



Des castors du Canada [Canadian Beavers], illustration from the map of North and South America, by Nicolas de Fer, 1698
CA ANC NMC-26825

Trade

In the 16th century, the fish-laden waters off the shores of Newfoundland—an unexpected resource for early European navigators—became the focus of a lucrative industry. The whale, whose blubber when rendered represented a new source of energy, and the seemingly inexhaustible cod banks answered the needs of a swiftly growing European population. It was during fishing trips that trading for hides and furs with the Aboriginal peoples began. These products, which produced an even more immediate profit than fish, generated income that formed the foundation of New France's economy. Although furs, primarily beaver, were the colony's main export, three-quarters of the population lived by farming cereal crops. In the 18th century, Canada produced enough grain to begin exporting, and it was during this period that trade developed among Canada, Île Royale (Cape Breton Island) and the French West Indies. Louisbourg became the trading hub for the three colonies as well as for France. Since fur was the only raw material New France had to offer the mother country, the limits of the European market in this commodity eventually hampered the economic development of the colony.



New France
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Le plan de l'habitation de Charles Mahier Encien habitant de la colonie de Plaisance en l'isle de terre Neûve [Plan of the dwelling of Charles Mahier, former inhabitant of the colony of Plaisance on the island of Newfoundland], after 1714

FR CAOM 3DFC 118C

The Fishery

By the 16th century, many French ships were crossing the ocean each year to fish the cod-rich waters of Canada's Atlantic coast. Producers of *morue verte* [salt cod] fished on the high seas, gutting and salting their catch onboard ship. In the much more common sedentary fishery, which resulted in *morue sèche* [dried cod], the catch, taken just offshore, was cleaned and dried in buildings on the coast. During the 17th century, the French ran such operations in the Gaspé Peninsula, Acadia and on the largest scale, in Newfoundland. In 1660, the King established a fortified settlement and administrative headquarters on the southern part of the island, at Plaisance (Placentia), with the aim of supporting the cod industry, which was by this time a significant source of revenue for France. The labour, supplies and capital involved in these Atlantic fishing operations, together with the markets they supplied, remained primarily European.



New France
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Agreement between the Compagnie de la Colonie du Canada and Louis Guigues, farmer-general of the Domaine d'Occident, and ratification of this agreement by the people of the colony, June 9 and October 10, 1700
CA ANC MG18-C3

The Compagnie de la Colonie

Of the many companies that held fur monopolies, only two were controlled by Canadians: the Communauté des Habitants, which existed for about 15 years in the mid-17th century, and the Compagnie de la Colonie. In 1699, faced with a prolonged slump in the beaver trade caused by over-production, the colony's merchants had two options: to lower the price of the pelts they sold to the farmer-generals (financiers who collected in a certain district) of the Domaine d'Occident, at that time holders of the monopoly for the buying of furs and their sale in Europe; or to take over the monopoly themselves. They chose the second solution, set up the Compagnie de la Colonie, and sent two delegates to France to negotiate transfer of the monopoly. An agreement between the two parties was signed on June 9, 1700, and ratified by representatives of Canada's elite on behalf of the whole colony, in October, at the Château Saint-Louis in Québec. Weighed down by debt, and unable to deal with the decline in the fur trade, the Compagnie de la Colonie was liquidated in 1706 and the monopoly was handed over to French merchants.



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Commitment made by Pierre Papillon called Périgny, of Batiscan, to De Croisil and Jean-Baptiste Lecouste, to go to Michilimakinac, from the records of notary Jean-Baptiste Adhémar called Saint-Martin, May 29, 1731
CA ANQ-M CN601 S3

The Fur Trade

In the early days of the colony, fur-trading took place mainly in the St. Lawrence Valley, where Aboriginal people came to exchange their pelts for European goods. During the 1660s, because the Iroquois were preventing other Aboriginal peoples from bringing their furs to their French allies, a growing number of men known as *coureurs des bois* started travelling illegally into the West. In 1681, in an effort to control the fur trade, the authorities began issuing *congés de traite* [trading permits]. These were sold or given to favoured individuals, who generally resold them to a trader or went into partnership with one. By the end of the 17th century, the fur trade was a highly organized activity, and by no means accessible to all. It required capital, experience, and the legal right to trade. Generally speaking, a trading trip would unfold in the following way. A *marchand équipé* [merchant-outfitter] based in Montréal would sell goods to a *voyageur*, who would travel to the West to exchange these goods with Aboriginal people for furs. A professional fur-trader, the *voyageur* would hire young men to assist on both the outward and return trip, navigating the waterways using birchbark canoes.



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The Monetary System

The money that circulated in New France consisted of various types of coin minted in France or elsewhere in Europe, such as the *louis*, the Spanish *piastre* and the Portuguese guinea. However, the official monetary unit was the *livre*, which was divided into *sols* and *deniers*; it was money of account, meaning that it was used strictly for reckoning. Canada's money was worth 75 percent that of France until 1717, when the two became of equal value. In order to make up for frequent shortages of legal tender, the colonial administration issued *monnaie de carte* [card money], which it used to pay small sums owed to its suppliers, the colony's soldiers and other State creditors. These cards were reimbursed in coin by the Intendant, although cardholders did not always receive their nominal value. Other substitutes for cash included bills of exchange, which bearers could endorse and use as a method of payment.



Design for 12 playing cards, 1714
FR CAOM COL A 21 fol. 125bis



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The Merchant Assemblies

In New France, all public assemblies required prior authorization, and the right to elect an individual who would speak on behalf of everyone had to be duly approved by the government. The colony's merchants received permission from the King to gather for the purpose of doing business and discussing questions of trade in a place that in France was called *la place*, *l'échange* or *la bourse*. They were also given the right to appoint a spokesman who, in an effort to promote their common interests, would represent them in dealings with the civil authorities.



Ruling permitting merchants of the towns of Québec and Montréal to gather daily, in a suitable location, for the purpose of doing business, May 11, 1717
CA ANQ-Q TP1 S35/2 Fonds Conseil souverain Série Arrêts du Conseil d'État du roi Registre F (vol. 6) fol. 63-64



New France
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The Travelling Vendors

Every summer, French vendors travelled to New France to sell their wares. Local merchants perceived this to be an unfair situation, since the stallholders' expenses were lower than those of the local merchants, and they were able to attract clients by offering their goods at *vil prix* [extremely low prices]. Although the stallholders were subject to certain restrictions determined by the King, including a prohibition on trading with the Aboriginal peoples, the Canadians felt that their presence resulted in a loss of capital. Nevertheless, the Court of Versailles remained indifferent to their complaints.



Petition addressed to Charles-Jean-Baptiste de Fleuriau, Comte de Morville, Minister and Secretary of State, by the traders and merchants of Canada, complaining about the stallholders, ca. 1724

FR CAOM COL C11A 46 fol. 51-53



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Liste des bâtiments venus à Québec d'Europe, des isles de l'Amérique et de l'isle Royale pendant l'année 1734 et de ceux de Québec qui en sont partis tant pour les isles de l'Amérique, Isle Royale que pour France [List of ships that arrived in Québec from Europe, the islands of America and Île Royale during the year 1734 and of those from Québec that set sail for the islands of America, Île Royale or France], October 20, 1734
FR CAOM COL F2B 11

Exports and Imports

Virtually all Canadian exports to France during the 17th century consisted of beaver pelts. In the following century, the proportion of furs and hides from other animals increased, and although furs were still the main export item, they were no longer the only one. Trade among Canada, Île Royale (Cape Breton Island) and the French West Indies developed during the first half of the 18th century, and Louisbourg, on Île Royale, became its hub. Aside from fur, most of Canada's exports consisted of food products (flour, biscuits, peas, fish) and wood; Île Royale's main export was cod, and those of the West Indies, tafia (rum), sugar and molasses. Manufactured goods, wine, spirits and luxury items were shipped across the Atlantic from France.



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The Price of Wheat and Flour

Wheat was the main crop in New France, and bread formed the basis of the population's diet. From the 1670s on, the colony was producing enough wheat to meet its own needs, and by the second decade of the 18th century, it started exporting wheat. This vital product was kept under constant surveillance by the authorities. In years when the harvest was poor, the price of wheat was regulated and its exportation restricted or prohibited; sometimes it was even necessary to import wheat from France. During the 18th century, if there was a shortage, wheat was requisitioned from the outlying areas, in order to ensure the survival of the urban population and the troops.



Ordinance from Charles de Beauharnois de La Boische, Governor of New France, and Gilles Hocquart, Intendant, regulating the price of wheat and flour, March 6, 1738
CA ANC MG8-A6 1



New France
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The Ironworks of Saint-Maurice

In 1730, the Montréal merchant and seigneur of Saint-Maurice, François Poulin de Francheville, was granted permission by the King to mine the iron deposits on his seigneurie at his own expense. The ironworks, built near the town of Trois-Rivières, were the first and only iron industry enterprise in New France. In 1736, shortly after Poulin's death, the ironworks were taken over by a company that, despite a loan from the King, went bankrupt in 1741. The ironworks then became the property of the Crown, and began producing artillery pieces and objects of everyday use, such as pots and stoves.

Company agreement between François-Étienne Cugnet, Thomas-Jacques Taschereau, Pierre-François Olivier de Vézin, Jacques Simonet d'Abergemont and Ignace Gamelin concerning the iron mines and ironworks of Saint-Maurice, October 16, 1736
FR CAOM COL C11A 110 fol. 100-103



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Licence as king's shipbuilder in Canada granted to René-Nicolas Levasseur, April 1, 1743
CA ANC MG18-H58

Shipbuilding

Canada's shipbuilding industry got under way in Québec and the surrounding area during the last third of the 17th century. To start with, the focus was on small vessels intended for coastal navigation: rowboats, small sailboats and *bateaux plats* [flat-bottomed boats]. In the following decades, seagoing ships of greater tonnage were also built. In 1739, the King established a shipyard in Québec for the construction of large vessels that would become part of the royal navy. He dispatched the experienced shipbuilder, René-Nicolas Levasseur, to the colony to oversee the undertaking. On June 4, 1742, the first ship was launched: a 500-ton *flûte* (a ship fitted for war with cannons and used to transport material) named the *Canada*. After flourishing for about a decade, royal shipbuilding collapsed with the end of the French Regime.



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Receipt for merchandise signed by the captain of the *Centaure*, November 1, 1742
CA ANC R721 dossier 1

Maritime Trade

Maritime trade was vital to New France. The colony's existence depended principally on the export of fur to France, and for its own provisions it depended heavily on a number of French products, including manufactured goods, wine, spirits and luxury items. From the early 17th century until the Treaty of Paris, the traffic of goods across the Atlantic increased at the same rate as the colony's population. But commercial shipping operations required major investments: the outfitting of a ship, the purchasing of goods, and insurance all gave rise to expenses that only prosperous traders could afford. Although there were a few merchants from New France involved in this type of commercial exchange, it was dominated by traders from France. Between 1730 and 1747, for example, the company owned by Robert Dugard of Rouen did a large amount of business with New France: his import and export cargoes represented a total value of 6,000,000 *livres*, a huge sum at the time.



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Smuggling

In the economic realm, France practised a policy of protectionism: the goal was to limit foreign imports and increase exports so as to achieve a positive trade balance. Under this system, the colonies were expected to supply the mother country with needed raw materials and provide a market for its manufactured goods. This meant that all the products purchased, owned or sold by the inhabitants of New France had to be French, and that all commerce with the neighbouring English colonies was prohibited. Despite repeated bans, however, and heavy fines, smuggling between New France and New England was common.



Letter from the Governor General Charles de Beauharnois de La Boische to a Governor of New England denouncing the entry into New France of English traders for the purpose of smuggling, June 20, 1738
CA ANC MG18-G6 2 p. 562-564



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