

The Legacy of the Christie Family's Seigneurial Estate. Management in the Upper Richelieu Valley

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The Legacy of the Christie Family's Seigneurial Estate Management in the Upper Richelieu Valley

by Françoise Noël, Ph.D.

Françoise Noël obtient son baccalauréat ès arts (B.A.) de l'Université de l'Alberta en 1972. Elle poursuit ses études à l'Université McGill avec Louise Dechêne, sous la supervision de laquelle elle complète une maîtrise ès arts (M.A.) sur la colonisation dans les Cantons-de-l'Est (le lieu de naissance de ses grands-parents) et un doctorat (Ph.D.) consacré aux seigneuries de Gabriel Christie. Les deux thèses ont été publiées. En 1988, elle déménage à North Bay, en Ontario, pour occuper un poste de professeure au Nipissing University College, aujourd'hui Nipissing University. Ses récentes recherches ont ciblé l'histoire des familles et l'histoire du tourisme. Son Family and Community in Northeastern Ontario (McGill-Queen's, 2009) s'est vu décerner le Fred Landon Award en 2010 tandis que son Nipissing: Historic Waterway, Wilderness Playground (Dundurn, 2015) fut retenu parmi les finalistes pour l'obtention du Prix du livre du Président, distinction décernée en 2016.

Elle a présenté à maintes reprises le résultat de ses recherches devant des auditoires locaux et a alimenté en illustrations et en documents concernant ses travaux son site web, plateforme numérique qu'elle entretient depuis de nombreuses années. Elle reçoit des courriels occasionnels se rapportant à ses recherches sur la vallée du Richelieu et à sa base de données sur les seigneuries de Christie; cet outil est toujours d'intérêt pour ceux qui retracent la généalogie des familles qui se sont établies dans cette région. À la veille de prendre sa retraite, cette dernière se réjouit à l'avance de retrouver sa province natale, l'Alberta, là où elle pourra retisser des liens étroits avec sa famille.

The Upper Richelieu Valley holds a distinctive place in the landscape and history of Quebec in that, although a seigneurial area, it also displays many characteristics more commonly associated with the township area of the province. Here, the global forces of imperial conflict and economic and social change intertwined with the management policies and accidents of birth and death of the seigneurial family whose history was linked to this local region for more than a century, that of Gabriel Christie, his heirs and would-be heirs. Those links were the subject of my doctoral dissertation written almost thirty years ago.¹ Based on this research, I will examine some of the ways that the Christie seigneurs impacted on the history of this area.

Gabriel Christie's most visible legacy is the landscape itself, shaped as it was by his survey and land granting policies. Less visible but equally significant was the impact of Gabriel Christie's will which, by placing an entail on the Upper Richelieu Valley properties he owned, prevented his son and first heir, Napier Christie Burton,² from selling them, and dictated that Christie's natural son, William Plenderleath, would succeed



Général Gabriel Christie (1722-1799).

© Château Ramezay – Musée et site historique de Montréal, 1998.1774

him as seigneur since Burton's sons had all predeceased him. When William Plenderleath Christie³ died in 1845, would-be heirs of Napier Christie Burton challenged his right to inherit in the first place and the case was not resolved until 1874. Prior to that time, therefore, the sale or alienation of the seigneuries would not have been possible, guaranteeing the continued association of the Christie family with the region. As we will see, however, the terms of Gabriel Christie's will impacted on the seigneurial practices of subsequent administrations and these in turn on the history and development of the area.

The fact that the Richelieu River was the chief transportation route between Montreal and the New England frontier was one of the most significant factors in its early history. As England and France battled for control of the continent, the Upper Richelieu was frequently a war zone and isolated as it was from the existing settlements along the Saint Lawrence River, it remained inhospitable to settlement. Having served in North America throughout the Seven Years' War, much of the time as assistant quartermaster general, Lt.-Col. Gabriel Christie was well placed to evaluate the potential of this area in the new context of British colonial rule. Recognizing the value of these well-timbered lands drained by several rivers that provided potential mill sites, he purchased all five of the URV seigneuries, as sole or joint owner⁴ shortly after the Conquest. Other strategic purchases in the Richelieu Valley included a mill domain in Chambly and lands in St John's (Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu).⁵ Although posted to the West Indies for much of the American War for Independence, Christie returned to Montreal in time to capitalize on the wave of Loyalist settlement. Through his land granting policies he encouraged some of these yeoman farmers to settle in his seigneuries. Thus, the Upper Richelieu Valley's early settlers had more in common with

settlers in the townships than with the habitants in the older seigneuries. Inasmuch as the early settlers in any region have an initial advantage over late arrivals, acquiring as they generally do, the best lands, this social group would remain prominent in the region through much of its history and some of their descendants are still located in the region.

The land policies that Christie put in place to draw English-speaking settlers to his seigneuries would have been standard practice in British colonies but diverged from traditional practice in the seigneurial lands of New France. Survey before settlement, location tickets that guaranteed a land grant and safeguarded improvements, lot size and dimensions, the translation of deeds of concession into English, and the use of printed deeds were the most important aspects of Christie's land policies that appealed to these English-speaking settlers. Unfamiliar with seigneurial tenure, they accepted the introduction of higher rates of rents and new contractual clauses reserving timber and mill sites to the seigneur. Through his policies, Christie integrated his seigneurial fiefdom into British cultural norms all the while maintaining and enhancing the seigneurial legal framework of rights and obligations that favoured the appropriation of resources and accumulation of wealth by the seigneur.

Napier Christie Burton began his administration of the seigneuries in a manner that suggested continuity and a smooth transition. The sudden death of his wife in England, followed soon after by the Napoleonic Wars, however, precipitated his return to England, and prevented his return. His affairs were managed after 1815 by an estate agent, the Laprairie notary, Edme Henry. Given the very great wealth that he enjoyed as a result of his marriage to the heiress Mary Burton, Burton's Canadian estate was of secondary significance, and Henry was given a virtually

free reign to administer them as he would until Burton's death in 1835. Henry's administration was marked by poor record keeping, favouritism to his family and friends, laxity in the collection of arrears, the almost fraudulent practice of "selling" censive land, the establishment of seigneurial villages with higher rents than on the farm censive, and, as he did not have the benefit of seigneurial capital investment, the decentralization of seigneurial milling privileges through leases. While some benefited from these practices, most ordinary *censitaires* did not. The most serious consequences of these practices emerged only after Burton's death when his heirs began collecting the arrears due the Burton estate with the full force of the law to back them up. As the colony moved closer to an armed uprising against British rule, it was not surprising that many of the French-speaking *censitaires* on the Christie seigneuries and even a few of the English-speaking ones, joined the ranks of the *patriotes*.

The third Christie seigneur, William Plenderleath Christie, began his administration in the midst of the turmoil leading to and following the Rebellions of 1837 and 1838. A staunch supporter of the colonial administration as well as an evangelical Anglican, Christie quickly set his own agenda and began a very different kind of administration with the assistance of his trusted friend and nephew by marriage as agent, William McGinnis. Among his priorities was the encouragement of protestant missionary work among the habitants. To fight back against the collection of arrears in his seigneuries by the heirs of Napier Christie Burton, he also forced sheriff sales that would clear the title of a property. He especially targeted properties that belonged to known *patriotes*. William Plenderleath Christie anticipated that the seigneuries would fall under divided ownership after his death and recognized that his will might be challenged. He sought to minimize the impact of this by

establishing the boundaries of each individual seigneurie that had been blurred by common ownership. He also reduced to almost nothing the amount of land held as domain, including the thousands of arpents in the center of DeLery which he had drained. All of the important mill sites in the seigneuries were sold or gifted to individuals who then held full rights to these properties. Even if his will did not hold, the ownership of this now *censive* land, much of it held by McGinnis and his wife Amelia Bowman, would not be in jeopardy. Given these changes and the fact that William McGinnis continued as agent in four of the five seigneuries after

1845, William Plenderleath Christie's heirs had little impact on the seigneuries. They gratefully received those rents that were paid and complained, sometimes loudly, about the low rate of return as compared to the "book value" of the seigneuries.

In the global history of British North America, Gabriel Christie was a minor character, a military officer who struggled to achieve the promotions and appointments he aspired to. Nonetheless, he became one of the largest landed proprietors in Canada after the Conquest, a seigneur-entrepreneur with commercial grist and saw mills. Not only did he shape

the early settlement and landscape of the Upper Richelieu Valley in his lifetime, the unique circumstances created by the entail on his seigneurial properties influenced the administrative practices of his heirs, and these in turn impacted on the landscape, social structure and history of the Upper Richelieu Valley for more than a century. For better or for worse, the Christie family is inextricably linked to the history of this region.

Endnotes

- 1 "Gabriel Christie's Seigneuries: Settlement and Seigneurial Administration in the Upper Richelieu Valley, 1764—1854," Ph.D. thesis, McGill University, 1985. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesescanada/vol2/QMM/TC-QMM-76748.pdf> <http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/thesesfile76748.pdf> This material is also the basis of my published book, *The Christie Seigneuries*, and several articles.
- 2 Napier took the name Burton when he married an heiress, Mary Burton.
- 3 His inheritance was conditional on taking the name and arms of Christie.
- 4 Noyan was acquired with John Campbell, and Bleury and Sabrevois with Moses Hazen. They were first divided between the proprietors and later Christie acquired his former partners' share.
- 5 Outside the Richelieu Valley he purchased the seigneuries of Lachenaie and Repentigny.

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