

A Closer Look

Religion in British North America

Religion was a very important part of most people's lives in British North America. A church was one of the first things colonists would build in a community, and most people attended church regularly. Some Aboriginal people continued to follow their traditional beliefs. Others joined one of the European Churches.

In Canada today, a person's religion is considered to be a private matter. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees that people of all religions have the same rights. In BNA, your religion could affect your opportunities in life.

French Canadians, Acadians, and Irish colonists were mostly Roman Catholic and followed the teachings of the Roman Catholic

Church. Most English colonists were Protestant and followed the teachings of the Church of England (in Canada today, it is called the Anglican Church of Canada). There were other Protestant Churches (e.g., Presbyterian, Methodist, etc.) but the Church of England was the "official" Church supported by the elite. Only this Church was given money and land by the government. In Canada East, the elite was Roman Catholic, but everywhere else it was hard to get ahead unless you were Protestant.

Throughout the 1800s, religious differences caused serious problems between people in communities. In Chapter 6, you will see that they also affected politics.

People of French Heritage

There were people of French heritage in all the colonies and territories, but the two main groups were the French of Canada East and the Acadians in Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. In the 1700s, there had been a lot of French settlement in Newfoundland. By the mid-1800s, however, there were only a few small communities along the French Shore.

The French in Canada East

For many years, people of French heritage had been in the majority in Canada East. Many families had been there since the early days of the French colonies in the 1600s. There was a small elite, but most of the population were *habitants*—farmers who lived in rural areas.

When Great Britain took over the French colonies in 1763, the French were given special rights. For example, they had the right to keep their language, customs, laws, and Roman Catholic faith. The British gave them these rights because they wanted to make sure that the French wouldn't rebel against them.

In general, *habitants'* farms did well, and they had strong communities to support one another when there were problems. However, as time went by, more and more British and Irish immigrants moved into the area. The French feared they would become a minority and lose their rights.