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Champlain's journey of 1613

On Sunday, June 16, 1968, a provincial plaque was unveiled in the municipal park on Highway 17 in the village of Cobden to commemorate the journey made by Samuel de Champlain up the Ottawa River in 1613. This was one of many plaques erected throughout the province by the former Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario.

Participants in the unveiling ceremony included: Mr. F.W. Truelove, councillor; Mr. L.G. Sparling, Reeve of Cobden; Mr. Maurice Hamilton, MPP (Renfrew North); Mr. Harry Hinchley, vice-president of the Upper Ottawa Valley Travel Council; Mr. Clyde C. Kennedy, local historian; Professor C.M. Johnston of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board; and Mr. Laurence Bromley, president of the Ottawa Valley Historical Society.

In 1993, the Ontario Heritage Foundation – successor to the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board – replaced this plaque with a revised bilingual marker that reads:

CHAMPLAIN'S JOURNEY OF 1613

The Father of New France, Samuel de Champlain, made the first of two voyages into what is now Ontario in 1613. He travelled up the Ottawa River seeking the northern sea (Hudson Bay) which one of his five companions, Nicolas de Vignau, claimed to have seen. The expedition struck inland above Lac des Chats and followed a chain of small lakes towards present-day Cobden. Here, on June 7th, Champlain visited with the Algonkin chief Nibachis. Later the party met with the Algonkin elder Tessouat at Allumette Lake. Not wanting the French to travel into Nipissing territory, Tessouat convinced Champlain that Vignau had lied about having seen the northern sea. Champlain, his plans thwarted, returned downriver.

LE VOYAGE DE CHAMPLAIN DE 1613

Samuel de Champlain, père de la Nouvelle-France, fait en 1613 le premier de deux voyages dans la région qui est maintenant l'Ontario. Il remonte la rivière des Outaouais en quête de la mer du Nord (la baie d'Hudson) qu'un de ses cinq compagnons, Nicolas de Vignau, prétend avoir vue. L'expédition met pied à terre au-dessus du lac des Chats et suit une série de petits lacs vers le cobden d'aujourd'hui. C'est ici que le 7 juin Champlain rend visite au chef Algonquin Nibachis. Plus tard, le groupe rencontre, au lac Allumette, l'ancien Algonquin

Tessouat. Ne voulant pas que les Français traversent le pays des Népissingues, Tessouat persuade Champlain que Vignau lui a menti. Champlain, ses plans contraires, prend le chemin du retour.

Historical background

Samuel de Champlain was born about 1570 at Brouage, France. By the time he made his first voyage to Canada, he was an accomplished geographer. This was in 1603 when François Gravé Du Pont invited Champlain to join his trade expedition to North America in order to record the journey. They travelled up the St. Lawrence River as far as the rapids at Lachine. (Champlain always referred to the spot as Sault Saint-Louis. Robert Cavalier de La Salle, thinking the rapids marked the gateway to the Orient, named it La Chine.) By questioning native people, Champlain made remarkably accurate deductions concerning the configuration of the Great Lakes. The next year he again came to Canada and stayed for three years, sharing in Sieur de Monts' frustrated attempt to establish a colony in Acadia. During these years, Champlain charted the Atlantic coast from Cape Breton to Cape Cod (Cap Blanc). In 1608, as lieutenant of de Monts, Champlain returned to the St. Lawrence with orders to found a settlement as the "point of Quebec", now Quebec City. In 1612, he became its nominal governor and "father of New France."

By 1613, Champlain was ready to turn his attention to the expansion of New France west of the Ottawa River, into what is now Ontario. A young Frenchman, Nicholas de Vignau, had spent the winter of 1611-12 in the Algonkin camp of Chief Tessouat on Allumette Lake. (It was a colonizing practice of the French to send a Frenchman to live in a native camp whenever possible. By learning the language and social customs of his hosts and by gaining their confidence and respect, he became invaluable as a translator and negotiator in trade agreements). Vignau told Champlain that the previous year he had travelled with the Algonkins to a "northern sea" (Hudson Bay), which was connected by lake to the upper Ottawa River and could be reached in 17 days travel from the Saint-Louis rapids. He claimed to have seen on the shore of this sea the wreck of an English ship. The story tallied with accounts that were then current of the ill-fated 1610-11 expedition of Henry Hudson. Lest this "northern sea" provide the English with a convenient approach to New France, Champlain determined to seek it out and claim it for France. He also wanted to consolidate relations with the Algonkins on the Ottawa River, who were beginning to feel that the French were not keeping their promise to support them in their wars with the Iroquois. An expedition up the Ottawa would serve both ends.

Champlain set out from St. Helen's Island near Montreal on May 27 with two canoes. The party included Nicholas de Vignau, Thomas Godefroy who acted as translator, two other Frenchmen and a native guide. On June 2, probably near L'Original, they met with a large party of Algonkins;

Champlain recruited one of them as a second guide and sent one of the Frenchmen back downriver to report on the expedition's progress.

On June 6, the group arrived at the Chenaux rapids above lac des Chats. Here, a dispute arose between the guides – who intended to portage westward to a string of small lakes – and Vignau – who wanted to continue on the river itself despite the number of rapids that lay ahead. Champlain followed the advice of his Algonkin guides and the party left the river, probably at a spot in the vicinity of the present Chenaux dam. There were several portages to negotiate, one so long that it took an entire day. Swarms of deer flies, black flies, mosquitoes, gnats and other insects – many of them poisonous – beset the travellers constantly as, burdened with heavy clothing, firearms and paddles, they waded through swamps and clambered over fallen trees.

Some two centuries later, in the vicinity of the portage connecting Green Lake with Muskrat Lake, a local farm boy found a mariner's astrolabe bearing the date 1603. Champlain was known to take measurements from the sun to determine latitudinal bearings with such an instrument, but there is no conclusive evidence that this particular astrolabe belonged to him. The artifact is displayed today at the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.

At the south end of Muskrat Lake, in the vicinity of present-day Cobden, Champlain and his party met with Chief Nibachis and his people, who welcomed the French with gifts of fish. Champlain assured the Algonkins that he would help them in their wars with the Iroquois, and Nibachis then provided Champlain with two more canoes and an escort to guide his party up Muskrat Lake and along the portage to the Ottawa River where it widened to form Allumette Lake.

There, Champlain was welcomed by Tessouat, an elder and chief whom he had met ten years earlier at Tadoussac. The old chief expressed much surprise that Champlain had negotiated his way so far over such difficult terrain. They crossed the water to Tessouat's main camp on Morrison Island, a large island surrounded by rapids in the middle of the river. Tessouat's people used their strategic location to advantage by collecting tolls from the Hurons coming downriver with furs to trade at Montreal. Wanting to protect this monopoly, they were not pleased to learn that Champlain wished to travel further north into Nipissing lands. They argued that the way was very hazardous, and when Champlain claimed that Vignau had told him that he had visited the northern sea two winters ago, they called Vignau a liar. Tessouat denied the existence of such a sea, and insisted that Vignau had never left the camp during the time he lived there. Whether Vignau had made up the story to ensure his inclusion in Champlain's circle or whether he was frightened of being killed by the angry Algonkins, he retracted his words.

Champlain, angry and frustrated at his plans having been thwarted, set up a wooden cross bearing the arms of France on the north shore of Lower Allumette Lake and prepared to return to Quebec. Tessouat, pleased at having protected his people's commercial interests on

the river, sent the French party south with 40 canoes laden with furs. They followed the main channel of the Ottawa River (now the boundary line between Quebec and Ontario), successfully running ten sets of rapids. On June 17 – a mere three weeks after he had left – Champlain was back at the Saint-Louis rapids.

From the point of view of his intended purpose, the voyage must have seemed to Champlain to have been a waste of effort. Back in France later that summer, he wrote up an account of his explorations (*Quatrième voyage*) and republished one of his earlier maps of New France, adding details from his recent travel on the Ottawa River. The episode of Vignau seems to have continued to rankle for, writing years later in his journal of 1632, Champlain was still agonizing over his uncertainty about the young man's credibility.



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