

L'Ordre de Bon Temps

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In 1606 the inhabitants of Port Royal (now Annapolis Royal), Nova Scotia, gave birth to the first social club to be structured by Caucasians in North America. Samuel de Champlain was considered to be the prime force behind the establishment of L'Ordre de Bon Temps.

The rationale underlying the formation of this club was determined by examining earlier French colonization efforts in the New World, together with the development of this particular habitation. It was concluded that previous attempts at settlement had failed for a variety of reasons, chief among which were the problems of scurvy and starvation, the fear of native aggression, loneliness and homesickness—conditions that proved an ideal medium for the growth of discontent and intra-group conflict. Champlain was vividly aware of these hazards having experienced two previous Maritime winters with colonists—Sainte Croix, 1604-5 and Port Royal, 1605-6.

To Champlain, the task was clear. To ensure the survival of the Port Royal Habitation (and this was imperative if he were to continue his explorations) four objectives had to be achieved. First, the daily diet of the colonists would have to be improved and, secondly, the men had to be encouraged to engage in challenging physical pursuits throughout the winter months. Operating on the premise that poor diets and a passive existence had contributed to the previous outbreaks of scurvy, Champlain believed that by urging the settlers to hunt, fish, gather and barter, they would both receive the exercise he deemed necessary and bring to the table an adequate supply of fresh foods. His third objective was to establish a regular forum whereby the colonists could relax and enjoy themselves in congenial surroundings, thus quelling any rumblings of discontent. Finally, the settlement's survival depended to a large extent upon the continued goodwill of the local natives. Champlain was determined to foster this relationship for to antagonize the Micmac could have conceivably resulted in armed conflict, something that was to be avoided at all cost. Further, it was from these Indians that the settlement derived the majority of its pelts and after all it was the fur trade that provided Port Royal with a *raison d'être*. By thus pursuing a policy of goodwill, the safety of the settlement could be guaranteed and the prospect of securing both furs and additional fresh fish, poultry and venison from the natives would be facilitated.

Champlain visualized L'Ordre de Bon Temps as a vehicle by which these objectives could be realized. Consisting of a formal dinner, complete with toasts, allocutions, singing and story telling, this biweekly social gathering of the Port Royal colonists and their Indian neighbours appears to have been an unqualified success. The establishment of L'Ordre helped to stimulate trade, boosted morale, upgraded diets and increased the amount of physical exercise that the colonists engaged in during the winter months. If it were in any way responsible for the fewer incidents of illness and unrest reported during the winter of 1606-7, then credit must be given where credit is due—to the creator of L'Ordre de Bon Temps, Samuel de Champlain.