

## The Northwest Passage

The Northwest Passage is a sea route through the Arctic Ocean along the northern part of North America. It goes through the waters of the Canadian Arctic Archipelago and connects the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Many have stated this sea route is not a practical one because it is often icebound. Throughout history, many explorers have sought the Northwest Passage, though they usually searched for a passage much farther south than the actual Northwest Passage. They wanted to utilize it as a trading route. The route first was mentioned in the 10th century after the Vikings had made several westward voyages to Greenland. The Vikings, however, would not have a chance to seek the sea route. The Little Ice Age occurred, and the climate grew colder. This was one of the reasons the Vikings abandoned their Greenland settlements. The Little Ice Age ceased any efforts for exploration of the region until the 15th century.

In 1497 John Cabot led the first attempt to discover the Northwest Passage. King Henry VII of England sent him to find a sea route that would take him to China and Japan. More British explorations would follow. In 1576 Martin Frobisher led one expedition. He discovered a body of water later named Frobisher Bay. Explorers Sir Humphrey Hilbert attempted in July 1583 and John Davis in August 1585 to find the passage. These men discovered Newfoundland and were the first to enter the Cumberland Sound on Baffin Island, respectively.

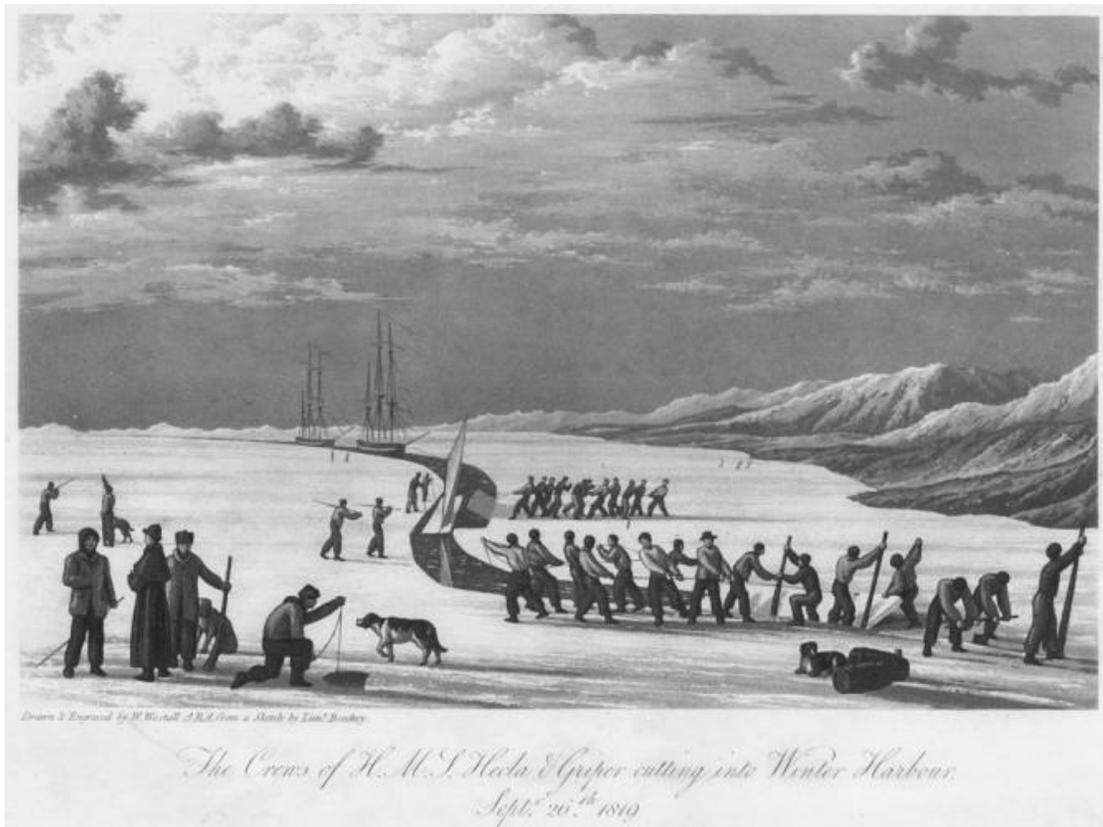
Some of the explorers began to investigate various water routes, including Jacques Cartier who traveled the Saint Lawrence River. While on this waterway, Cartier believed the Saint Lawrence River was the Northwest Passage. He became convinced of this when he hit significant rapids in Montreal. Cartier thought all he had to do was travel around the rapids, and he would be in the Orient. Cartier named the rapids the Lachine Rapids. (*La Chine* is French for China.) In 1609, Henry Hudson launched an exploration over a body of water that later would be known as the Hudson River. He was only able to travel as far as present-day Albany, New York, before turning back. On a later voyage, he tried to force his exhausted crew to continue exploring what is now Hudson's Bay. They just barely had survived the Canadian winter, and the crew members were more interested in returning to England than exploring. When Hudson refused to return to England, the crew mutinied and left Hudson floating in a small boat on Hudson's Bay.

In 1728, some people were attempting to explore the western part of the Northwest Passage. Danish Navy Officer Vitus Bering would use a strait that eventually would be named after him (although Semyon Dezhnyov actually discovered the strait in 1648) to discover the continents of Asia and North America were separate land masses. Bering conducted other explorations of the western part of the Northwest Passage. One he explored with Russian Lieutenant Alexei Chirikov in 1741. Bering went in search of lands beyond Siberia but eventually was separated from Chirikov. Chirikov ended up discovering some of the Aleutian Islands. In 1762, the *Octavius*, an English trading ship, set sail on the western part of the Northwest Passage. It never returned. Thirteen years later, the *Herald* found the ship's remains. There has been speculation the *Octavius* was the first western sailing ship to sail through the passage; however, all the crew members were found frozen to death inside the ship. The Spanish began unsuccessful explorations for a Northwest Passage led by Juan Francisco de la Bodega y Quadra, Alessandro Malaspina, and Francisco de Eliza.

England focused on the exploration of the Northwest Passage, and Captain James Cook was sent in 1776 to find the route. A year earlier, an offer of 20,000 pounds was made to the explorer who could find the Northwest Passage. Cook had been retired, but he carefully read the journals and diaries of Bering's explorations. He was convinced he could find the Northwest Passage. The Admiralty gave Cook control with Charles Clerke, the man originally chosen to lead the mission, as his second in command. Cook and Clerke crossed the Pacific and began their mission at Nootka Sound in April 1777. They sailed up the coastlines, following the earlier Russian routes. Their orders called for them to search all the inlets and rivers up to sixty-five degrees north latitude. Just before reaching this point, they found a part of the coastline that pushed them south into what became known as Cook Inlet. After going through the nearby water route, the crew only was able to reach the Alaskan peninsula and the first of the Aleutian Islands.

Many began to believe the Northwest Passage was a myth. George Vancouver led an exploration from 1791 to 1795 that looked into all the water routes of the Northwest Coast. Afterward, he concluded there was no passage south of the Bering Strait. Alexander Mackenzie supported these claims during his exploration in 1793. However, it was learned the actual Northwest Passage was north of the Bering Strait. During the early 19th century, John Ross, James Clark Ross, and William Edward Perry made many explorations in the region. Some men even searched in Alaska for the Northwest Passage.

Finally, Sir Robert McClure found the Northwest Passage in 1851. He was able to look across the Banks Island in the northwest part of Canada while on the strait named after him and see Melville Island. However, the strait was not navigable; and McClure could not pass through it. Three years later, John Rae was able to travel the passage after finding a route that connected the entrances of the Dolphin and Union and Lancaster Straits, which were both in Canada's Northwest Territories. Today, submarines travel the Northwest Passage, and passenger ships sail it during the warmer months.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Discussion Questions:

1. What happened during Jacques Cartier's exploration of the Saint Lawrence River?
2. Why do you suppose Cartier made his misjudgment? Explain.
3. Why was Vitus Bering's Northwest Passage exploration significant?
4. The *Octavius* was the first ship to make it to the Northwest Passage. Why?
5. What was the result of Captain James Cook's exploration in search of the Northwest Passage?

