

Exploration 1651 to 1760

The process of French inland exploration between 1651 and 1760 had its roots in the explorations of Champlain and the Jesuits earlier in the seventeenth century. Invariably would-be explorers in this period would begin by questioning Aboriginal groups about unknown areas, often soliciting maps. Once this information was gathered, Aboriginal guides were hired (or more commonly, the explorer would simply join a group of Aboriginal groups returning to their homeland). The exploring party would be equipped with goods, that could be exchanged for food or given at ceremonies to conclude agreements of friendship.

Throughout the French régime most of the information that emanated from exploration was passed on orally or in reports and letters to various government officials, usually the Intendant of New France or its Governor. In view of English expansion along the Atlantic coast, and after 1668, on Hudson Bay, the Intendant, Jean Talon, recognized that some record should be kept where French men had travelled. In 1670 he ordered that explorers keep diaries and conduct ceremonies taking formal possession of new lands. By 1702, the final destination of maps and written records was the Ministère de la Marine, in Paris, the ministry in charge of the colony. Here, government officials and the various royal geographers could consult whatever was available. In 1720, the process of transmission became more formalized with the establishment of a depository collection, the Dépôt des cartes, plans et journaux, within the Ministère de la Marine.



Figure 1: La Verendrye - Lake of the Woods by A. H. Hider

Source: National Archives of Canada

In contrast to the French in this period, the English did little exploring until the middle of the eighteenth century. The exploration that did occur was passed on orally or written down, and buried in the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Beginning in 1741, criticism of the Company's poor records in exploration began to mount and led to a parliamentary enquiry into their affairs. Subsequently, the Company began serious coastal charting and in 1753 under severe competition from the French, authorized the beginning of inland exploration. None of the information gathered during this period was made public until late in the century.