



The Ottawa River's "Canadian Heritage River" Status

In 2005 a very valuable piece of work on the history and heritage of the Ottawa River was published in support of the Ottawa River's Nomination Under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System. This background study document is the most comprehensive ever made available on all aspects of the river. Any student or admirer of the Upper Ottawa Valley should read **Chapter 2**, in particular, as well the rest of this very important document.

The Ottawa Valley contains thousands of archaeological sites, few of which have been studied in detail. The ancient history of the Ottawa Valley below Mattawa reaches back to when the Ottawa River was quite literally forming, and spans across millennia. During this time, the peoples of the Ottawa Valley developed an intimate relationship with the land and distinct cultural characteristics, including a rich ceramic tradition. At the same time, artifacts from the Ottawa Valley demonstrate wide trade and communication networks that existed up to 6000 years ago, enabled by the Ottawa River and its tributaries. Despite the relative lack of archaeological research in the Ottawa Valley, the data which we do possess provides brief but exciting glimpses into ways of life which have been constantly changing and adapting. Page 17 Summary from [Ottawa River's Nomination Under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System](#).

The Ottawa River was the pathway for much of the early European exploration of North America, truly a gateway to the continent. In search of a passage to the Orient, French and later English and Scottish explorers began their travels by paddling up the Ottawa River, including the illustrious Jolliet, Mackenzie and Franklin. The most famous of French explorers in Canada will be remembered for their exploits and discoveries along the Ottawa River, beginning with Champlain and his emissaries who mapped and named many features of the river after founding Quebec in 1608. Other well-known figures in Canadian history including Nicollet, Radisson, La Vérendrye, Dulhut and De Troyes, traveled west along the Ottawa River to establish trade relationships with First Nations communities, laying the groundwork for the fur trade, a period that is central to the history of Canada. Page 52 Summary from [Ottawa River's Nomination Under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System](#).



When Europeans arrived in the Ottawa River region in the early 1600s, the Great River was already an important trading route. Europe's high demand for beaver furs set in motion the development of an extensive fur-trading network involving both French and First Nations Peoples and later, the British. This trading network quickly became the foundation of France's North American colonial economy, and led to the cultural development of the now famous coureurs de bois and voyageurs era. Later British competition led to the creation of the North West and Hudson's Bay Companies, key companies to Canada's economic and political development. The

frenzied trade in furs set in motion much adventurous travel up and down the Ottawa Waterway, and shaped early European settlement patterns in the region. Fascinating relics of this by-gone era can still be seen along the Ottawa's shores, including the remains of some of the Ottawa River forts.

For First Nations Peoples, the trade in furs caused traditional trade routes to shift and brought them into increasing contact with Europeans. As various First Nations groups wished to gain greater control of trade, tension soon led to open conflict among groups. The Ottawa River region experienced a brutal war in the 1600s. This war, coupled with epidemics spread by European diseases, severely damaged First Nations social groupings and led to the dispersal of its survivors (Gaffield 78).

Amid the profound social, political, and economic changes of the 17th century, the Ottawa River remained one of North America's most important trading routes. It played a central role in the story of the fur trade in North America, and thus in the development of Canada. Even after the opening of the St. Lawrence route, the Ottawa remained the main route to the west and to the north, providing a shorter and more protected route to the interior. Page 70 Summary from [Ottawa River's Nomination Under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System](#).