



## Algonquin history

The territory of Témiscamingue was populated well before the first white person set foot. A site dating from over 8,000 years ago was discovered in the Taschereau area of Abitibi. Since the people who lived there originated from the south and west part of the continent, it is very probable that they occupied the Témiscamingue area well before this time. Preliminary research does not allow us to confirm this assumption at this moment. Nevertheless, 5,000 to 6,000 years ago, a period prior to the construction of the pyramids in Egypt, hunter-gatherer people, a distant ancestor to the present day Algonquin nation, lived and occupied the shores of Lake Témiscamingue on the point where sits the present day interpretive centre of Fort Témiscamingue National Historic Site. During the 1992, 1993, 1995 and 1997 digs, evidence of occupation was discovered proving that people inhabited this land over three milleniums before Christ (B.C.). These searches have also proven that the shores surrounding Fort Témiscamingue had been visited continuously by the aboriginal people from antiquity to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



## **The Algonquin nation of Témiscamingue**

When Jacques Cartier landed on the coast of Gaspé in 1534, the Ottawa River and the present day Abitibi-Témiscamingue areas were occupied by culturally-related aboriginal groups, who spoke a dialect of the Algonquin family. “Algonquin” refers to the large linguistic and cultural family that encompasses other related nations such as Cree, Attikameg, Micmac and Abenaki. These tribes belong to the Algonquin nation as the Spanish, Romanian, Italian and Portuguese are related to the French language. This aboriginal family was widely spread in North America with representatives ranging from the Western Plains (Blackfoot and Cheyenne) and as far as the California foothills (Wiyots and Yuroks).

The first person to refer to this nation as being Algonquin was Samuel de Champlain, after his first encounter with them in Tadoussac in 1603. The name Algonquin originates from a distortion of the Malecite or Montagnais word which would have been transcribed phonetically by Champlain. For example, “Algoumekuot”, a similar Algonquin word, signifies “those who paint themselves in red.”

### **Algonquin lifestyle**

Contrary to the Iroquois people who were sedentary and farmers, the Algonquin people were for the most part nomads, which meant they lived mainly from their hunting and fishing activities. This way of life led them to undertake periodic journeys within their vast territory. They set up camp in different areas for variable lengths of time within access of available resources such as deeryards in winter and spawning sites in summer.

According to experts, it is estimated that when Champlain founded Québec, the Algonquin formed a nation composed of 3,000 to 5,000 people. During the creation of the Saint-Claude Mission in 1863, the entire Algonquin tribe was composed of barely 1,500 people: 1,000 in Abitibi, 500 in Témiscamingue and a few hundred in the Ottawa area. This decline in population was a direct consequence of the effect of certain infectious diseases such as measles, flu and smallpox which decimated populations throughout the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, today, the Algonquin nation is composed of more than 7,000 people spread out through 10 communities in Québec and Ontario.

### **Arrival of the white people**

The opening of Fort Témiscamingue in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was aimed mostly at building relationships with the Algonquin nation who were the main suppliers of pelts, but mostly to short-circuit fierce competition with the English from Moosonee. This latter group was quick to break trail to Lake Abitibi by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century with the help of Radisson and DesGroseillers. This continued well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Fort Témiscamingue was established as a trading post and soon became the heart of fur trade in Algonquin territory. Hence, a permanent contact with the white people was established. All year long, the Amerindians came to the Fort to sell their furs and buy goods and provisions offered by traders. They often stayed for many days.

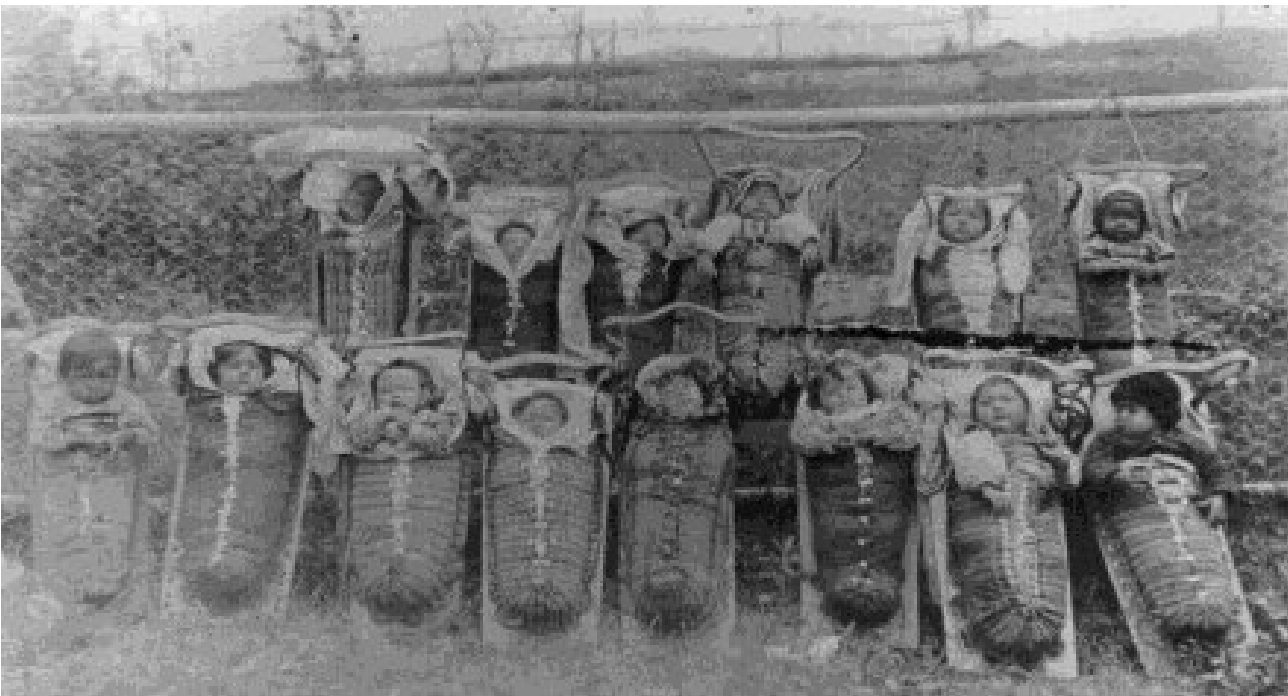


### **Arrival of the missionaries**

The Algonquins seem to be receptive of new ideas transmitted by the Catholic missionaries who do not appear to have much difficulty in evangelizing them. To consolidate their acquisition, the missionaries chose to settle on the Ontario shores facing Fort Témiscamingue. The settlement was named Saint-Claude Mission. This site appeared to be best situated to communicate throughout the year with the Amerindians who were continuously relocating within their territory.

### **Cultural exchange**

Increased contacts with the white people caused the Algonquins to progressively integrate certain aspects of their lifestyle. Hence, they profoundly modified their economic and spiritual behaviours. The fur trade allowed the aboriginal to purchase tools and goods that facilitated their way of life. The sale of beaver pelts allowed the Algonquins to purchase cauldrons, axes, swords, textiles, compared to pre-white contact when they made almost all of their objects, tools and utensils using cut and polished stone, ceramic, skins, bones, wood and bark. Exclusive proprietary rights on hunting grounds was a notion that did not make sense to the Amerindians. In fact, according to their beliefs, the creator gave them the right to benefit from the land with the condition that they be good people, respectful of the forces of nature and the spirit of the animals. It is not until the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1821 that the transmission from father to son of family territory began. This system persists still today.



According to Algonquin spirituality, aboriginals are an integral part of nature much like the animals, fish, water and thunder. They believe that the elements of nature have a spiritual substance and are likely to react to human behaviour. Some individuals, that is the shamans (mandokewinni in Algonquin) had the knowledge to deal with events or to act as an intermediary between men and the spirit world. With the arrival of the missionaries, the Amerindians were confronted with many ideological changes. The priests challenged the ancestral beliefs and the influence of the shamans to convert them to catholicism. The missionaries came to Lake Témiscamingue convinced of the superiority of their religion and lifestyle. They believed the Algonquin way of life was primitive.

The white people learned a lot from their contact with the aboriginals who provided vital knowledge on how to survive winter, how to benefit from medicinal plants and how to hunt game animal for food. It is thanks to these aboriginals that the white people learned to use snowshoes to walk in the snow.

## **Today**

Up until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, relationships with the Aboriginal people were based on trading and religion. The white people capitalized on the aboriginals because they supplied the furs, they became allied with them to gain their support in case of possible conflicts and converted them to Christianity to save their souls. However, the role of the aboriginals was mollified with the growth of the forestry industry and they even became somewhat of a nuisance. They were displaced and evicted from the territories sought by loggers. From this came the idea to confine them to smaller areas and turn the nomadic hunters into independent farmers. In 1851, the United Canada legislature designated 93,080 hectares of land towards the creation of eleven Algonquin communities in Quebec to be used exclusively by the aboriginals. Two of these communities were reserved for the Algonquin people, that is the Maniwaki reserve in the Outaouais region and the Notre-Dame-du-Nord reserve in the Témiscamingue region.

In the 1970s, a second reserve was set up in the Témiscamingue region next to the community of Kipawa. Members of the Sand Point Band are established in Winneway which is not legally recognized as a reserve. As for the members of the Wolf Lake Band, most of them live within the town of Témiscaming.

*Source:*

*Marc Côté, archéologue  
Corporation Archéo-08*