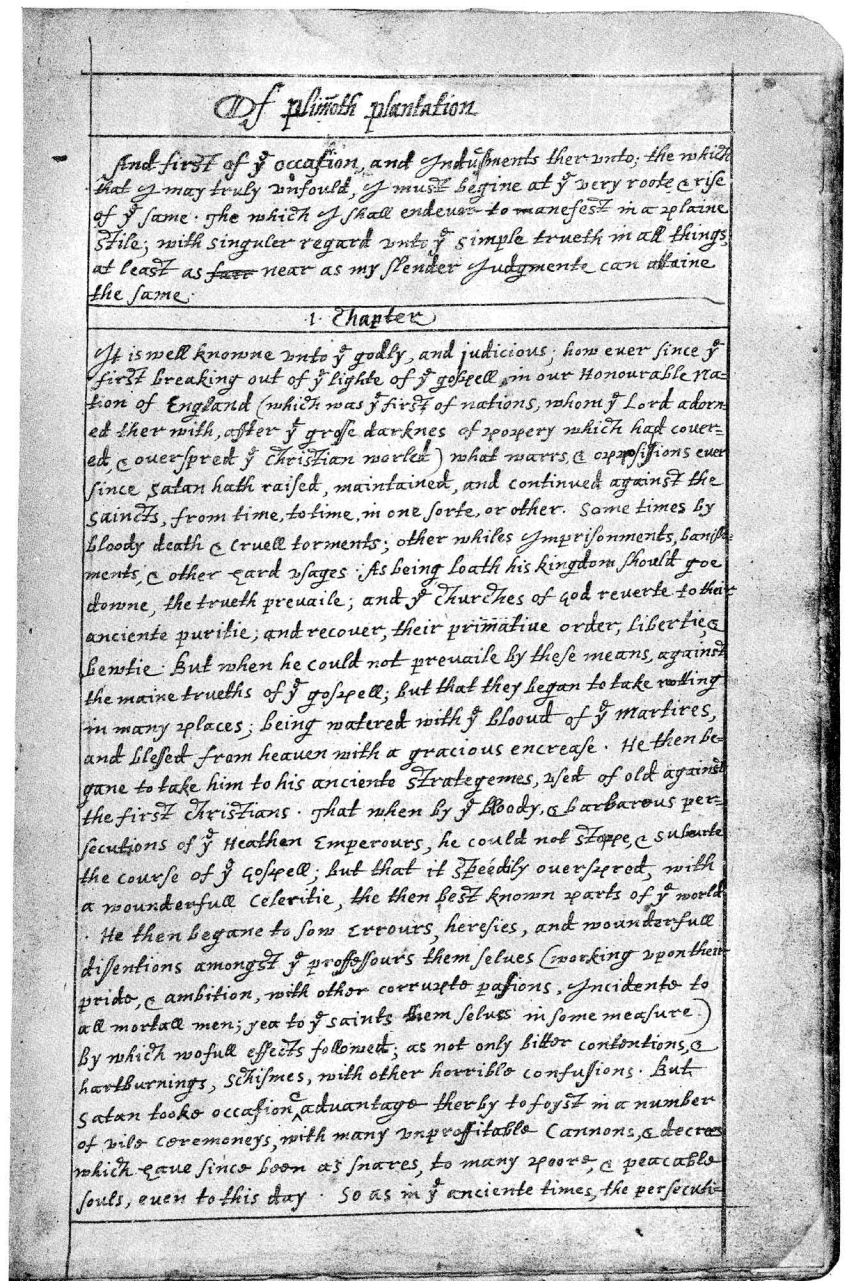
³ Although part of the dedication to Prince Henry of Lorraine has a prayer-like flavor similar to the address to Jesus Christ, Sagard's primary purpose was to gain Henry's assistance to publish and sell his treatise. Sagard refers to his "little book," which, when published, ran more than 400 pages!

modern Provincetown, an area then occupied by the Nauset Indians. Soon after landing, the English raided several caches of Nauset corn and beans, prompting the local tribe to attack their advance party. On December 16, 1620, the colonists who had been shipbound since leaving Holland, sailed across Massachusetts Bay from Cape Cod and disembarked at Plymouth.

Of Plymouth Plantation provides a detailed, first-hand account of the Mayflower voyage, the establishment of Plymouth Colony, relations with various Indian communities, exploration of surrounding areas including Maine, and the daily life of New England's first settlers. Bradford's manuscript appears to have been written at various times between 1620 and 1647. It disappeared from Boston during the American Revolution before being printed, but was discovered in London in 1855. It was first published in the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* in 1856. The complete edition that is presented on the *American Journeys* website preserves Bradford's original spelling and punctuation. (AJ-025) The standard modern edition is: Morison, Samuel Eliot, ed. *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647* (New York: Knopf, 1952).

This lesson focuses on excerpts from Bradford's first chapter, in which he outlined the reasons he and his followers left England, to escape religious persecution and go to somewhere they could have freedom of religion. At the very end of the excerpt (and the chapter), Bradford writes that they will go to Holland and the Low Countries in search of a better life.

The language will be challenging. On the left side of the pages, students will see the excerpts taken directly from the *American Journeys* website. On the right side, there is



a modern translation which students should find clearer and easier to understand. Teachers should be aware that students may find some of the language in the excerpts troubling, even offensive. Bradford refers to Catholics and Catholicism in a derogatory manner, as "popery" and "papists." When he criticizes the Church of England during Queen Elizabeth's reign, he says that they adopted many of the trappings and practices of "popery."

Facsimile of Manuscript Page. Reproduced in William Bradford, *Bradford's History "Of Plymouth Plantation,"* Book I, p. 2a. Boston, 1898. (AJ-025)

Activities

Have your students read the sections in their textbook that cover early exploration and the beginnings of European settlement in the Americas. Encourage your students to pay particular attention to any information about the differences between French, English and Spanish exploration and settlement in the New World, or any discussion of the Pilgrims and the Plymouth Colony in what is now Massachusetts. If the textbook contains any information about religious conflict in England in the early 1600s, that would also be quite useful as background.

Activity 1

Have your students read the excerpts provided from the two documents. Students may work individually or in groups, whichever seems most appropriate for their grade level and abilities.

After the students finish reading the texts, lead them in a discussion. Ask them to consider and discuss the questions in the Activity 1 Handout on p. 67.

Have your students produce a brochure or booklet that Bradford might have developed to encourage people to join him in leaving England. Explain to the class that distributing such literature in England in 1617 or 1618 would have been dangerous, and encourage students to discuss how they might have produced and distributed these booklets in such a situation.

Activity 2: Enrichment/Extension

Have your students read additional sections from the two documents (Sagard, www.americanjourneys.org/aj-129/

or www.champlainsociety.ca/cs_bibliography.htm, and Bradford, www.americanjourneys.org/aj-025/).

Short chapters that may appeal to students include:

From Sagard:

- Chapter 3: “Quebec, the residence of the French and of the Recollect Fathers,” pp. 50-54.
- Chapter 4: “From Cape Victory to the Hurons, and how the savages manage when they travel through the country,” pp. 55-67.
- Chapter 8: “How they clear, sow, and cultivate the land, and then how they bestow the corn and meal, and their mode of preparing food,” pp. 103-109. (Champlain Society website)
- Chapter 9: “Their feasts and guests,” pp. 110-114. (Champlain Society website)

From Bradford:

- Chapter 9: “Of their vovage, & how they passed ye sea, and of their save arrival at Cape Codd,” pp. 90-97.
- Chapter 10: “Showing how they sought out a place of habitation, and what befell them therabout,” pp. 97-107.

NOTE TO TEACHERS: Be sure to read any chapters before assigning them to your class! Some chapters, particularly in Sagard’s work, contain material that you may not feel is appropriate for use in some classroom settings or in lower grades.

Schedule two “news conferences” and have students prepare for them. Divide the class into two groups.

- One group will plan a news briefing that might have been held with Brother Sagard upon his return to France. Select one student to act the part of Sagard, and pick two or three others to portray his traveling companions or members of the ship's crew. The rest of the students in the group should play the parts of members of the press corps. Have students develop questions and answers, and then stage the news conference.
- The other group will plan a news briefing that might have been held with Governor Bradford in 1622, two years after the Plymouth Colony was established. Assign one student to play the part of Governor Bradford, and two or three others to portray Puritan settlers. Students should develop questions and answers about the settlers' experience on the trip to North America and in the first year in the new land. Stage the news conference.

Afterword

While this lesson focuses on religious considerations, both texts provide a treasure trove of information about many aspects of life in North America during the early seventeenth century. Sagard describes the Hurons' life and the physical world that he found on his 1623-24 mission, while Bradford captures the experiences of a group of newcomers as they struggled to survive and establish a British colony.

A few years after Sagard published his *Long Voyage...*, he published a revised and much longer work called *History of Canada* that is in fact a much elaborated version of this same work, embellished with accounts of the missionary labors of the Recollect order

around the globe. Little is known about his later life. He died sometime after his *Histoire du Canada* appeared in 1636.

At Plymouth Plantation, about half the English died of starvation, disease, or exposure in the first four months. The survivors elected Bradford governor in 1621 and returned him to office twenty times until 1656. Despite early conflicts with their Native American neighbors, the settlers did establish peaceful relations with Massasoit, the chief of the neighboring Wampanoags. During the colony's early years, factional splits divided the colonists, until in 1627 Bradford and a majority bought out those of the original stockholders who were unhappy.

The economy of Plymouth, based on shared agriculture, depended on good relations with neighboring tribes. This was usually effected through trade and diplomacy, and the Indians taught the English how to successfully grow local crops such as pumpkins, corn and beans. Relations with other English non-religious colonies, such as those formed under Thomas Weston at Wessagusset and under Thomas Morton at Mount Wollaston, or Merrymount, were problematic. In 1628, Miles Standish and men from Plymouth drove out Morton and his men for providing guns, alcohol, and "frolicking" with the Indians.

In 1630 another English religious settlement was founded in Boston as the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and an influx of Puritans began to pour into New England from the Mother Country. Plymouth achieved solid financial footing by entering into trade with settlers in New Holland at Manhattan and the Hudson Valley, and conducting regular trips back to England to exchange furs for money, goods, and supplies.

French Arrive at Port Royal.
Engraving from Johann
Ludwig Gottfried, *Neue
Welt vnd Americanische
Historien*, p. 325. Frankfurt,
1655. (A)-119)



Selected Bibliography

Baker, Emerson W., et. al., eds. *American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega*. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1994.

Clark, Charles Upson, ed. *Voyagers, Robes Noires, et Coureurs de Bois: Stories from the French Exploration of North America*. New York, N.Y.: Columbia University, 1934.

Simmons, R.C. *The American Colonies from Settlement to Independence*. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1981.

For background on French missionary efforts and additional background on early Canada, see the “Virtual Museum of New France” at www.civilization.ca/vmnf/vmnfe.asp.

Many other early Canadian primary sources are available at Early Canadiana Online: www.canadiana.org.

Other first-hand accounts of Plymouth on the Web can be found in: Rhys, Ernest, ed. *Chronicles of the Pilgrim Fathers*, www.bibliomania.com/2/1/60/107.

Background on the Mayflower voyage and Plymouth Colony is available at www.plimoth.org, the official website of Plimoth Plantation.