

Around the same time, Etienne Brûlé and Nicolas du Vignau accepted to be exchanged for an Algonquin chief's son named Savignon. The chief's son went to Paris, and upon his return characterized the French as strange people who would argue loudly but did not fight.

With the help of these men, the French began to build up the human resources to explore further inland. When they reached Lake Huron, Champlain observed a small band that had exceptionally good beaver pelts and a variety of trade goods, and his curiosity was piqued. He began to inquire about them and soon learned they came from Manitoulin Island in the Georgian Bay. Instead of hunting, they had managed to obtain what they needed by trading among the different communities. They travelled as far as the northern Cree in the rivers that drained into the large northern waterway that is known to us as James Bay. They carried goods among the peoples of the Great Lakes and were respected for their integrity everywhere they went. As a result, their influence was out of proportion to their numbers. He learned that they were called the Adawe, or Ottawa, and that the word itself meant "those who trade."



This region of the river once formed part of the seigneurie of Vaudreuil. Pierre de Rigaud de Vaudreuil de Cavagnial, Marquis de Vaudreuil (1698-1778) was the first and only Governor-General of New France who was born in the colony. He surrendered New France to the British in 1760 and was transported to France, where he spent time in the Bastille until the French government reinstated him. He lived out his last 15 years in France, a country that was never really his own. In his name and title, you can see the origins of several place-names. His father and brothers spelled Cavagnial without the letter 'i'.

Champlain encouraged trading with the Ottawa, and the French had only to meet the Ottawa at the Huron villages. With this development, the usefulness of men like Nicollet, Brûlé and Vignau changed. They did not have to explore, and soon the French became reliant upon the Ottawa for their excellent pelts. The Ottawa would pick up French products and trade them for furs, spreading the French goods as far as Sault Ste. Marie and even to the Cree. The French remained active partners with the Ottawa, helping and encouraging their trading. They supplied them with steel tools and hunting equipment to offer in exchange for furs.

Encouraged by the French, the Ottawa went further afield offering these new products and returning with furs. They experienced great success most of the time, but they were not always well received. When they came up against the Winnebago on the western shores of Lake Michigan, their steel implements were resented and the Winnebago refused to cooperate or to let them trade in their territory. The Ottawa, being traders, always looked for negotiated solutions to problems, but were willing to turn to war when necessary. In this case, rather than resenting the rejection, the Ottawa sent negotiators to discuss their differences with the Winnebago, but they ate the negotiators. Stunned by the rebuff, the Ottawa reported the incident to the French and prepared for war. The French, concerned that a war would not help trade, sent the legendary Jean Nicollet to meet with the Winnebago. He arrived in 1634, no doubt wearing his famous brightly coloured Chinese robe, and was likely the first European they had ever seen. His novelty contributed to saving him from sharing the fate of the Ottawa ambassadors and he succeeded in negotiating a peace between the Ottawa and the Winnebago.

As seen in the previous chapter, French trading patterns were seriously disturbed by the temporary British capture of New France in 1629. The well-armed Iroquois had virtually exhausted their beaver population and were being pushed out of their habitual hunting grounds by English settlement. They continued to expand into French trading territory even after the return of Champlain and the French

administration. By the time the French took back New France, their own allies were at war with the Iroquois. To successfully compete, these various tribes had to form an alliance against the Iroquois, and it was inevitable the French would begin to supply firearms to this new alliance. Unlike the Iroquois, which was a well established federation of six nations, the new alliance needed leadership, and the natural leaders – the only ones who knew them all – were the Ottawa. As traders, they had been known and respected by the other partners for a long time and knew all of the routes and passages.



A yacht floats at anchor outside the Hudson Heights Boat Club. A part of present-day Hudson, originally known as Cavagnal, was called Hudson Heights from 1896 to 1969.

Had the Kirke brothers, and subsequently the Iroquois, never ventured into the French trade route, the political map of North America might have evolved differently. The French and the Great Lakes nations grew closer in the face of the Iroquois and the British, but nation after nation was dragged into the conflict on one side or the other. These included the Nipissing, Ojibwe, Shawnee, Miami, and Cherokee and involved a total of 20 nations, extending into the Mississippi Valley and out west. During this whole period, the Ottawa maintained a leadership role and the French support was constant.