

Stepping back in time leads to understanding

Part 2 in an historical series about the War of 1812, by Zig Misiak

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Let's step back in time.

To understand the War of 1812 a little better, we have to go back to at least the "Seven Years War." Americans refer to it as the "French and Indian War" and many from Quebec call it the "War of Conquest."

It was probably the first "world war," due to the fact that so many countries in Europe were involved. Nearly 1.5 million people lost their lives during the conflict.

Because France and Britain were on opposite sides in Europe, they were the two main opponents in North America. We are all familiar with the "Plains of Abraham," where British General Wolf and French General Montcalm were killed during an attack on Quebec City.

Another significant battle that became a major French victory took place at Fort William Henry. It is located at the south end of Lake George, about eight hours from Brantford, in present day New York State.

This British defeat was immortalized by the movie Last of the Mohicans.

Even though not an accurate portrayal of that event, it's a pretty good movie. The fighting depicted and wardrobe of the warriors and soldiers is well done.

The name "French and Indian War" is a little misleading, as First Nations fought for both the British and French. The Six Nations were the main allies of the British during this time, with about 10 other First Nations allied with the French.

You might think that France was completely displaced after its loss, but that is not so. As a matter of fact, you need a passport to visit French territories that lie just to the south of Newfoundland in the mouth of the St. Lawrence River.

That's right: there is a European country that owns territory in our waters. The islands are called St. Pierre and Miquelon and were left in the hands of France after the Treaty of Paris in 1763.

Another important document was signed the same year, called the Kings Royal Proclamation of 1763. It was an attempt to regulate trade, settlement and land purchases with the Six Nations.

This proclamation was a cultural clash, as it imposed boundaries on the Six Nations and First Nations in general. For First Nations peoples, land was a gift from the creator to be shared and used, not owned.

"We are your friends and allies. Our men fought and died alongside your soldiers. Why do you take

the land we occupied and give it to the colonialists? Why do you create borders confining us, not allowing us to hunt on land we used for centuries? How is it that our land can be sold and you, our brother the King, tell us we must do this through you?"

These are words that come to my mind and words I think could have been said then.

The 1768 Treaty of Fort Stanwix was to be a ratification of the Royal Proclamation. Members of Six Nations were assembled to discuss the final agreement that would be documented and signed.

I shake my head as I write this, as in the five short years after the "proclamation" and this 1768 gathering, First Nations borders had been shifted further west by the British without prior consultation with Six Nations.

So what happened here? One royanni (chief) from each nation of the Six Nations signed the treaty. There is actually a copy in existence that shows their names and their mark.

Already, this is a contradiction of Six Nations policy, as all 50 royanni would have had to approve any decision made on behalf of their Confederacy.

Let's get back to the aftermath of the war.

Now, we have an angry France, having lost its foothold in North America. The western First Nations started a war with the British immediately following the Treaty of Paris called the "Pontiac War." The British colonies were agitated at the Royal Proclamation, which defined Quebec (not the Quebec we recognize today) and outlined First Nations lands, limiting colonial expansion and illegal encroachment.

Can you see a pattern forming?

The colonies are getting moody and want to separate to take responsibility for their own future. The French are seeing this as an opportunity to get back at Britain and reclaim their lands lost in this part of the world. The First Nations are in a state of anxiety as they see a fragile peace that is likely to be broken between themselves and the colonies.

Well, it only took 11 years and "all rebellion" broke loose. The First Nations, especially the Six Nations, for the most part sided with Britain. Unfortunately, there was a division within Six Nations own Confederacy.

My next article will outline the American Revolution. You will see how the French and Indian War was relevant both to the American Revolution and the War of 1812. To know our past is to know our present.