THE INDIANS OF THE OTTAWA VALLEY

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Visitors to the National Museum of Man often ask, "What Indians lived in the area around Ottawa?" Although today their name is perhaps not as well known to the general public as the names of some other tribes, the Algonquins (or Algonkins) were one of the most important tribes in the early history of Canada. In spite of their importance, confusion surrounds their history, their way of life, and even their name.

The Name

The first recorded meeting between Europeans and Algonquins occurred at Tadoussac in the summer of 1603, when Samuel de Champlain came upon a party of Algonquins, under Chief Tessouat. They were celebrating with the Montagnais and Etechemins (Malecite) a recent victory.
over the Iroquois. In Champlain's time the Algonquins, together with other Algonquian tribes, were carrying on an old war with the Iroquois of the Five Nations, a conflict which some historians believe grew out of a contest for the control of the fur trade. Champlain understood that these people were called Algoumequins. However this seems to be a Malecite word meaning "they are our relatives or allies," so it may not have been their name at all. The Algonquins' name for themselves is Anishinabeg, which means "human being." The identifying remark recorded by Champlain soon became shortened to "Algonquin," and has, since that time, been the name by which they are known.

At a very early date, the French observed that the Algonquin language was the key to communication and commerce, indeed it seemed to the French to be as much esteemed in Canada as were Greek and Latin in Europe. Fur traders as late as the nineteenth century studied Algonquin to prepare for travel into the interior. In the last century the name "Algonquian" or "Algonkian", was introduced to describe the whole family of related languages.

In 1613, Champlain visited the Algonquins on the Ottawa River, Chief Tessouat's band, the powerful Kichesipirini (Big River People) on Morrison's Island near present-day Pembroke, and the Nibachis at Muskrat Lake. This caused some people to believe that the Algonquins were the same people as the Ottawas, but the Ottawas were a different tribe whose homeland was on the shores of Lake Huron. Champlain's name for the Ottawas was cheveux relevées, "high hair", because of the way they wore their hair.

**Distribution**

The Algonquins were spread over an extensive territory ([click here](http://www.civilization.ca/cmc/archeo/oracles/outaouai/30.htm) to see a map of the Algonquin territory), a tribe related by language and customs. Although the prehistory of the Ottawa
Valley is practically unknown, the Algonquins were on the Ottawa and its tributary valleys (Petite Nation, Lièvre, Gatineau and South Nation) in the early French period. There is some evidence of a copper-using people here approximately 5000 years ago, but they cannot be connected with the Algonquins of the historic period. It seems that the Algonquins in the Ottawa Valley left, perhaps for the interior, soon after the Iroquois had destroyed the Huron nation in 1649-50.

Algonquin territory was bounded on the east by the country of the Montagnais. In the 1800s, Algonquins were hunting up the Saint Maurice River and eastward to the Ste-Anne-de-la-Pérade River. They regarded this area as their ancient territory. To the west their territory was bounded by that of the Nipissing and Ojibwa, and to the north by that of the Cree - though the actual boundary lines are not known - but the southern boundary, with the Iroquois, was a theoretical line from a rock in Burlington Bay on Lake Champlain in the east, to Oswegatchie (on the St. Lawrence River at Ogdensburg, New York) in the west.

Over this vast territory there were often shifts in the Algonquin population. In historic times, many of the shifts were brought about by war and the attractions of trade and religion. At an early date, some Algonquins settled in French mission villages, such as Oka. In the frequent wars between the French and the English, the Algonquins were always allies of the French. Considered by some as greater warriors than the Iroquois, they fought at Fort Necessity, Lake George, Monongahela, Fort Edward, Schenectady, Fort Orange, the Plains of Abraham and other battles. It is doubtful that there was ever a politically united Algonquin nation, even in Champlain's time there were several Algonquin bands, each with its own chief.

**Lifestyle**

The Algonquins travelled much, but they were not, as is sometimes supposed, an aimlessly nomadic people. There was
their annual cycle of travel. In the summer all the families of a band gathered on a large lake or river where for a few weeks they enjoyed social life as a community. Marriages were made, and they were visited by European traders and missionaries. In the fall, the band broke up into family groups which returned up the rivers to their own hunting and trapping grounds.

Because they travelled much (click here to see a pair of Algonquin snowshoes), their material goods had to be limited to those that could be carried by canoe (click here to see an Algonquin canoe), toboggan and tumpline, and those that could be made on the spot where they were needed: bows and arrows; crooked-knife; axe; awl; needles; firemaking kit; cradle boards (click here to see Algonquin cradle boards); basswood bags and mats; birchbark containers; clothes and sleeping robes. Their shelters in the hunting camps were rectangular, conical, and dome-shaped, formed of poles and covered with birchbark. Some summer camps and semipermanent villages contained longhouses similar to those of the Iroquois.

The basic unit of Algonquin society was the family: the father and mother, grandparents, children and adopted children. Chiefs were selected for their leadership ability and prestige, and their authority depended more upon these personal qualities than upon their office. In any case, they could exert their influence only during the summer months when the whole band was living together.

The abundant wildlife formed the mainstay of Algonquin subsistence. As one Algonquin said, "Our country was a big
garden. It grew twelve months of the year, and we just reached out and took what we needed. We didn't plant, and we didn't waste." Unlike the Iroquois, their neighbours to the south, the Algonquin lived in a zone that was generally unfavourable to agriculture, although at one time they did grow some corn, beans, squash and even European peas in the St. Lawrence and Ottawa Valleys.

Their most dependable source of food was fish, caught the year round. Their largest and most dependable game animal was the moose, hunted in fall, winter and spring. Black bear, beaver and water fowl were important, and smaller animals were taken when they were needed and available. Berries were gathered throughout the summer as the different kinds became ripe. The southern bands tapped the sugar maple in the spring for its sap. The animal world was necessary as a food source, the plant world as a source of fire, shelter and tools.

The same animals which were killed for food also supplied the Algonquins with fur and skins for clothing and robes, bones for needles, awls and other tools, and sinew for thread. With the arrival of the Europeans, these animals became especially important as a source of furs, which would be traded for a variety of desired European goods. Trapping furs in winter expeditions took the Algonquins of the Montreal missions far up the Ottawa River. The name "Ottawa" is commonly thought to have been derived from the Algonquin word atawe, "to trade." (The Ottawa River probably got its name from the fact that, after 1653, the Ottawas brought furs to the French by that route.) The Algonquin position on the Ottawa River, which was the easiest trade route into the interior, was a strategic one. The Kichesipirini on Morrison's Island controlled a tollgate on the river between the Hurons and other western Indians and the French. This tribe became especially powerful and acquired a reputation of being proud and independent.

**Religion and Beliefs**

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The Algonquins thought of themselves as part of the natural world with which, for their own well-being, they must live in harmony. The Indian religion has been little understood by Europeans. Missionaries wanted to replace it with some form of Christianity, or dismissed it with terms like "superstition" and "magic." Algonquin thinkers, like European philosophers, concluded that the world of natural things could not have made itself and that there was one who made all things. They addressed him as "you that made all" and offered him tobacco and corn. He thought of as the owner of everything. He is widely known today under the name Kitchi Manito, "the Great Spirit", but this name may have been coined by the missionaries.

The traditional stories of Algonquin folklore sometimes contain lessons and guides to behaviour. The most important figure in Algonquin mythology is Wiskedjak, a contradictory and puzzling character, although he was always causing mischief, people liked to have him around and he had the power to make everything in creation answer when he spoke.

**Algonquins today**

Algonquins continue to live on the Ottawa and its tributaries in the twentieth century. There are bands or families at Golden Lake, at River Desert (Maniwaki), at Temiskaming and other points on the Ottawa River between Ottawa and Temiskaming: Lac Quinze, Mattawa, Kipawa, Lac Dumoine and Rivière Coulogne. There are bands in Northern Ontario and Quebec at Abitibi, Grand Lac Victoria, Lac Simon and Lac Barrière.

There are still many speakers of several Algonquin dialects. Besides the Algonquins in officially recognized bands, there are an unknown number of persons of Algonquin decent throughout the Ottawa Valley unaffiliated with any reserve. The total number of Algonquins appears to be increasing slightly.
It is these people, the Algonquins, who were and are the Indians of the Ottawa Valley; Canadian history would have been a different story without them, the role they played in those early chapters was considerable.

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