Imperial Rivalries, Part Two: England, France and Holland Race to New World

By Peter C. Mancall, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.26.17

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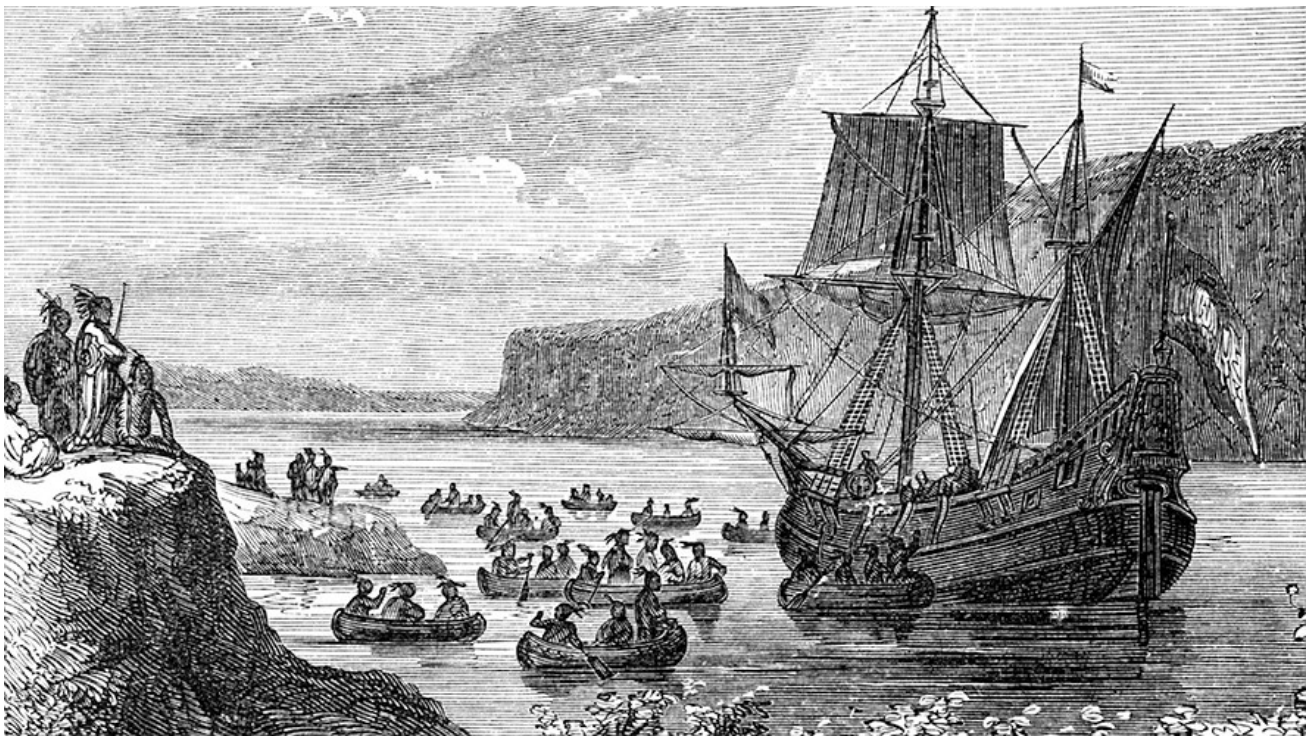

An illustration of Henry Hudson's ship, the Half Moon, arriving at Manhattan in 1609 on behalf of the Dutch East India Company. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

The second in a three-part series

Spain and Portugal had agreements in the early 1490s that made them the first major players in crossing the Atlantic Ocean into the New World. But in the early 1500s, other European countries also recognized the benefits of conquering and controlling the valuable lands in the Americas. The French had been interested in possibilities of Atlantic enterprise since the early decades. The explorer Jacques Cartier from France made three voyages. The first was in 1534, the second in 1535, and his third that ended in 1542. The French wanted to expand their knowledge of North America, but the main goal was to find a possible route through the

continent to the Pacific Ocean. Cartier never found that passage, but he did explore the St. Lawrence Valley region north of the St. Lawrence River in Canada. He also was the first one to claim Canada for France.

France establishes colony in Canada

By the mid-1500s, a group of mapmakers in France produced a series of new maps called portolans. These sea charts showed harbors, the distances between them and sailing directions. They also hinted at what explorers might find. In July 1608, Samuel Champlain sailed for France to explore territory farther south, that was closer to the St. Lawrence River and established the colony called Quebec City. It would become the main outpost of New France. Other countries used this same method to claim ownership of areas in Canada.

In 1609, the Dutch employed English captain Henry Hudson to find the Northeast Passage. They hoped he would find open water north of Russia that led to the Pacific. He crossed the Atlantic and eventually made his way up the river that now bears his name. In the years that

followed, the Dutch claimed this region, calling it New Netherland, and establishing their main colony on the island of Manhattan, which is part of New York City today.

Explorers try to meet European demand

The English, along with French and the Dutch, tried to find the Northwest Passage water route to Asia that European mapmakers were convinced existed somewhere in North America. Whoever found that route would be able to control passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. From there, they could sail to Japan, China and the Spice Islands.

Europeans had fallen in love with East Asian silk as well as the cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and peppers from places like Banda, which is about 1500 miles south of the coast of China. The explorers knew there was enormous demand for whatever they could bring back, and the

people of Europe would buy everything the sailors' ships could hold. A northern route would cut the length of the journey, so the spices sailors hauled home would be fresher than those that were brought on routes around Africa or South America.

A shorter water route across the north would help other northern European countries compete with the Spanish. Spain was now able to get to Asia more easily after they claimed Mexico and built a major port at Acapulco on the Pacific Ocean. The Spanish could now bring silver to the Philippines more quickly to purchase spices and silks. The northern route was also much faster than the route the ships of Portugal took around Africa and across the Indian Ocean.

England searches for faster route

The English also felt that the discovery of the northern route would prove that God favored them. King Henry VIII had left the Catholic Church in Rome because he wanted to divorce his wife, Catherine, and marry Anne Boleyn. The pope would not allow the divorce.

The pope had supported Spain and Portugal and given them permission to use southern routes. The discovery of a shorter northern route would show the pope that God had rewarded the English with a faster route. This northern path would be more valuable than southern lands and routes he gave to Spain and Portugal.

Peter C. Mancall is a professor of history at the University of Southern California. His publications include "Fatal Journey: The Final Expedition of Henry Hudson — A Tale of Mutiny and Murder in the Arctic" (2009), "Hakluyt's Promise: An Elizabethan's Obsession for an English America" (2007) and "Travel Narratives from the Age of Discovery: An Anthology" (2006). He is currently working on "American Origins," which will be the first volume of the "Oxford History of the United States."