

My Ancestor - Olivier Le Tardif

Lee Gelineau, Member #827

When Samuel de Champlain began his work of founding the colony of New France, he had a vision of what it would eventually look like. Central to accomplishing his plan was the way in which he saw himself, and other Frenchman who would build the colony with him, dealing with the indigenous people who already populated the region. He didn't want to enslave them as the Spanish had in Mexico and South America, and he didn't want to drive them from their land and control them by military force as the English were doing in their colonies to the south. Rather, he envisioned a spirit of cooperation with them in which the Indian and French cultures would benefit each other and live together in a state of peaceful coexistence. This would prove to be a difficult task, though, since it would not only involve the Montagnais, the tribe located near the new settlement of Quebec, but also the tribes allied to them, the Algonquin and Huron further to the west, and their enemy, the Iroquois to the southwest. Each had its own cultural differences that distinguished them one from the other, including completely different languages. It would require a group of very special people. One member of this group that helped Champlain to work toward the accomplishment of his vision was Olivier Le Tardif.

Olivier was born in 1601 in Etables, in the Diocese of St. Brieuc, in Brittany, France, the son of Jean Le Tardif and Clemence Houart. He appears to have spent time in Normandy, however, as he is known to have on occasion signed his name "Olivier Letardif de Honnfleur," suggesting that he considered his roots to include the port town of Honfleur in Normandy, France. It is from here that he left France on May 24, 1618, presumably aboard a ship of the Compagnie des Marchands (Company of Merchants), landing about June 24, 1618 on the banks of the St. Lawrence River at the small settlement of Tadoussac, 124 miles downriver from Quebec. As a young man, he traveled and lived among the Indians of the St. Lawrence Valley, traded with them, and exhibited a remarkable success in learning their languages, a fact that did not escape the attention of Champlain. Besides Champlain, others also had a high opinion of Le Tardif, praising his character and honesty in his dealings with the Indians. A pious and devout individual, he strongly supported the Indian missions, encouraging the baptism of them and serving as godfather to many. The Indians also held him in high esteem and he always remained very close to them. Following Champlain's example, he adopted three Indian children in 1638, raised them as his own, and helped to arrange good marriages for them.

The first time Olivier was brought into the inner political circle of the colony was in 1621 when Champlain summoned him to attend an assembly with other Quebec persons of notoriety. Held Aug. 18, 1621, this was the first legislative type assembly ever held in Quebec and presented a case against two trading companies that were alleged to be operating in an illegal manner. Olivier signed the resulting petition with Champlain and others that was addressed to King Louis XIII of France.

In 1623, he became a clerk/interpreter in the employ of Guillaume de Caen, the Royal Superintendent of New France. In 1628, when an English force under the command of the Kirke brothers attacked Quebec, which at the time was lacking enough food and munitions to defend itself, Champlain deputized Le Tardif to surrender the keys to the town to them.

He did this on July 20, 1629 and soon after returned to France with Champlain. The first four months of 1630 were spent by Olivier in London, trying to recoup de Caen's losses for the furs seized in the capture of Quebec. Eventually, he returned to Honfleur to engage in commercial work there, but when the Treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye returned control of Quebec to the French in 1632, Olivier returned there in the employ of the King's Company of the Hundred Associates, which served as the core of investors in New France, and he resumed his relationship to Champlain, often appearing at his side and working closely with him as his interpreter in some of the most important meetings with the Indians from 1633 to 1635. Following Champlain's death in December of 1635, Olivier Le Tardif became a leading figure in New France, rising steadily in the Company of the Hundred Associates, from sous-commis (under clerk) to premier-commis, and then to commis-general, overseeing the Company's affairs in the St. Lawrence Valley.

He also became a land developer. In May of 1637, he received a joint land grant with Jean Nicolet for 160 arpents on the outskirts of the Village of Quebec. In 1645, when the fur trade monopoly that had been enjoyed by the Company of the Hundred Associates was taken over by the group known as the Communaute des Habitants, Le Tardif began to devote most of his time to the Compagne de Beaupre which had acquired a fief and Seigneurie on the north bank of the St. Lawrence River and the Ile d'Orleans. The following year, he became a co-seigneur by purchasing a 1/8 interest in these properties. His holdings on the Beaupre bank had a five arpent frontage on the St. Lawrence and ran a depth of five miles. He conceded a portion of this land to fifteen other, helping to stimulate its development. He is also considered to be the founder of Chateau Richer, and to help develop the town, he granted at least twenty more concessions to people there as well.

When Samuel de Champlain died, Olivier Le Tardif had been one of several men at his bedside. While looking after the Company's trade, he had become Champlain's most trusted interpreter and companion in his meetings with the Indians. Even after Champlain's death, Olivier had worked to keep his vision for the future of New France alive. By actively encouraging the intermixing of the French and Indians and their cultures, they were able to bring about the growth and establishment of New France in a relatively peaceful manner. But they did much more than that; they actually created a new race of people. As early as 1615, the children of the mixed unions of French and Indians began to be recorded as "Metis." A century later, the word was applied to an entire population of French-Indian descent. The Metis are the only ethnic group to be truly native to the North American continent; other Native American tribes, and even the Inuit, originated somewhere else. They owe their existence to men like Olivier Le Tardif who served as Champlain's interpreters and ambassadors to the Indians and shared his vision.

Note: Info on Samuel de Champlain found in David Hackett Fischer's Book, "Champlain's Dream"