

LEVELED BOOK • X

# The Algonquins

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# The Algonquins



Reading A-Z

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# The Algonquins

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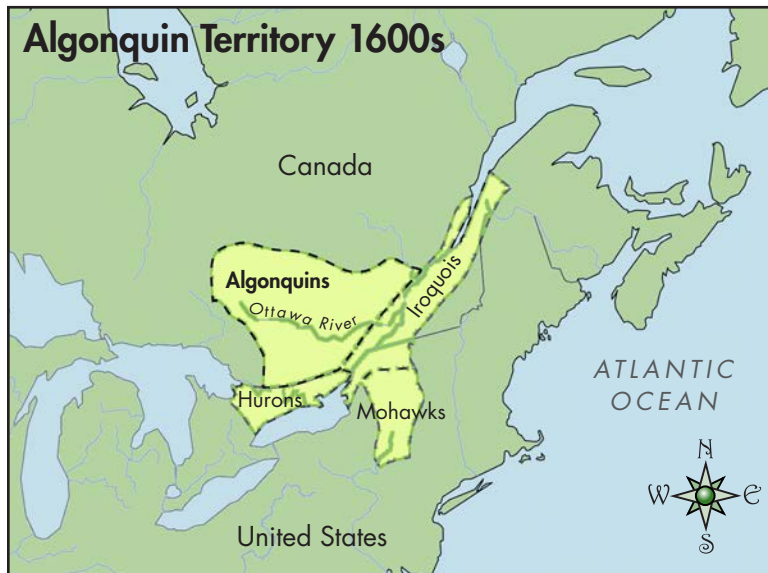
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## The Clearing of the Forest

It was the Moon of the Falling Leaves in the year that white people called 1835. Here in western Quebec, one could feel the approach of winter. With the setting of the sun, the air grew cold. It would not be long before the first snow arrived.

Along the Ottawa River, the Algonquin people were making preparations for the winter. Soon they would leave their villages. For several months, they would live in small bands and try to survive the harsh winter in eastern Canada. But the time to depart had not yet come. The Ottawa River Valley was still painted with the bright colors of autumn.

The valley was beautiful, but not as beautiful as it had been. Large sections of forest were disappearing. In one part of the valley on this autumn evening, a group of loggers was heading back to their camp. Behind them lay trees that had fallen that day to their axes and saws.

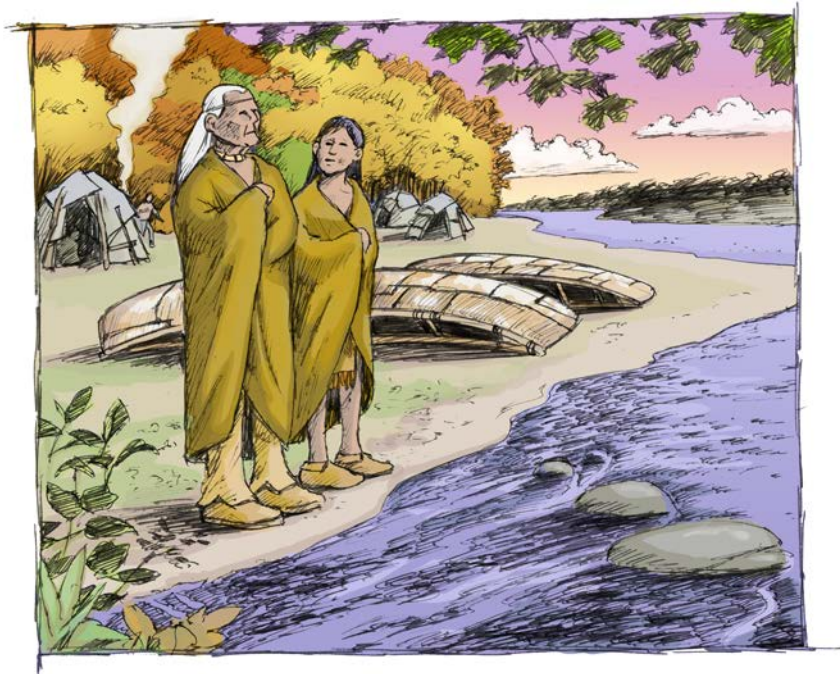
On the other side of the river, the several dozen birchbark **wigwams** of an Algonquin village huddled close together. Two figures stood by the edge of the village, gazing silently at the far side of the river. They wrapped blankets around themselves to ward off the cold. The taller figure

was an old man named Eagle Feather. The other was his great-grandson, Sagastao.

At length, the old man spoke. "How can people need so many trees?" he asked. "No matter how many they cut down, it's never enough. I remember when this valley had more trees than you could count in your lifetime."

The boy made no reply. Who could say why anyone would need so many trees?

"Come," said Eagle Feather, "let's go back to the fire. And I will tell you about our people when the valley and the forest belonged to us alone."



## Long, Long Ago

Eagle Feather and Sagastao sat on logs next to a small fire in the center of the village. The boy threw some dry branches on the fire, and the fire blazed with new life.

The flames revealed the long, gray strands of Eagle Feather's hair and the deep lines in his face.

Sagastao sat quietly, waiting for his great-grandfather to speak. All the daylight was now gone from the sky. The stars sparkled brightly.

Eagle Feather took a deep breath. Then he spoke. "I have seen eighty winters," he said. "So I can tell you many things that I have seen myself. But the beginnings of our people were long before I was born, as was our first meeting with the white men. I will tell you both what I have seen and what I have been told."

### Creation Myths

Throughout history, people have told myths to explain where they and other human beings came from. These myths often include a creator or more than one creator, like the Algonquins' Glooskap and Malsum, whose actions make the world. Creation myths often reflect the beliefs of a cultural group and highlight important moral lessons for its people.



Sagastao waited quietly for Eagle Feather to begin his story. The old man stared into the fire.

“All the people of the world came from Great Mother Earth,” Eagle Feather said at last. “This was long, long ago. Great Mother Earth had two sons. One of the sons, Glooskap, was good, wise, and creative. The other, Malsum, was evil, selfish, and destructive.

“When Great Mother Earth died, Glooskap used parts of her body to create human beings and useful plants and animals. Malsum used other parts of her body to make poisonous plants and snakes.

“The humans created by Glooskap populated all the world. Our people and the other native peoples were given this part of the world to live in.”

## The Algonquin Way of Life

Eagle Feather leaned toward the fire.

“When I was a boy,” he related, “the elders said that our people had originally lived far to the east. They came here in about the year that the white men call 1400. They were probably forced out of their homeland by the Iroquois.”

Sagastao smiled at hearing this traditional name for their long time enemies. It meant *Rattlesnakes*. The French traders had adopted the name and added a French ending, making it *Iroquois*. It was a group name that included the hated Mohawks and several other tribes.

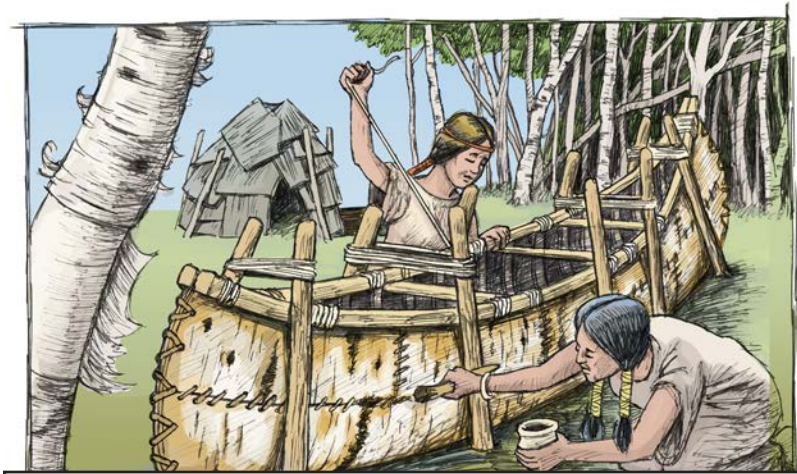
“Great-Grandfather,” said Sagastao, “did our people develop the life we know here in the valley, or did they just bring the old ways with them?”

“Who can say? They probably continued some of the old ways and invented new ones. Every place is different and requires some new ways. But the way of life that you know is very old.”

For a long time, the old man talked, relating the ways of the Algonquins. Sagastao knew all these things. But he also knew that his people’s way of life was threatened. There was no end to the white men who were coming to the valley. The boy

realized that his great-grandfather wanted him to memorize every bit of Algonquin life. If their way of life disappeared, at least it would live on in memory.

*There were so many things to remember about the way they lived, the way they dressed, and the way they celebrated, Sagastao thought. This village had once been home to three hundred people. Now there were scarcely more than a hundred. Could there really come a time when this would all be gone?*



### Constructing a Birchbark Canoe

A birchbark canoe was built by first making a wood frame and staking it to the ground. The frame was used to hold pieces of the canoe together as construction progressed. The builders formed the upper edges and ribs of the canoe with pieces of wood that had been softened with steam. Once the skeleton of the canoe was completed, the women of the village applied strips of birchbark—bark from birch trees—to the outside of it. They stitched the pieces of bark together and sealed all the edges with sticky sap from pine trees. Birchbark canoes were easily damaged and were repaired frequently.

Sagastao looked around him as his great-grandfather continued to relate the ways of the Algonquins. He admired the birchbark and animal-skin wigwams that had been constructed with such care. He looked with pride at the birchbark canoes down at the water's edge. Their people had long been famed for the quality of their canoes.

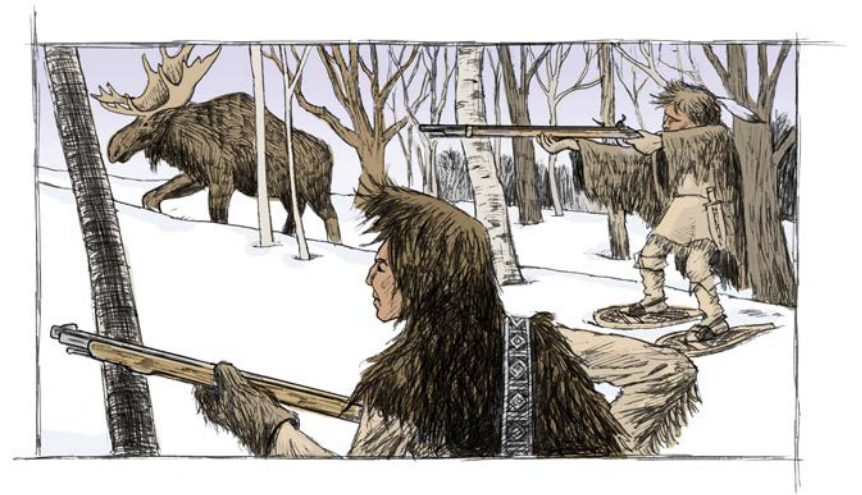
Sagastao put his hand beneath his blanket and felt the softness of his deerskin clothing. For all the ten years of his life, his mother had taken good care of him. When she wasn't out hunting for nuts and berries, she often washed deerskins brought back by the men of the family. With the skins, she fashioned clothing and moccasins.

Once when he was sick, his mother had dressed him in clothes of pure white deerskin. The village shaman said white deerskin would chase away the evil spirits that were making him ill. Indeed, he soon got well.

The shaman was an important man. The Algonquins believed that he healed them when they were sick and that he communicated with the



spirit world. The highest being of the spirit world was the Great Spirit, who looked over them and controlled the elements. But the Earth, they believed, was also filled with many lesser spirits. Some were good, others evil.



Sagastao pulled his blanket tight around him. Even with the fire, he felt cold. He thought ahead to the winter months. In his mind, he could see the men putting on snowshoes to go hunting for deer and moose, or cutting holes in the ice on the river to spear fish.

There was food to be had in the winter, but life was hard. The winters in Quebec were long and very cold. People sometimes couldn't find enough to eat, and they starved to death. Sagastao hoped that the coming winter would not bring too much hardship.

The boy's mind was wandering. He realized that he had missed some of his great-grandfather's words. But now he paid attention. His great-grandfather was talking about war with the Iroquois.

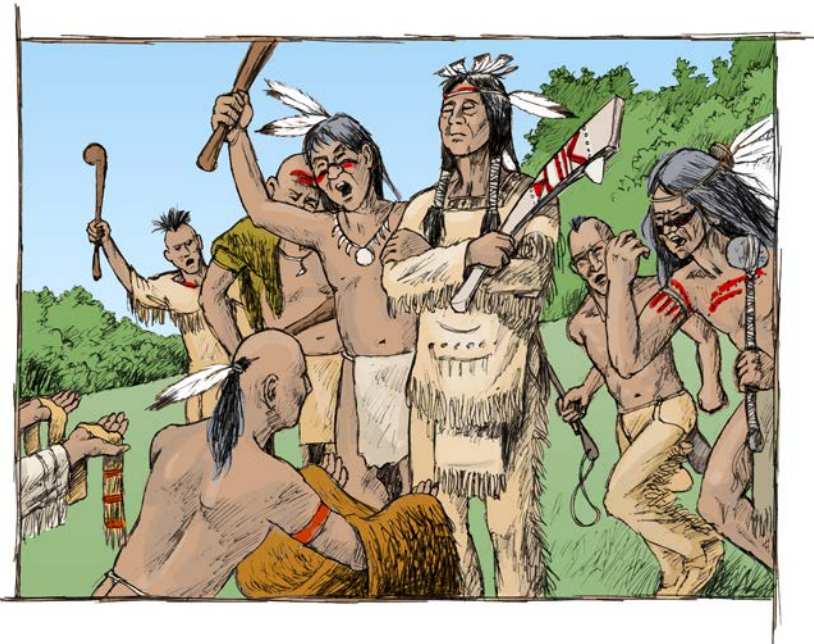
## A Bitter Struggle

Smoke wreathed about Eagle Feather's head as he related his people's long war with the Iroquois.

"This was before the coming of the white men, in the time they called the 1500s," he said. "At that time, some tribes of Iroquois were living near here along the Big River."

"The Saint Lawrence," Sagastao said.

Eagle Feather nodded. He didn't like calling things by the names the white men had given them. "The Iroquois clashed often with our people. They were strong, but we were stronger. Our brave warriors defeated them in many fights."



Eagle Feather told of how the Algonquins subdued their longtime enemies and cleared them from the area, and of how they forced the defeated Iroquois to pay annual **tribute** of furs and other valuable items.

"It was a good time to be an Algonquin," said Eagle Feather with a smile. "The people were very proud."

"But then, everything changed," Eagle Feather said, his smile vanishing. "The Iroquois formed a mighty **federation**."

Sagastao had heard this story many times around tribal fires, and it always gave him a pain in his heart. How the Mohawks and several other Rattlesnake tribes joined together to become the strongest nation in the northlands, so strong that the Algonquins could no longer stand up to them.

After the founding of the federation, the Mohawks were even more feared and hated. The Algonquins were afraid to take their canoes onto the Saint Lawrence River, which became a Mohawk **stronghold**. The Algonquins had gone from triumph to humiliation. But they vowed to restore their former power. Beginning in 1603, they saw their opportunity.



## The Coming of the French

Sagastao tossed a few more branches onto the fire. The flames leapt higher and gave off some welcome heat. Eagle Feather had fallen silent for a few moments.

“You said 1603, Great-Grandfather?” Sometimes Sagastao had to prompt the old man into getting on with a story.

Eagle Feather resumed: “Yes, 1603, as the whites called it. Everything began to change that year. It was when our people met the first Frenchmen. They established a settlement on the Big River to trade for furs.”

### A Confusion of Names

The French began applying the name “Algonquin” to the people of the Ottawa River Valley in the early 1600s. The origin of the name is uncertain. The Algonquins called themselves the Anishnabek, which means “Original People.”

The name Algonquin—pronounced al-GAHN-kin or al-GAHN-KWIN (and also spelled Algonkin)—causes much confusion. **Anthropologists** call the Algonquin language and dozens of other related Native American languages “Algonquian” (al-GAHN-kee-uhn or al-GAHN-kwee-uhn). Many people think Algonquin and Algonquian mean the same thing and that the Algonquins lived throughout much of North America. But that is not so. Algonquins lived mostly in eastern Canada in the Ottawa River Valley.



The leader of that group, Eagle Feather related, was the famous explorer and fur trader Samuel de Champlain (sham-PLANE). Champlain was impressed with the animal furs that the Algonquins brought to trade for steel knives, hatchets, and other valued goods. Furs were in great demand in Europe for the making of hats and coats.

In 1608, Champlain moved his trading post farther up the Saint Lawrence River. That made it easier for the Algonquins to get to his post without being attacked by the Mohawks. Champlain wanted the Algonquins to be his friends and the **allies** of France. The Algonquins were willing, but they wanted something in return: help in their ongoing war with the “Mohawk Rattlesnakes.” Champlain agreed to assist them. In 1609, he and several other Frenchmen joined an Algonquin attack on the Mohawks. The French firearms shattered the Mohawk ranks and killed two chiefs.

## A Time of Troubles

Things were once again looking more hopeful for the Algonquins. With their new weapons, including an increasing number of guns, the Algonquins had the Mohawks on the run. They and an allied tribe controlled the fur trade on the Saint Lawrence River for the next twenty years.

“The coming of the French was a great benefit to us,” said Eagle Feather, as he stared at the fire’s embers as if to coax more warmth from the burning wood.

“Yes, a great benefit,” Eagle Feather said, picking up the thread of his story. “But only for a while. Because the Iroquo found another source of steel weapons and guns. They got them from Dutch traders.

“This was the beginning of a very bad time for our people. The French tried to limit the number of guns they traded to our people, but the Dutch gave the Iroquo as many **muskets** as they wanted.”

Eagle Feather told of the misfortunes that followed—how the Mohawks pushed the Algonquins out of the Saint Lawrence River area, this time for good; how the Mohawks destroyed the Algonquins’ most faithful allies, the Hurons; and how the French, determined to protect their



fur trade, signed **treaties** with the Iroquois federation.

Adding to all these troubles were epidemics of disease transmitted to the native peoples by the European settlers. Beginning in 1634, smallpox, measles, and other illnesses **ravaged** many tribes. Within ten years, the Algonquin population, which had once numbered at least 6,000, was reduced to about 1,000.

“We were never again a great power,” said Eagle Feather.

## Allied With the British

The fire was dying down. Sagastao threw more branches onto the flames, and once more he could feel a surge of welcome warmth. It was now late at night, and the cold was deepening. Across the river, the logging camp was dark and silent. From far away in the forest came the howl of a wolf.

Sagastao turned to Eagle Feather. “Are we now getting to the things you’ve seen with your own eyes, Great-Grandfather?”

Eagle Feather nodded as his thoughts turned to the events of the late 1700s.

“I was born in the year that the white men call 1755. It was a time when the French were fighting the British to see who would rule Canada.

### The French and Indian War

From the late 1600s to the mid-1700s, the British and French fought four wars for the control of North America. The wars began as a fight to control the fur trade. But they developed into a struggle for possession of vast stretches of territory. During each war, both sides used Native American allies. The last and biggest of the conflicts was the French and Indian War (1754–1763). The war ended in defeat for the French. France was forced to give Great Britain much of its land in North America, including almost all of Canada.



“The French and the British used many native warriors in their fights. The tribes had to choose one side or the other or stay out of the fight. The French had been unreliable allies. So we signed a treaty with the British agreeing not to make war against them.

“Later, in the big war that the British fought against their own kind—the Revolutionary War—we fought on their side. I was in a battle in the Mohawk Valley. I got shot in the leg by a musket ball.”

Eagle Feather rubbed the thigh of his right leg as he thought about receiving that wound, now so long ago.

## Losing the Land

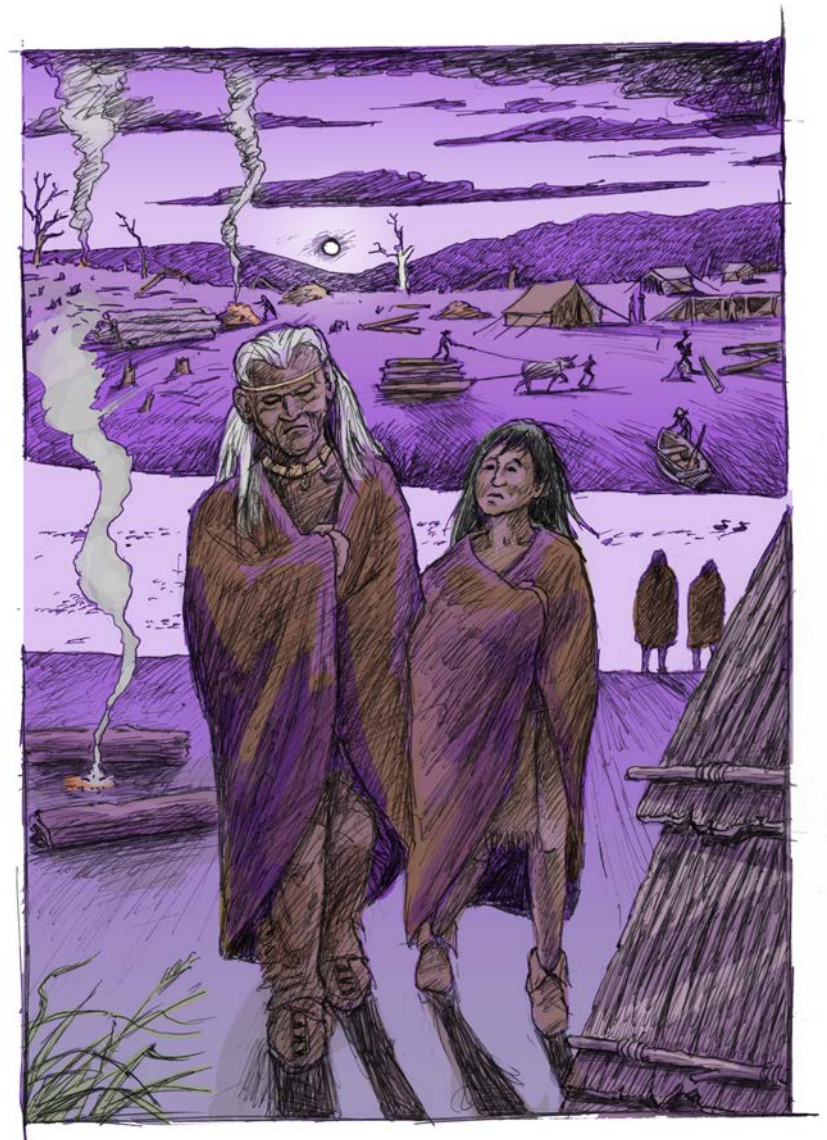
“We were good friends to the British,” Eagle Feather said. “Some years after the Revolutionary War, the British went to war with the American nation. It was called the War of 1812. Again in that war, we were British allies. By then, I was beyond my warrior days, but many of our braves fought alongside the British soldiers.”

A note of bitterness came into the old man’s voice. “We thought we would be rewarded for our help to the British, and they said we would be. They promised that we would keep all of our lands. But for years now, settlers have been taking our land and pushing us into smaller areas.”

Eagle Feather gestured toward the river. “Now we have all these men coming here and cutting down the trees. Well, you can see what lies ahead for our people.”

“Maybe things will get better,” Sagastao said, without much **conviction**.

He considered all his great-grandfather had said as he looked across the river at the logging camp, the cold seeping deeply into his bones despite the flames of the fire.



The old man rose from the log. “Come,” he said. “It’s time for you to sleep.”

Sagastao rose to his feet. He and Eagle Feather walked together to the warmth of the wigwam.

## Afterword



Children from Kitcisakak, Quebec, live on land once inhabited by their ancestors.

Beginning in 1850, the British government began establishing **reserves** for the Native Americans in Canada. Ten reserves were created for the Algonquins, but the total land area was just a tiny fraction of the Algonquins' **ancestral** lands.

The reserve system was maintained by the Canadian government after 1931, the year in which Canada became independent of Great Britain. The tribes in the reserves are known as First Nations.

Each Algonquin reserve is considered Algonquin land and is under tribal control. About 8,000 Algonquins live in Canada today. Many live in the reserves and maintain their tribal traditions. But some choose not to live in the reserves. All Native Americans in Canada are Canadian citizens and can live wherever they want.

## Glossary

- allies** (*n.*) people or groups that join with others for a common cause (p.16)
- ancestral** (*adj.*) having to do with relatives from long ago, before grandparents (p. 23)
- anthropologists** (*n.*) people who study human societies around the world (p. 15)
- conviction** (*n.*) a strong belief or opinion (p. 21)
- federation** (*n.*) a large political group made up of smaller groups united by a common goal (p. 14)
- muskets** (*n.*) long-barreled shoulder guns used long ago (p. 17)
- ravaged** (*v.*) destroyed (p. 18)
- reserves** (*n.*) lands set aside in Canada for First Nations, or Native American people (p. 23)
- stronghold** (*n.*) a well-protected place (p. 14)
- treaties** (*n.*) formal agreements of peace or friendship between two nations or groups (p. 18)
- tribute** (*n.*) an act or statement that shows gratitude or respect (p. 14)
- wigwam** (*n.*) a dome-shaped hut traditionally made by some Native Americans from animal skins or sheets of bark laid over a pole frame (p. 4)