



## *The Weekly Historical Note*

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### *Early Iroquois encounters with Samuel de Champlain*


In 1906, Professor of History at Yale University, Edward G. Bourne, edited and published a two volume set titled *The Voyages and Explorations of Samuel de Champlain (1604-1616)*. The rare book set, published by A. S. Barnes & Company of New York is now a hard to find collectors item. Those fortunate enough to find the book will find a first hand account of Samuel de Champlain who was a Frenchman and although not the first, he was one of earliest to venture past the immediate coastal areas of North America and make contact with Nations on the eastern interior.


French settlements at the time were closest to the Algonquin. The Algonquin could have easily attacked and killed the small numbers of French. So, for practical reasons more than anything, the French made peace with them and agreed to aid them against their enemies; the Iroquois.

In 1610, Champlain recorded a battle which took place near the mouth of the Richelieu River (referred to as the "River Iroquois"). The river ran north and south between Lake Champlain and the Saint Lawrence River and was southeast of Quebec or about 10-12 miles east of Montreal. The following are excerpts from Champlain's account of what happened in June of that year.

*"In the year 1610, when I had gone with a bark and some men from Quebec to the mouth of the River Iroquois, to wait for 400 savages, who were to join me, so that I might aid them in another war, which turned out to be more imminent than we thought, an Algonquin savage in a canoe came swiftly to warn me that the Algonquins had encountered the Iroquois, who numbered one hundred, and they were well barricaded, and that it would be hard to get the upper hand of them if the Misthigosches (as they call us) did not come promptly."*

*"At once the alarm began among some of the savages, and each one jumped into his canoe with his arms... When we had gone about half a league across the river, all the savages went ashore and, abandoning their canoes, took their [weapons] and began to run into the woods in such a way that we soon lost them from view, and they left us without a guide. Nevertheless, we kept following them and went about half a league into the thick woods, into fens and marshes, always with water to our knees, each armed with the corselet of a pikeman, which was very burdensome. Besides, there were quantities of mosquitoes so thick that they scarcely allowed us to catch our breath at all; they persecuted us so much and so cruelly that it was a strange experience. Nor did we know where we were until we noticed two savages crossing the woods. We called them, and told them that they must stay with us to guide us and conduct us to where the Iroquois were, and that otherwise we could not go there, and we should lose our way. This they did."*





*“As soon as the savages saw us they began to shout in such a way that one would not have heard it thunder. I ordered my companions to follow me all the time, and not to separate from me at all. I went near to the barricade of the enemy to explore it. It was made of heavy trees set close together in a circle, which is the usual shape of their fortresses....Then we began to discharge a great many musket shots through the foliage, since we could not see them as they could us. I was wounded as I was shooting the first time into the side of their barricade, by an arrow shot which slit the end of my ear and entered my neck. I took hold of it and pulled it out; it was barbed on the end with a very sharp stone. Another of my companions was wounded at the same time in the arm by another arrow, which I pulled out of him. Nevertheless, my wound did not prevent me from doing my duty, nor our savages from doing their part; and likewise the enemy, to such a degree that the arrows were seen flying from one side and the other as a thick as hail.*

*The Iroquois were astonished at the noise of our muskets, and especially at the fact that the balls pierced better than arrows; and they were so frightened at the effect of them... When I saw that our ammunition was beginning to fail, I said to all the savages that they must overcome them by force and break their barricade... which they did promptly. And as they were about to accomplish it, the bark, which was a league and a half from us, heard us fighting, through the echo of our muskets, which resounded as far off as they were; this led a young man from St. Malo, full of courage, called Des Prairies, who had his bark near us... and thereupon he decided to come to me in a shallop with some of his companions... ..As soon as he arrived he went toward the fort of the Iroquois, which was on the bank of the river. There he went ashore and came to find me. When I saw him I ordered the savages who were breaking down the fortress, to stop, so that the newcomers might have their part of the pleasure. I begged Sieur des Prairies and his companions to fire some salutes of the musket before our savages should take the enemy by storm, as they had decided to do; this they did, and they shot several times, each one doing his duty. When they had shot enough I addressed our savages and incited them to complete the work.*

Champlain's narrative continues with a rather graphic and detailed account of the slaughter of the remaining Iroquois in the barricade. Champlain stated that his Algonquin allies scalped the dead, looted what could be salvaged, took about 15 Iroquois prisoner and shot and killed the rest of the Iroquois as they fled or drowned them in the river. The 15 prisoners were taken only for the purpose of torturing them to death as revenge for their fallen warriors. Champlain was involved in several skirmishes between the Algonquin and the Iroquois. The Iroquois later played the English and French against each other rather successfully which gave them the upper hand in trade negotiations.

