



## CHAPTER *Geography in History*

### 5



## Riverways Through French North America

Each spring, fleets of bark canoes moved swiftly through the melting ice on the St. Lawrence River. Loud songs announced the arrival of bold trappers bringing treasured fur from the interior wilderness.

In the 1600s, the fur trade led France to claim a huge empire in North America. By 1750, that empire stretched from the mouth of the St. Lawrence River to the Gulf of Mexico. The empire was not united. It included a patchwork of settlements in three areas: New France in Canada, Louisiana on the lower Mississippi River, and Illinois country in the mid-Mississippi Valley.

### **FURS AND FISH IN NEW FRANCE**

New France, with its cities of Quebec and Montreal, had the largest population of the three French footholds. By 1750, about 60,000 people lived there. Most lived along the banks of the St. Lawrence River.

Montreal was the center of a vast trading network that reached into the heart of the continent. Led by Indian guides, trappers paddled inland through Lakes Huron and Michigan and along rivers into the wilderness. Returning to Montreal, they traded their furs for supplies before heading west again.

As the number of fur-bearing animals dwindled, trappers moved so far inland that they could no longer make the round trip to Montreal. So the French built a system of forts across the interior, where trappers could trade furs for supplies and trade goods. The forts also served other purposes. They protected the empire against the English and were the headquarters for Catholic missionaries who were preaching to the Indians.

Fort Michilimackinac (mihsh ah leh MAK ah naw) was one of these centers. It stood at a strategic spot between Lakes Huron and Michigan. (Today, it is the site of Mackinac, Michi-

gan.) From there, trappers headed along rivers to the north and west.

Besides the fur trade, fish contributed to New France's wealth. The shallow waters along the Atlantic coast from Labrador to northern New England are among the world's richest fishing grounds. There, the Labrador Current and the Gulf Stream meet, creating an environment that supports rich plant life, which in turn attracts sea creatures on which cod feed.

### **LOUISIANA Foothold**

Louisiana had a much smaller population than New France. Only about 2,000 people lived there in 1750. New Orleans, at the mouth of the Mississippi River, was the only large town. It served as the center of government and trade as well as a military outpost that protected the lower Mississippi River.

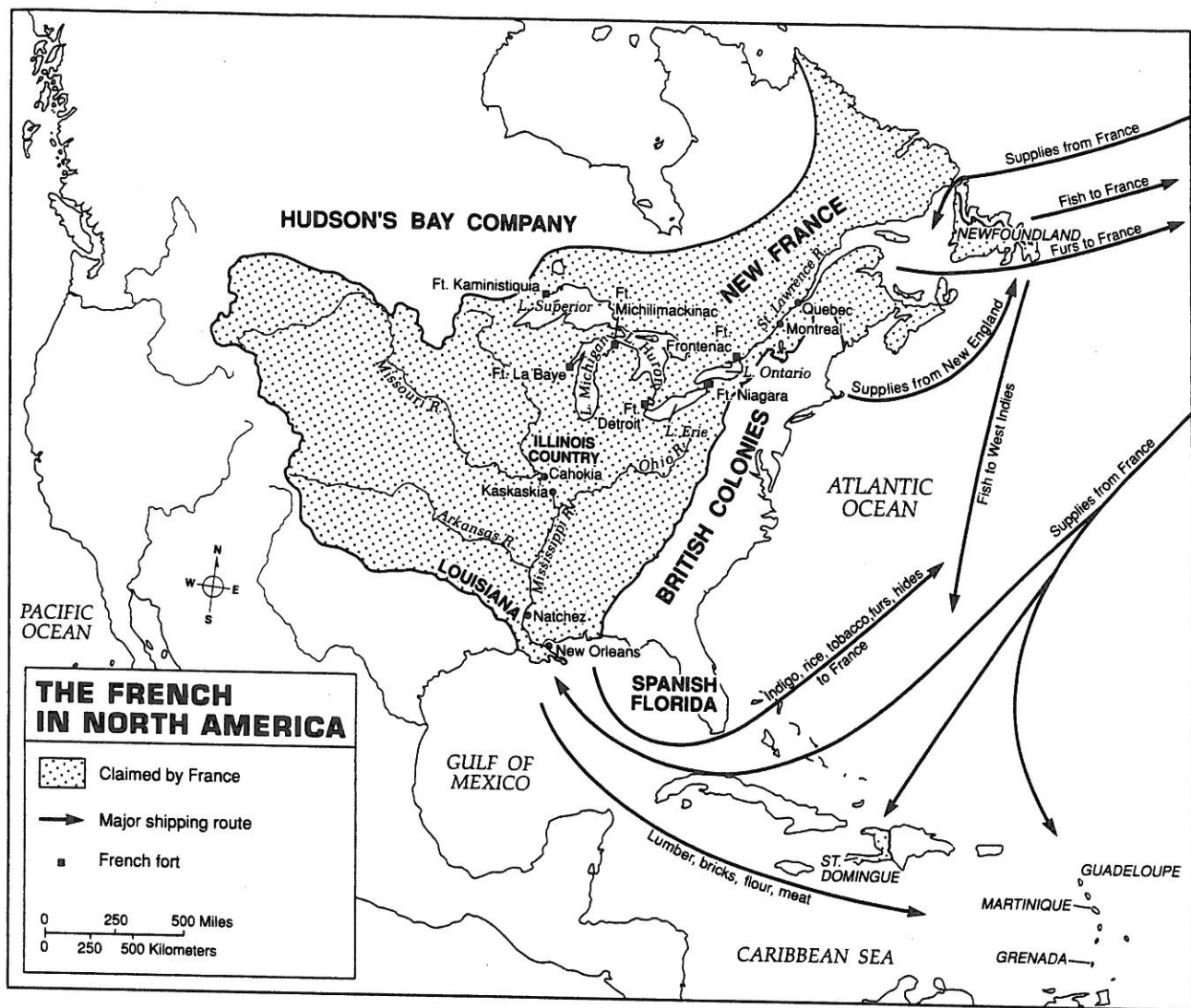
As in New France, settlers in Louisiana clung to the waterways, carving out estates along the Gulf Coast from New Orleans to Mobile. Planters relied on African slaves to grow rice, indigo, and tobacco. Because of a weak demand for these crops in France, the colony grew slowly. However, slaves produced lumber and bricks that were exported to France's colonies in the West Indies.

### **ILLINOIS COUNTRY**

The third French foothold stood in the mid-Mississippi Valley. Known as Illinois country, the area was separated from both New France and Louisiana by about 1,000 miles. Its two main settlements, Cahokia and Kaskaskia, were founded by French missionaries.

Settlers turned the region into "the garden of New France." Farmers grew grain and raised stock, sending boatloads of flour and meat down the Mississippi River to New Orleans.

Traders and trappers roamed the Illinois River country. They encouraged Indians to bring



furs to trading posts along the Wabash and Ohio rivers. Unlike food exports that were sent south, furs were sent northeast along the Illinois River and across the Great Lakes to Mon-

treau. The cooler climate of New France was better for the furs than the hot, damp climate of New Orleans.

### A. FOCUS ON GEOGRAPHY

- Location** In which direction did trade goods travel from Kaskaskia to New Orleans?
- Place** What natural resources influenced the economy of New France?
- Interaction** Using information on the map and from the essay, do you think Fort Kaministiquia was more important as a defense against the British or as a fur-trading center? Explain.
- Movement** Why was Fort Michilimackinac an important trading outpost?
- Regions** Compare New France, Louisiana, and Illinois country.

### B. CRITICAL THINKING

- Drawing Conclusions** What geographic factors worked against creating a unified French empire in North America?
- Applying Information** Why do you think it was easier for farmers in Illinois country to send their goods to New Orleans than to Montreal?