

## Chapter 4

# France Plants Her Banner in North America

### VERRAZANO – PIRATE AND EXPLORER

GIOVANNI DA VERRAZANO was born in Florence, Italy, probably about ten years before Columbus made his famous voyage in 1492. In those days Florentine lads with a longing for the sea spent days and days on the docks. They watched the ships unload their cargoes of spices brought to the Mediterranean ports by slow-moving caravans, over long and dangerous land routes. Verrazano learned the art of navigation on this inland sea that was the mariner's cradle. Indeed, he must have crossed the Mediterranean many times because he lived in both Egypt and Syria before he embarked upon the voyages which made him famous. As a French corsair, or pirate, the Spaniards called him Juan (John) Florin or Florinus. He lived in a time when piracy was a respectable business if a captain had a commission from the king of a country to prey upon the merchant fleets of an enemy nation. With papers issued by the King of France, Verrazano became the terror of the seas.

As an explorer for Francis I, King of France, the Florentine navigator was Verrazano, searching for a northwest

passage to the Spice Islands and not Florin, the corsair, waylaying the treasure ships of Spain. In January of 1524, he sailed from the Madeira Islands in the *Dauphine*, steering directly west to avoid the Spanish sea lanes to the West Indies. In less than two months, the light of fires burning on a beach directed him to land. It was the coast of New Jersey. There, Indians gathered in the early spring to feast on shellfish and to manufacture wampum, which were strings of shells they used for money. Skirting the shore line in search of a strait, Verrazano entered New York harbor and anchored off Sandy Hook. In his explorations he found many natives huddled around fires on Rockaway Beach. Although Verrazano entered New York harbor eighty-five years before Henry Hudson, he failed to find the great river. Having only one vessel, he did not risk it in passing through the Narrows. Continuing the northern voyage, he touched the east coast of Newfoundland and then turned homeward.

After his arrival in France in July, Verrazano wrote a letter to Francis I, the King of France, telling what he had seen on his voyage – the natives, the forests, and the fertile lands. Verrazano had brought back no gold and had failed to locate the

Northwest Passage to the spice-laden Orient. Francis I was too deeply involved in war to profit by Verrazano's discoveries, although the pilot recommended the country he had seen for colonization. Ten years passed before the King of France was able to turn his attention again to America.

## CARTIER – THE BOLD BUCCANEER

SPAIN'S SUDDEN WEALTH from the New World tempted the hardy seamen of the French coast and many a captain turned pirate to raid the Atlantic sea lanes. From the sheltered harbor of St. Malo on the coast of Brittany, these daring buccaneers sallied forth to pounce upon the treasure ships of Spain. Among them were the Italian Verrazano and the Frenchman Cartier.

Jacques Cartier was born in St. Malo about the time that Columbus was making his first voyage to America. When the lad was old enough to play on the wharves, he eyed with childish wonder the booty from the Indies, brought in by the buccaneers. It was not long until Cartier was one of them, sharing danger and adventure to capture the Spanish vessels with gold and silver from Mexico and Peru.

When the King of France had a breathing spell from war, his thoughts turned to the spice trade. Was there a Northwest Passage to Cathay? If not, was there land beyond the line of demarcation that might be added to the domain of France? Searching for a strait through a continent claimed by Spain was entirely within the bounds of the Treaty of Tordesillas. Neither Spain nor Portugal could reasonably object to such a venture, especially, if the leader of the expedition was respected and feared. While

looking around for the right man, the Vice Admiral of France took Cartier to the court and personally introduced him to Francis I. No one knows now what the King, the naval officer, and the bold buccaneer said at this meeting. One can only guess.

Cartier, to whom the broad Atlantic was as familiar as the Breton shore, came away from the meeting with a commission from the King placing him in command of an expedition to search for a western waterway to India.

On an April day in 1534, with two small ships and sixty-one hardened sailors, Cartier sailed from the harbor of St. Malo to cross the North Atlantic. He followed the route of the French fishermen who had been coming to the rich fisheries of Newfoundland since 1500. It was a pleasant voyage for Cartier and his men. A strong wind filled the sails, wafting the vessels to the shores of Newfoundland in only twenty days. The sea was so full of icebergs that the ships took shelter in a harbor for ten days. Here, the men feasted on waterfowl. They salted four or five casks of great auk to eat when no fresh fowl could be obtained. Continuing their voyage toward the mainland, the sailors caught their first glimpse of a polar bear "as big as a calf and as white as a swan." Boats were lowered for his capture, and bear steaks were served on board that evening.

The two vessels poked in and out of bays, slipped through narrow straits, and drifted along the coast of Labrador. They explored gulfs and bays, large and small, for a water opening leading westward. For days at a time, dense fog blotted out the shore line. When a strong wind blew, the fog parted to reveal a barren land, bleak,

cold, and gloomy. Returning from one of his many trips ashore to explore the country, Cartier was heard to remark: "In all the Northland, I have not seen a cartload of good earth."

Undaunted, the explorer turned westward, still hoping to win for France the glory of discovering the passage to the East. On the first day of July, Cartier and his men went ashore on Prince Edward Island. They feasted on wild strawberries, blackberries, and gooseberries while they listened to birds chattering in the cedars, pines, white elms, ash, and willow trees. After the fog-bound coast of Newfoundland this island seemed a paradise. With renewed courage Cartier sailed up the coast until he found a widemouthed bay which he hoped would lead into a strait to the Orient. He named it Chaleur Bay (Bay of

Heat) because the weather was warm. Chaleur Bay proved to be landlocked.

Leaving the ships anchored, Cartier and a small party of sailors rowed up a river in small boats to explore the country. They had not gone far upstream when about fifty canoes, crowded with Indians, cut across their path and paddled for the shore. With shouts that rang through the woods, the natives leaped ashore and waved pelts of fox, marten, and beaver stretched on paddles. With signs and yells they made it plain that they wanted to trade with the strangers. Cartier feared to run the risk of going ashore — a few white men among so many Indians. The next day a few daring sailors rowed up the same stream to barter with the natives. For furs the Frenchmen traded knives, needed to skin animals, and iron tools, glass beads, combs, and trinkets.

**Cartier explored the St. Lawrence River as far as the site of the present city of Montreal.**



Delighted with their bargains, the Indians danced and sang, clasping their hands and looking heavenward as though they were thanking the sun for their good luck. Thus began the fur-trading business which came to be the treasure France gained in the New World.

Before leaving for home, Cartier planted a wooden cross thirty feet high at the entrance to the harbor of Gaspé. At the center of the cross, he placed a shield with the French emblem, and above that, a board upon which was carved, LONG LIVE THE KING OF FRANCE. While the natives looked on in wonder, the French explorers knelt in prayer, bidding farewell to this new land destined to become New France. Without the loss of a man, Cartier and his crew sailed into the harbor of St. Malo early in September of that same year, 1534.

Eight months later, at the command of Francis I, Cartier sailed from St. Malo on his second voyage to search for a strait leading to Cathay, and to explore new lands he found. On this voyage, he discovered the St. Lawrence River. He explored the river as far as Montreal and beyond, searching for a rich country where the Indians said gold and jewels could be found. The mythical land was probably the Lake Superior region, and copper, not gold, would be the metal the Indians told him about. On Cartier's first voyage, he had kidnapped two Indians, to whom he taught the French language. He could now talk with the natives through these interpreters.

During the long cold winter a number of Frenchmen died of scurvy before an Indian chief told Cartier how to cure the disease by drinking water from boiled bark of a certain tree. It was the middle of July in 1536, before Cartier reached

St. Malo again to report to the King on the country he had explored.

In 1541, Cartier left St. Malo on his third voyage. John Francis de la Roche, Knight, Lord of Roberval, was to go with him as lieutenant and governor to start a French colony. Since Roberval was not ready, Cartier went ahead of him, taking along cattle, hogs and goats to stock farms in the new land. Roberval arrived later with two hundred colonists, including soldiers and mariners, who took possession of Cartier's old fort on the St. Lawrence River. Many of these newcomers were prisoners released from jail as recruits. The majority did not live through the first, harsh winter. The survivors, Roberval among them, abandoned the colony and returned to France.

## **FURS SET THE PATTERN OF FRENCH COLONIZATION**

AFTER THE FAILURE of Roberval's colony, it was fifty years before the French King renewed efforts to establish a settlement in the New World. Meanwhile French fishermen were coming to the banks of Newfoundland as they had been doing for years. Some ventured to the mainland where they traded for a few packs of furs to take back with their fish. When beaver skins brought more money than codfish, fishermen turned traders, following the rivers to barter trinkets for pelts. Instead of sending over prisoners, forcing them to be colonists, as was done with Roberval, the King granted permits to trading companies. These trading companies were given exclusive rights to the fur business in certain territories. Then the trading companies found their own

colonists, provided for them, and established centers where trappers and hunters, both French and Indians, brought their furs to market.

In the year 1608, on the third of July, Samuel de Champlain marked out the site for the first building in Quebec, the Indian name for the spot where the St. Lawrence River becomes narrower in its course. The structure was both a dwelling for traders and a storehouse for skins. From this trading post grew the largest fur market in the New World and the city of Quebec. Champlain represented merchants in France, bought and sold furs, organized a trading company of his own, served as lieutenant and governor of New France, and still found time and energy to explore the region of eastern Canada as well as the Atlantic Coast. He traveled among the Indian tribes, seeking to win and to hold their friendship. Upon the Indians' good will depended the fur business that supported the colonies in New France. Champlain established missions among tribes to convert them to Christianity and he took an interest in their welfare.

Champlain had a hard time persuading men to stay in one place and till the soil. The French gold that grew on the backs of wild animals lured the colonist deep into the wilderness. Hunters and trappers migrated to the lakes and streams of the Canadian woods. These voyageurs learned to like the carefree life of the wilderness. Men without licenses for fur trading were known as "coureurs de bois" (runners of the woods). In frail canoes made from birch bark or hollowed from tree trunks, the fur hunters paddled up the St. Lawrence River, skirted along the shores of the Great Lakes, and ventured into the back country where no white man had ever

been before. Often a trader went alone in search of furs, with no one to talk to for weeks at a time. His only friend was his trusty canoe. The northern woods rang with the paddling songs which the jolly voyageurs sang to their little boats upon which their lives and their profits depended.

## **A TRADER AND A PRIEST EXPLORE THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER**

AS THE FUR BUSINESS became more profitable, trading companies established posts along lakes and rivers farther inland. To these posts, voyageurs in the region brought their packs of skins and gained supplies for their wilderness trips. Priests followed the trails of the voyageurs. They built missions in the trading centers where they preached the gospel of Christianity to the Indians. In accompanying traders on fur hunting expeditions, these priests, most of whom were Jesuits, explored the wild country and wrote what they had learned.

For protection against Indian attacks, forts were erected in these frontier settlements. Around the log store, church, and fort were clustered the huts of the voyageurs and their Indian wives and children. Thus did furs set the pattern of French colonization in North America.

From tribes in the Great Lakes region the missionaries learned of a wide river, the "Great Water" called by the Indians, "Messipi," or "Missi-Sipi." It flowed into a sea, the natives said. Could this body of water be the South Sea? Maybe the "Great Water" was the long-sought waterway to the East. The two men who finally set out to find this river were a trader, Joliet, and a priest, Marquette. These close

friends were once students together at the Jesuit seminary in Quebec.

In the middle of May, 1673, Joliet and Marquette left the Jesuit mission of St. Ignace, near the Strait of Mackinac, with five companions and two canoes. The only food they took along consisted of bags of cornmeal and some smoked meat. The seven men carried the two canoes and supplies over the portage of 2700 paces that brought them to the Wisconsin River, and then to the Mississippi, in one month of travel time. Late in June the French explorers reached the prairie country of the Illinois Indians. Here fields of green corn lined the riverbank. These natives seldom suffered from hunger because their fertile soil produced abundant crops of maize, beans, squashes, and melons. The friendly Illinois gave the strangers cornmeal mush seasoned with buffalo fat, and invited them to remain with the tribe. Although they declined the invitation, Marquette promised to return and preach the gospel to them. Later, he kept his word.

When the Frenchmen insisted on traveling farther down the stream, the Indians warned them that the heat would make them ill. They said that sea monsters infested the lower region of the "Great Water." Some time later Marquette was tempted to believe the tale when a huge catfish almost upset his canoe. About seven hundred Illinois men, women, and children crowded the riverbank to watch their chief present a calumet (peace pipe) to his white visitors to protect them in their journey. The long-stemmed pipe with streamers of bright feathers saved the lives of the daring explorers on more than one occasion. When hostile Indians shot arrows from the shore or swam out to tip over the light canoes, Marquette held up

the peace pipe. It worked like magic, turning enemies into friends.

Not far from the mouth of the Arkansas River and near the spot where de Soto had been buried, the Frenchmen met a tribe whose advice changed their plans. The natives gathered on the riverbank to welcome the palefaced strangers. The Frenchmen were greeted by the chief, who performed the calumet dance and presented the peace pipe as a token of friendship. At the banquet in their honor, the explorers were feasted with boiled cornmeal and roast dog. They did not relish this course as much as they did the dessert of sweet, ripe melons. The Indians apologized for the meager fare. They explained that they did not dare go out to the prairie on buffalo hunts. Their tribal enemies were friends of white men (Spaniards). These tribes killed the buffalo hunters with guns that barked like dogs.

Joliet and Marquette held a council and decided it would be foolhardy to continue their journey down the Mississippi River and risk capture by Spaniards or their Indian allies. They had gone far enough to prove that the "Great Water" ran directly south into the Gulf of Mexico and not west to the Pacific Ocean. It was not the waterway to the Orient. They turned back, paddling against the current, until they reached the mouth of the Illinois River. Steering from this stream into the Des Plaines River they crossed a portage to the Chicago River and finally reached Lake Michigan. It was the end of September when the party arrived at the mission in Green Bay. Marquette was ill.

After spending the winter at the mission, Joliet started to Quebec in the late spring when the ice broke up in the lakes and streams. In the outskirts of Montreal, the

rowers became so overjoyed at the sight of farmhouses that they carelessly turned into a strong current that capsized the canoe in the rapids. All were drowned except Joliet. He was dashed upon a rock where he was found unconscious by fishermen and rescued. Joliet mourned the loss of his companions, and most of all, the death of an Indian boy given to him by one of the chiefs he had met in the Mississippi country. Frontenac, governor of New France, deplored the loss of Joliet's journal of his expedition, written during the winter at Green Bay. He asked Joliet to write another one, as best as he could remember, and draw another map to replace the one lost when his canoe turned over. With this information Frontenac determined to continue the exploration of the Mississippi Valley.

## **LA SALLE DREAMS OF A FRENCH EMPIRE IN NORTH AMERICA**

IN 1666 LA SALLE, member of a wealthy French family, migrated to Canada. He received a large land grant near Montreal at the rapids afterwards named La Chine. The name suggested adventure, the search for the waterway to China. Like most colonists La Salle entered the fur business. From the Indians he learned enough of their languages to barter with them. The Senecas told him about a great river to the west that flowed to the sea. Being an explorer at heart, La Salle traded the comforts of his estate for the hardships of the wilderness. While hunting for the headwaters of the great river in the region of Lake Ontario, he met Joliet returning from Lake Superior. Joliet had gone to locate copper deposits which Indians told him

were numerous. Although there are no records to prove absolutely that La Salle discovered the Ohio River in his wanderings, it is quite possible that he found the upper course of that stream in 1670.

In the year (1673) that Joliet and Marquette started on their journey to the Mississippi River, La Salle, as an assistant to Frontenac, the governor of New France, was assigned the task of erecting a fort on Lake Ontario. The purpose of this fort was to shut out the Iroquois who were taking furs to Dutch and English traders on the Atlantic Coast. Since a number of forts were necessary to control the western fur trade, La Salle went to France to present his plan for a chain of forts and missions along the inland waterways of North America. He received the right to own the land he might discover. He also received rights to the fur business with tribes that were not then sending furs into Montreal. He was to pay the expenses of his explorations and he was not to ask financial help from the King.

The French were careful not to antagonize the Indian tribes upon whom their business depended. The French trader found a welcome because he brought knives, kettles, cloth, and other articles the Indians needed to exchange for furs. Then he went away. He did not take their land from them. With few exceptions, the tribes were friendly toward the French. With the natives on their side, La Salle figured that soldiers stationed in the scattered forts could prevent the English colonists from crossing the Allegheny Mountains. Likewise they could keep the Spaniards from moving north of the Gulf of Mexico.

Before he built his forts, La Salle realized that he had to know more about the geography of this vast central region of



*Chamber of Commerce of New Orleans*

### CITY OF NEW ORLEANS

**La Salle's dream of a city like Paris at the bend of the Mississippi River came true in New Orleans. Here, the language and customs of France still cling to the city.**

the continent. He had to prove beyond any doubt that the "Great Water" emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. In the middle of the winter of 1681-82 La Salle started for the Mississippi River. In his party of fifty-four persons were French woodsmen, Indian guides, ten Indian women to do the cooking, and three of their children. The loaded canoes were dragged on sleds over the frozen Chicago and Illinois rivers, enroute to the Mississippi. Travel was slow down the stream, with time out to hunt wild turkey, quail, and deer to feed the party. The only food carried was cornmeal.

Like Marquette, La Salle took along a calumet, the Indian symbol of peace. The pipe of peace warded off Indian attack, assuring tribes that the strangers were friends. In the lower part of the Mississippi

the weather was warm and pleasant. La Salle was delighted to find mulberry trees and dreamed of raising silk worms in the mild climate. At a bend in the river where the ground was dry, he envisioned a city with spires and towers, like Paris.

In April the party reached the broad flat delta where the Mississippi River divides into three channels. La Salle sent a group down each of the branches. A week later all three parties met to celebrate the first successful journey to the mouth of the Mississippi River. They set up a pole and nailed the arms of France to it. La Salle stood beside the column and said in a loud voice:

In the name of the most high, mighty, invincible, and victorious Prince, Louis the Great, by the



Grace of God King of France and of Navarre, Fourteenth of that name, this ninth day of April, one thousand six hundred and eighty-two, I, in virtue of the commission of his Majesty which I hold in my hand, and which may be seen by all whom it may concern, have taken, and do now take, in the name of his Majesty and of his successors to the crown, possession of this country of Louisiana, — Mississippi and rivers which discharge themselves therein, from its source, — as far as its mouth at the sea or Gulf of Mexico, —

When he had finished speaking, claiming the entire heart of North America for France, the explorers shouted, “LONG LIVE THE KING!” They fired a salute with guns. Beside the pole, a wooden cross was raised. La Salle pledged the King of France to establish missions for the natives in this vast territory. All sang a hymn. One by one before a notary, Frenchmen signed the paper that La Salle had read, amid hearty shouts of LONG LIVE THE KING!

Five years later, on another exploring expedition in Louisiana, La Salle was

murdered by one of his own men. Although he did not live to carry out his plan, the chain of forts and missions was built. At the bend in the river, the city of New Orleans was founded. In this city, today, many people still speak the French language and follow French customs. LaSalle’s dream came true, but his empire did not survive. It takes people living on the land to hold a new country, and the French were traders rather than farmers. French colonization consisted of relatively few men scattered over a large territory. Their English rivals, who had settled along the Atlantic seaboard, cultivated the land first and then indulged in trade. They were colonizers.

#### MAPS:

WA6r, WA9r, WALLr

*Atlas of American History* by Edgar B. Wesley