

Étienne Brûlé Teacher Insert

Étienne Brûlé was one of the original settlers of Quebec who came with Champlain to the city in 1608. Champlain reports that he was but a youth at this time, no older than 19. The survival of Quebec and New France was contingent on the local indigenous populations, as the French settlers had no knowledge of the local geography or ecosystem and struggled to find food and map the land they found themselves in. In response to this, Champlain became increasingly interested in the idea of establishing a corp of truchements; interpreters or intermediaries. To Champlain's surprise, the young lad of Quebec, Brûlé, volunteered for such a role on his own initiative. He was fascinated by the indigenous cultures and wanted to live among them, to learn their languages and their skills.

In 1610 an agreement was reached between Champlain and the natives. The chief of the Arendahronon, Tregouaroti, was to send his younger brother Savignon to live with Champlain in Quebec while Étienne Brûlé was to go with Iroquet of the Ononchatteronon. In a year everybody would reunite and exchange their findings. Brûlé traveled with Iroquet into Wendake for the winter. Brûlé traveled deep into Wendake during this first year, but most importantly, he quickly learned both the Wendat and Algonquin languages. Being able to liaise with the natives was essential for Champlain's operations in New France. So too was the knowledge of the waterways and trade routes that Brûlé was acquiring. Brûlé is credited with being the first European to see four if not five of the great lakes, the first European to walk in what is now Toronto, and the first to set foot in Pennsylvania. Certainly he traveled most if not all of the major trade and water routes in what is now Southern Ontario and the surrounding area before any other European in his decades with the Wendat.

Significantly, he was the first European to voyage down the Carrying-Place Trail. In 1615 Champlain, accompanied by Brûlé and a group of French soldiers allied themselves with the Wendat confederacy to lay siege to an Iroquois fortress at Onondaga, in present day Upstate New York. Brûlé volunteered to travel with a Wendat party to seek reinforcements from the Susquehannocks by traveling down the Humber River from Lake Simcoe to Lake Ontario, and then further west. Unfortunately, Brûlé and the reinforcements arrived too late to help Champlain who was wounded in the siege. This was the legendary Carrying-Place trail voyage, during which Brûlé became the first European to walk in what is now the City of Toronto.

Brûlé was also a master linguist, and easily picked up new languages, becoming fluent in many indigenous dialects. He assisted the missionary Gabriel Sagard in compiling the first French-Wendat dictionary. Considering that Sagard only spent 8 months in Wendake, Brûlé's help would have been indispensable in such an undertaking. Brûlé was never trusted by the missionaries because of his lavish lifestyle, which they saw as detrimental to their conversion efforts. Champlain began to distrust Brûlé after the disastrous route at the Onandaga siege, and this mistrust grew to outright accusations of treason in 1628. Brûlé was captured by the privateering Kirke brothers on his way back to North America after a brief stay in France, and when they captured Quebec in 1629 Champlain blamed Brûlé for the disaster. The Wendat also grew to distrust him, possibly because of their high esteem for Champlain and disdain for the English, and killed Brûlé in 1632.

Étienne Brûlé left no written records of his own. His voice and perspective are lost to time forever, but as educators we can do our best to give him a fair representation. The information for the brochure came primarily from the following websites:

The Champlain Society
<http://www.champlainsociety.ca/>
Contains links to Champlain's Voyages in New France

Links

<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/>
*Contains links to Sagard's History of
Brulé's discoveries and explorations*

Canadian Museum of History
Virtual Museum of New France
<http://www.historymuseum.ca/>

Dictionary of Canadian Biography
<http://www.biographi.ca/en/>

The Encyclopedia of French Cultural Heritage in North America
<http://www.ameriquefrancaise.org/en/>

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Étienne Brûlé researcher

Questions

What was the name of the chief with whom Étienne Brûlé went to live with in 1610?

Why did Étienne Brûlé travel down the Humber river in 1615?

Where do you think Étienne Brûlé ended up after he left Champlain in 1615? Why did he disappear for three years?