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Article abstract

L'emploi saisonnier rattaché au commerce de la fourrure a eu des effets considérables sur l'économie rurale dans certaines régions du Bas-Canada et l'auteur se propose ici d'étudier ceux de ces effets qui sont les plus manifestes dans le cas de la communauté rurale de Sorel.

Il appert d'abord que, dans cette paroisse, l'emploi saisonnier engendré par le commerce de la fourrure s'est avéré un élément essentiel de l'économie locale pendant les années 1790 à 1820. Il ne s'agit pas ici, comme certains l'ont soutenu, d'une situation simple où des énergies se trouvaient temporairement détournées de l'activité agricole, mais bien d'une situation beaucoup plus complexe où la dépendance vis-à-vis d'un revenu extérieur a conduit à la fragmentation des terres, à la surpopulation rurale et à une pauvreté plutôt généralisée.

Cette étude de Sorel démontre aussi que la coexistence, dans un endroit donné, d'une agriculture de subsistance et d'un salaire saisonnier est apparue, dans certaines régions de la vallée du Saint-Laurent, bien avant que l'industrie forestière ne vienne la favoriser ailleurs au Québec.

Fur-Trade Labour and Lower Canadian Agrarian Structures

ALLAN GREER

There can be little doubt as to the importance of the fur trade in early Canadian history. For hundreds of years, the exports of beaver and other pelts was the foundation of the country's commerce. Historians have pointed to the crucial role of this trade in conditioning white-Indian relations and in establishing a transcontinental transportation network linking the far-flung regions of what would become the Dominion of Canada.[1] The preoccupation with the economic nation-building of the Montreal merchants, however, has left little room for an examination of the "relations of production" on which this commerce was based. Some important work has been done on the effects of the trade in furs on the Indian societies that produced them.[2] As for the French-Canadian society of the "voyageurs" or "engagés" who performed the vital task of transporting the canoes laden with pelts and trade goods between the western interior and the port of Montreal, many historians have been content to echo the sentiments of upper class contemporaries to the effect that the fur trade led French-Canadian habitants to adopt some of the uncivilized habits and attitudes of the Indians they frequented.[3] But the idea that the fur trade was a medium for contagious savagery seems such a blatant example of the elite ideology that views the "lower orders" as barbarians that it is difficult to accept it at face value.

This is not to suggest that the fur trade had no effect on the civilization of the St. Lawrence valley where most of the voyageurs were born and where most of them died. This paper argues, on the basis of a local study, that French-Canadian social and economic structures could be shaped to a significant extent by the manpower needs of the fur trade. It is essential to begin by noting that the effects were by no means identical at all times and in all places. The case study presented here, Sorel around the turn of the nineteenth century, shows the influence of the fur trade at a particular stage in the evolution of its organization and in a specific historic context. This was the era of the Northwest Company when, as a result

1. Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: an Introduction to Canadian Economic History*, second edition (Toronto, 1956).
2. For example, Arthur J. Ray, *Indians in the Fur Trade: Their Role as Trappers, Hunters, and Middlemen in the Lands Southwest of Hudson Bay, 1660-1870* (Toronto, 1974).
3. For example, Marcel Trudel, *Initiation à la Nouvelle-France: histoire et institutions* (Montreal, 1968), p. 36; W.J. Eccles, *The Canadian Frontier, 1534-1760* (Hinsdale, Illinois, 1969), pp. 91-2.

of a century and a half of development in the direction of consolidated ownership, the Canadian trade was almost entirely controlled by a handful of merchants united in a single enterprise.

Earlier, in the middle of the seventeenth century, the trade was open to all and most settlers at Montreal obtained a few pelts from visiting Indians. Specialized merchants gradually emerged and, as the Indians ceased making the trip down to Montreal, Canadian *coureurs des bois* began making trading journeys to the Great Lakes region. These *coureurs des bois*, or voyageurs as they were called after about 1680, depended on the merchants for backing but they operated their trading expeditions quite independently, generally forming partnerships of three or four men to complete the crew of a canoe. The first appearance of the *engagé* was late in the seventeenth century. *Engagés* had no interest in the canoe, the cargo, or the profits of an expedition; instead, they worked for a voyageur or a merchant in return for a contractually specified salary. The tendancy in the first half of the eighteenth century was for the *engagés* to become more numerous as the voyageur category disappeared, a few of the more successful voyageurs joining the ranks of the merchants while the rest found themselves reduced to the status of wage labourers. By the late eighteenth century, if not earlier, the fur brigades were manned entirely by *engagés*.[4] Voyageurs in this narrow sense of the term—often *engagés* were later referred to as "voyageurs"—had occupied a position similar to that of a pre-industrial artisan: "independent" yet subjected to merchant capital through debt. But they were even less successful in maintaining their ownership of the means of making a livelihood in the face of advancing capitalism; the eighteenth century saw "la prolétarisation progressive du personnel de la traite."[5]

Labour and ownership were separated and control of the Canadian fur trade was eventually concentrated in a single merchant enterprise. After the British conquest, large partnerships were formed until, in 1783, the Northwest Company united all the major traders in a loose coalition that grew more solid with the passage of time. This process of consolidation was partly connected to the increasing cost of competing transportation lines as the trade moved into more distant territories, but it also owed much to government policies, such as the requirement of posting bonds, and to the merchants' ruthless methods in combatting independent traders.

In the early eighteenth century, the majority of voyageurs and *engagés* came from the immediate vicinity of Montreal and, to a lesser extent, Trois-Rivières,

4. Louise Dechêne, *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVIIe siècle* (Paris and Montreal, 1974), pp. 171-83.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-2.

the traditional bases of the Indian trade,[6] but, as the trade was rationalized along capitalist lines, merchants increasingly cultivated a rural workforce.[7] With the advent of the Northwest Company and the expensive lengthening of transportation routes into the most remote regions of the continent, efforts were made to control costs by adopting more efficient boats and by recruiting cheap and docile labour from country parishes. Instead of remaining in Montreal and competing with other urban employers for the services of men who had come to town looking for work, fur traders sent agents out into the countryside in an active attempt to develop new sources of manpower. Even after the demise of the Northwest Company, its recruiting traditions were followed by the Hudson's Bay Company whose agents hiring men in Lower Canada were "carefully excluding those who are brought up in the neighbourhood of Towns...."[8]

Rural areas, particularly poor communities, were admirably suited to filling the labour needs of the Northwest Company. Since the demand for canoemen fluctuated from year to year and since a large number of seasonal workers was always needed, there was little place in the fur trade for a genuine proletariat. Instead, traders found they were best served by land-owning peasants who could sustain themselves between stints in the Northwest. Employers could then draw on a reservoir of experienced workers to suit their requirements without having to worry about paying a "living wage" for year-round subsistence. Dispersed through the countryside much of the time, peasant-workers were unlikely to form "combinations" against the traders' interests and, as their possession of land pro-

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 220-1. Data collected by Jean Laflamme on 146 *engagés* who signed on for the upper Ottawa trade between 1739 and 1752 show an even stronger concentration on the Montreal area. The sample breaks down by parish of origin as follows:

City of Montreal	10	62%
rest of island of Montreal	81	
surrounding parishes	25	17%
elsewhere	10	7%
unknown	20	14%
Total	146	100%

Source: Jean Laflamme, "La traite des fourrures dans l'outaouais supérieur (1718-1760)", (M.A. thesis, Université de Montréal, 1975), appendice II.

7. Fernand Ouellet, "Dualité économique et changement technologique au Québec (1760-1790)", *Histoire sociale-Social History*, 9 (November 1976), pp. 269-70. It seems to me that Ouellet's findings, based almost entirely on evidence from the English régime, do not so much challenge the validity of Dechêne's conclusions about the 1708-17 period as indicate that the geography of fur-trade recruitment changed over the course of the eighteenth century.

8. George Simpson to James Keith, London, 18 November 1840, cited in Carol M. Judd, "'Mixt Bands of Many Nations': 1821-70", in Carol M. Judd and Arthur J. Ray, eds., *Old Trails and New Directions: Papers of the Third North American Fur Trade Conference* (Toronto, 1980), p. 145, n. 45.

tected them from complete indigence, they did not represent the same sort of social danger that, for example, unemployed sailors did.[9]

One community particularly favoured by McTavish and Frobisher, the partnership at the core of the Northwest Company, was the agriculturally rather poor parish of Sorel. After hiring large numbers of men there throughout the 1790s, McTavish and Frobisher even engaged a local notary and a local habitant-voyageur in 1797 to recruit Sorel men and process their *engagement* contracts on the spot.[10] Located at the mouth of the Richelieu, about seventy kilometres northeast of Montreal, Sorel was not too distant from the city yet far enough away to be untouched by the urban labour market and other unsettling influences. A local priest suggested that men from Sorel rather than Lachine *engagés* be hired for a missionary expedition to Red River as they were experienced, honest, polite ... and inexpensive.[11] The principal aim of this paper will be to evaluate the effects of the fur trade on rural Sorel. It will be shown, first of all, that temporary employment in the fur trade was an essential element in the local economy from about 1790 to 1820. A comparative analysis of social and economic structures of Sorel and the nearby parish of St. Denis which contributed hardly any men to the western trade will then be presented to show that the dependence on fur-trade wages in Sorel contributed to over-crowding and the fragmentation of holdings.

The parish of Sorel was first settled in the 1660s by soldiers of the Carignan-Salières regiment. Colonization proceeded slowly at first, but by the early nineteenth century this was a heavily populated but predominantly rural community. A small town, William Henry, was established in the parish in 1787 to accommodate Loyalist refugees. However, it does not seem to have had a very significant effect on the rural section of Sorel which remained French Canadian and no more controlled by its "urban" nucleus than were neighbouring parishes dominated by their own villages.

Nevertheless, Sorel did differ from communities further up the Richelieu in one crucial respect; from the 1790s to the 1820s, it was a major supplier of labour to the fur trade. Through most of the eighteenth century, comparatively few men from this area served as *engagés*,[12] but by the end of the century, that is, from about the time the Northwest Company was formed, unusually large numbers of local

9. Jesse Lemish, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America", *William and Mary Quarterly*, third series, 25 (July 1968), pp. 371-407.
10. Archives Judiciaires de Sorel (hereafter AJS), files of Henry Crebassa, 1797, *passim*.
11. Archives de la Chancellerie de l'Evêché de St-Hyacinthe (hereafter ACESH), XVII, C66, J-Bte. Kelly to Mgr. Plessis, 13 April 1822.
12. Louise Dechêne's study of *engagement* contracts signed between 1708 and 1717 suggests that only about 5 per cent of men in the Sorel area were then involved in the fur trade (*Habitants et marchands*, pp. 514-5). These notarized documents may not mention every man paddling a canoe to the Northwest, but there is no reason to assume that they do not constitute a reasonable sample and the basis for a portrait of the fur-trade labour force. Regardless of the accuracy of the absolute numbers presented, Dechêne's figures, when viewed comparatively, indicate a striking inequality in the extent of involvement among the regions of New France. The Sorel region had one of the

men were departing with the western fur brigades. An exhaustive examination of the files of notaries practicing in Sorel and nearby parishes, together with a search through an inventory of *engagements* signed in Montreal, suggests that employment contracts can be traced in the 1790-1799 period for one-third of Sorel's adult male population (see Table 1).[13] This is certainly an underestimate of the actual numbers involved since a great many *engagés* served without signing a notarized *engagement* for the benefit of future historians.[14] Moreover, since work of this sort was mainly a young man's occupation,[15] the proportion of Sorel males in their twenties mentioned in these contracts must have been much greater than 33.5 per cent, even leaving aside source deficiencies. These figures then only represent a minimum estimate of fur-trade participation, but they show a clear contrast between Sorel, where it would hardly be an exaggeration to suggest that a majority of young men worked as *engagés* at some time in the decade, and St. Denis, thirty kilometres up the Richelieu, which was almost untouched by the fur trade.

For the majority, work in the fur trade was seasonal, but many signed on for a few years at a time. The main distinction, in the eighteenth century, was between "winterers" and "Montreal men" or "porkeaters." The former remained in the Northwest for terms of three years or more, subsisting for long stretches on pemmican, and transporting furs and supplies between the remote posts and

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lowest rates of participation: only 5 per cent of the adult males here signed engagements, compared with 39 per cent in the nearby Boucherville area. For a slightly later period, a list of 146 engagements for the Ottawa (1739-1752) includes no men from Sorel and only one *engagé* for the entire Richelieu valley. (Laflamme, "La traite des fourrures dans l'outaouais supérieur", app. II.)

For the period between the Conquest and the American Revolution, a glance through the official trade licences, which give names and residences of canoe crew members, shows Sorel names to be quite rare. In one bundle of licences from the 1760s, only five local men were found out of a total of 322 *engagés*. Men from the city and island of Montreal and from nearby parishes such as Laprairie, Vaudreuil, les Cèdres, and Ile Perrot seem to have been most numerous. An additional rough indication is furnished by the parish registers of Detroit which list the birthplaces of fifty-two Canadian men married between 1760 and 1781. Among these grooms, who presumably came to Detroit because of the fur trade, there was not one man from Sorel. Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), RG 4, B 28, vol. 110, Trade Licences, 1763-1768; Ernest J. Lajeunesse, ed., *The Windsor Border Region: Canada's Southernmost Frontier: a Collection of Documents* (Toronto, 1960), pp. 343-55.

13. AJS, files of Antoine Robin, 1790-1795, Henry Crebassa, 1795-1799; Archives nationales du Québec, dépôt de Montréal, files of Louis Bonnet, 1791-1796; E.Z. Massicotte, "Répertoire des Engagements pour l'ouest conservés dans les archives judiciaires de Montréal", *Rapport de l'archiviste de la province de Québec*, 1942-1943, pp. 261-397; 1943-1944, pp. 335-444.
14. Ouellet, "Dualité économique", pp. 294-6; Gratien Allaire, "Les engagements pour la traite des fourrures—évaluation de la documentation", *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* (hereafter *RHAF*), 34 (June 1980), pp. 3-26.
15. At least it was in the seventeenth century. Hubert Charbonneau, Bertrand Desjardins, and Pierre Beauchamp, "Le comportement démographique des voyageurs sous le régime français", *Histoire sociale-Social History*, 9 (May 1978), p. 127.

a Great Lakes rendezvous. There they met the seasonal *engagés* whom they sneered at as "mangeurs de lard." The latter were the more numerous group however. They paddled the large canoes that left Lachine early in May for the Grand Portage or some other advance base, returning late in August. The sources used for this study do not always make it clear whether an individual signed on for only a summer's trip or as a winterer, but some idea of the relative numbers involved in each group can be inferred from the destinations mentioned in the *engagements*. Ninety-nine of the 106 contracts involving Sorel *engagés* between 1790 and 1799 specify the destination and, of these, 52 were for trips to Grand Portage and another 13 for trips to other Great Lakes bases. In other words, about two-thirds of the departures from Sorel in the 1790s were for seasonal work only.

Table 1 — Fur Trade Engagements, Sorel, St. Ours, and St. Denis, 1790-1799

	Sorel	St. Ours	St. Denis
engagements	128	48	11
individuals	106	40	10
adult males*	316	389	418
proportion of adult males involved (%)	33.5	10.3	2.4

*Men 16-60 years from 1790 census

Certainly some of the men who left Sorel to serve several years as winterers never returned to their homes, either because they died prematurely or because they spent the rest of their lives in the West. At least ten *engagés* brought Métis children they had fathered to be baptized at the church in Sorel between 1795 and 1827. (The dates give a rough indication of the period of maximum local participation in the fur trade.) Since the children were six to twelve years old when christened, it seems likely that their fathers had settled more or less permanently in the western interior.[16] Any attempt to determine precisely how many *engagés* returned and how many were lost to Sorel forever is doomed to failure by the absence of nominal censuses between 1681 and 1851 (censuses for the intervening period give only aggregate local figures or, at best, list heads of households. How many *engagés* were household heads?) and by the problem of namesakes which would make it impossible to link names appearing without additional personal information on *engagement* contracts to any listing of inhabitants. Nevertheless, rough indicators suggest strongly that most men involved in the fur trade were only temporarily absent from Sorel. For one thing, the parish's rapid demographic growth (see below) argues against any notion that the western trade was a significant drain on population. There is the additional fact, mentioned earlier, that a substantial majority of the voyages from Sorel were seasonal and the porkeaters involved were in little danger of deserting Lower Canada during a four-month trip to Lake Superior.

16. Registers of births, marriages, and deaths, St-Pierre-de-Sorel, transcript compiled by abbé Georges-Henri Cournoyer, copy at PAC (MG 8, G 59).

The Canadian fur trade was at a peak of activity in the 1790s but, even as it declined in later years, Sorel remained a favourite source of temporary labour. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the American Fur Company recruited *engagés* here, as did the Hudson's Bay Company.[17] A study of Hudson's Bay Company personnel records for the period 1823-1848 shows that, of employees whose Lower Canadian origins could be traced, more were from Sorel than any other community with the exception of Montreal; not one man was from St. Denis.[18] This local concentration was not accidental; Governor Simpson's instructions to recruiters in 1840 were quite specific:

> The engagements of the Recruits to be for a term of 3 to 5 years, all to be taken from the Voyageur parishes ... and as many of the favorite names, LaVallés, L'Esperances, Felixes, Convoyées [sic - Cournoyers?] etc. as possible.[19]

Three of these four "favourite names" belong to long-established Sorel clans. Since there were no more summer voyages between Montreal and Lake Superior after the demise of the Northwest Company in 1821, work for the Hudson's Bay and American companies meant longer absenses with a greater likelihood of definitive emigration. The numbers involved seem to have been proportionally much smaller than in the 1790s. Thus the fur trade was presumably less important to Sorel's rural economy in the later period than it was between 1790 and 1821. Nevertheless, it does seem clear that, since the end of the eighteenth century, Sorel had established itself as a "voyageur parish".

At the time of the Northwest Company, the *engagés* do not seem to have been a group apart in Sorel. Instead, temporary or seasonal work in the fur trade was a normal part of a local habitant's life. Wage labour of this sort was not the preserve of seasoned professionals. The 128 *engagement* contracts from the 1790s mention 106 different names; 86 men (81 per cent) went on only one trip in the decade, while only 18 (17 per cent) signed on twice and two (2 per cent) went three times. Although the Hudson's Bay Company may have directed recruiting efforts in 1840 towards "favorite names," there was hardly a concentration of *engagés* within particular family groups in the early period when summer employment was common. Few family names recur in the collection of Sorel contracts, and this is all the more striking in view of the large number of individuals in the population at large sharing some of Sorel's more common surnames (see Table 2). Three-quarters of the families involved had only one representative in the sample. Work

17. AJS, files of H. Crebassa and M.L. Duplessis, *passim*. These *engagements* in the 1830s were all for winterers serving terms of at least three years.
18. Carol M. Judd, "The Ethnicity of Hudson's Bay Company Servants in the Nineteenth Century", paper presented to the Fur Trade Conference, Winnipeg, May 1978, Table 2.
19. Simpson to Keith, London, 18 November 1840, cited in Judd, "Mixt Bands", p. 145, n. 45. Another document from the same period refers to "the old voyageur parishes of Sorel, Maskinongé, and Yamaska." A. Simpson, *The Life and Travels of Thomas Simpson, the Arctic Discoverer*, quoted in Philip Goldring, *Papers on the Labour System of the Hudson's Bay Company, 1821-1900*, Parks Canada Manuscript Report 362 (Ottawa, 1979), I, p. 176. Cf. Marcel Giraud, *Le Métis Canadien, son rôle dans l'histoire des provinces de l'Ouest* (Paris, 1945), p. 969.

in the fur trade was occasional and hardly a specialist's activity in 1790s Sorel then.[20] Nor does it seem to have been the mark of low status: eleven of the 106 *engagés* in this sample were eventually elected churchwardens of Sorel, the highest lay office in the community.[21] Anything but marginal figures, veterans of the fur trade were well integrated into a community whose economy was based on a mutually supporting system of subsistence agriculture and temporary wage labour.

Sorel had become a "voyageur parish" because, as mentioned earlier, the Northwest Company had deliberately sought out a rural labour-force. However, this community had several characteristics that made it an especially suitable rural parish for fur-trade recruitment. It included a large number of alluvial islands where the St. Lawrence enters Lake St. Pierre and their inhabitants must have been accustomed to boat and canoe travel from childhood. Also, the habitants of Sorel were initiated into the practice of working for wages during the American Revolution when many of them were drafted for transport duties for the large British military camp in their midst. But the most important factor assuring a cheap and ready supply of *engagés* was the poor soil and, consequently, the low agricultural productivity of most of the lands in the parish.

Table 2 — Family Concentration Among Sorel *Engagés*, 1790-1799

Engagés with the same family name	families number	families per cent	engagés
1	48	73	48
2	10	15	20
3	1	2	3
4	2	3	8
5	3	4	15
6	2	3	12
total	66	100	106

The sandy earth of Sorel would not hold moisture through the hot summers; by the late eighteenth century, the land's virginal fertility had been exhausted and wheat could no longer be planted with any assurance of a harvest. Around 1784, more oats were grown here than wheat, whereas St. Denis habitants, blessed with comparatively rich soil, still concentrated on wheat, Canada's main "cash crop," and grew about twice as much of it per capita as Sorel habitants.[22] The decline

20. A century earlier, work in the fur trade tended to be dominated to a much greater extent by particular families and by "professionals" who made this commerce their career. Town-dwellers seem to have played a larger role then also. Dechêne, *Habitants et marchands*, pp. 219-24; Charbonneau, *et al.*, "Le comportement démographique", p. 126.
21. Archives de la paroisse Saint-Pierre-de-Sorel, vestry accounts, 1730-1868.
22. Calculations based on tithe figures published in Ivanhoë Caron, *La Colonisation de la Province de Québec*, two volumes (Quebec, 1923-1927), I, pp. 275-80.

of wheat continued in Sorel, much to the chagrin of the local priest who saw his tithe slowly disappearing. In 1790, he described the contrast between agriculture in his parish and that practised in neighbouring communities where

> ...le blé et autres Grains y venant abondament. Mais icy tres mauvaise terre ou le blé vient à peine, pois & avoines. [sic] Les habitants industrieux connoissant leur terre en employent la meilleur partie qui est prôche de leurs Batiments en encorre y metant L'engrais qu'il faudroit, sur leur terre en Blé dinde, feves, patates et tabac en quoi ils reuissent fort bien.[23]

The substitute crops mentioned here—oats, corn, beans, potatoes, and tobacco—may have been exchanged locally for wheat but, in Lower Canada in the 1790s, they were not marketable commodities and, no matter how well they grew, they could scarcely be of use except for the subsistence of the local population.

Habitants in both Sorel and St. Denis practised a peasant form of agriculture, in the sense that production was primarily for use rather than for sale.[24] Farming activities were organized around household needs; this meant that, above all, wheat was grown. With the expansion of overseas markets for Canadian wheat in the second half of the eighteenth century, merchants such as Samuel Jacobs appeared in St. Denis and other villages, taking wheat in payment for retail purchases. The result was that additional land was cleared and, where possible, more wheat grown to discharge obligations to the shopkeepers. The basic subsistence orientation remained unchanged; one element of production was simply expanded. In Sorel, however, wheat simply would not grow and this posed a serious problem to local merchants. Samuel Jacobs had a store here in the 1760s in addition to other branches in St. Denis and elsewhere. The Sorel shop was unprofitable though as the habitants who dealt there had no means of paying for their purchases; after a few years, the merchant closed it and forced his customers to liquidate their debts by providing him with squared timbers to be shipped to Quebec.[25]

Although Sorel's forests might provide enough timber to liquidate habitants' debts on one occasion, they were small and shrinking at this time: hardly a substitute for wheat. Instead, fur-trade wages seem eventually to have played the role filled by wheat sales elsewhere. It is no doubt for this reason that fur-trade *engagements* were usually signed, and an advance of pay given, in the months of January and February, that is, in the threshing season when rural merchants pressed their customers to deliver their grain and settle their annual accounts.[26] In this re-

23. ACESH, XVII, C 66, Martel to bishop, 30 October 1790.
24. Allan Greer, "Habitants of the Lower Richelieu: Rural Society in Three Quebec Parishes, 1740-1840", (Ph.D. thesis, York University, 1980), pp. 246-54.
25. PAC, MG 19, A 2, series 3, 10: 756, "Etat de ceux qui ont donné leur obligation pour le bois d'écarisage", [sic] 29 December 1770.
26. Of 187 engagements involving men from the neighbouring parishes of St. Ours and St. Denis as well as from Sorel, signed 1790-1799, the breakdown by month is as follows: January—70, February—55, March—19, April—13, May—14, June—0, July—2, August—2, September—3, October—2, November—2, December—5. In other words, 67 per cent of the contracts were concluded in the first two months of the year. On the seasonal schedule of rural merchants, see Greer, "Habitants", p. 284.

spect, *engagé* earnings seem to have been a direct substitute for agricultural sales.

During the first decade of mass participation in the fur trade, these earnings seem to have more than made up for the deficiencies of Sorel's agriculture. An analysis of estate inventories evaluating the possessions of sixty-five habitants from Sorel, St. Denis, and St. Ours, a neighbouring parish with a wheat-centred economy like that of St. Denis, suggests that the habitants of the fur-trade community were far better off in the 1790s than they were forty years earlier or forty years later (see Table 3). Land is not assigned a money value in Lower Canadian estate inventories, but the total value of movable property (furniture, implements, livestock, etc.) gives a rough indication of an individual's standard of living. The average value of such property was high among Sorel habitants in the 1790s, not only relative to other periods, but also in comparison with habitants of the agriculturally prosperous communities of St. Ours and St. Denis. Moreover, it was only at this time, when Northwest Company recruitment was at a peak, that residents of Sorel included in the sample were not heavily in debt; in fact, slightly more money was owed to them, on the whole, than was owed by them. Accordingly, the "net worth" of Sorel habitants (that is, movable property plus cash minus debts) was at a maximum in the 1790s, when it was also much higher than in the other parishes.[27]

One of the more prosperous individuals whose possessions were evaluated—he ranked fourth out of twenty-seven in the 1790s—was Pierre Letendre of Sorel, "décédé dans les pays d'en haut" in 1795.[28] This *engagé* left at his death a small fifty-*arpent* farm, half the area still wooded, on the St. Lawrence. He had movable possessions worth 1,274 *livres*, including the usual complement of farm animals and agricultural implements, as well as a moose and a caribou hide. The signs of comparative prosperity included "un criste [sic] d'argent", a bag full of French and Spanish coins worth 281 *livres* and an absence of debts. Various individuals owed Letendre's estate a total of 119 *livres*.

Unfortunately, Sorel's prosperity did not last. By the 1830s, few habitants were involved in the fur trade, agriculture was as unpromising as ever, and the average net worth of habitant inventories had dropped from 1,358 to 448 *livres*.

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27. Higher also than the average "richesse mobilière" (net worth) found in a sample of sixty-two habitant inventories from three regions near Montreal, 1792-1796 (680 *livres*, 917 *livres*, and 756 *livres* respectively). Gilles Paquet and Jean-Pierre Wallot, "Les inventaires après décès à Montréal au tournant du XIXe siècle", *RHAF*, 30 (September 1976), p. 187.

    Since farms in St. Ours and St. Denis were larger and more valuable than those in Sorel, habitants in those two parishes probably had possessions worth as much in total as their neighbours in Sorel, but inventoried wealth (excluding land) probably gives a better indication of relative prosperity.

28. AJS, files of A. Robin, 25 October 1795.

Table 3 — Inventoried Wealth of Sorel, St. Denis and St. Ours Habitants, 1740-1839
(in *livres*)

	Sorel	St. Denis and St. Ours
1740-1769		
number of inventories	15	12
avg. movable property	856	773
avg. cash	140	149
avg. debt	367	221
avg. net worth (excl. land)	629	701
1790-1799		
number of inventories	15	12
avg. movable property	1278	794
avg. cash	41	42
avg. debt	−39	160
avg. net worth (excl. land)	1358	676
1830-1839		
number of inventories	11	
avg. movable property	922	
avg. cash	2	
avg. debt	476	
avg. net worth (excl. land)	448	

Debts now claimed more than half the value of movable property in the average estate. Visitors to Sorel in the early nineteenth century were struck by the poverty of its inhabitants. Governor Dalhousie spent several summers here and wrote in his diary in 1820: "The more I walk about here, the more I see of poverty, idleness, and loose disolute habits—mean unblushing beggary...."[29] Although the governor blamed this poverty on moral deficiencies of the population, another British visitor, John Lambert, pointed to the effects of the fur trade.

> The country people in the vicinity are mostly employed as voyageurs in the North-west fur-trade, and the cultivation of their farms is left to their wives and children. When they return home, they seldom bring more than enough to support them during the winter. The soil is thus neglected, and the town is badly supplied with provisions.[30]

Like Lambert, many historians have argued that the fur trade was detrimental to Quebec's agricultural development and they too emphasize the diversion

29. Scottish Records Office, Dalhousie Papers, sec. III, no. 543, Lord Dalhousie's diary, 15 July 1820 (PAC microfilm).
30. John Lambert, *Travels through Lower Canada and the United States of America in the years 1806, 1807, and 1808*, two volumes (London, 1814), II, pp. 509-10.

of labour from the fields to the woods.[31] There is no real evidence, however, that Sorel's agriculture suffered primarily from a shortage of manpower. The problem should some day be studied at the family level, since it may be that *engagés* tended to come from households with enough other adult males that their help could easily be dispensed with. It is true that in the fur trade, unlike the timber trade, seasonal employment was in the summer when men were most needed in the fields, but the porkeaters did return home in time for the grain harvest. Rural Sorel was at a peak of prosperity in the 1790s just when summer departures for the west were most common and it was most distressed in the 1830s when able-bodied men were superabundant. In any case, if habitants from Sorel did periodically abandon their farms to join the canoe brigades, it was an exceptionally ungrateful soil they neglected. Given the technology of Lower Canadian agriculture, Sorel's low productivity was related more to poor soil than to any shortage of hands.

Work in the fur trade had an obvious appeal to residents of this agriculturally disadvantaged community and it is little wonder that a dual local economy of temporary wage labour and subsistence farming emerged in rural Sorel when it made the habitants there so prosperous. Depending as it did on a rather unstable source of employment, Sorel's prosperity at the turn of the nineteenth century was very fragile. Soon, short-term work in the fur trade all but disappeared and the parish was left with only its meagre agricultural resources and the "agrarian structures" adapted to the earlier "boom" period. These structures—microscopic holdings, peasant proprietorship, dense settlement—contributed to the impoverishment of rural Sorel and constituted so many obstacles to capitalist development. Accordingly, economic development proceeded at a very slow pace through the post-Confederation period in the town of William Henry, renamed Sorel.[32] Attractive on first sight, Northwest Company employment was a Trojan horse with ultimately disastrous consequences for the habitants of Sorel. In the pages that follow, some of Sorel's agrarian structures of the first half of the nineteenth century will be described and compared with those of St. Denis, the parish with no connection to the Northwest trade. This is not to suggest that St. Denis was paradise nor to argue that its soil was as fertile for capitalism as it was for wheat (St. Denis had its own problems, largely connected to the wheat trade): the aim is simply to isolate the patterns of population, land ownership, and so on attributable to the effects of the fur trade.

With earnings from the Northwest Company so effectively taking the place of an agricultural surplus in the 1790s, Sorel habitants had little incentive then to grow more than enough to feed their families. Unfortunately, there are no sta-

31. For example, W.T. Easterbrook and Hugh G.J. Aitken, *Canadian Economic History* (Toronto, 1956), p. 62.

32. Ronald Rudin, "Local Initiative and Urban Growth: the Development of Four Quebec Towns, 1840-1914", (manuscript), pp. 60-71. Rudin argues that this sluggish urban and industrial growth was due to the town's overreliance on shipbuilding, a seasonal industry, and to the lack of entrepreneurial initiative on the part of its business elite.

tistics on agricultural production for the period when local participation in the fur trade was most intense, but figures from the 1831 census on the extent of land cultivated by each household reflect the basic subsistence pattern which had evolved over the years. At that date, very few farms in Sorel had more than forty *arpents* of cultivated land and almost half had less than twenty *arpents* (see Table 4). The average cultivated area was thirty *arpents* per farm, exactly the figure one finds in 1880 in the Saguenay community of Hébertville where subsistence agriculture was combined with seasonal wage work in the forests.[33] Clearly, these uniformly small fields in the poor soil of Sorel were adapted, not to "commercial" agriculture, but to keeping people alive. By comparison, the average farm in St. Denis in 1831 had seventy-nine *arpents* under cultivation, well over double the average in Sorel. Moreover, there was rather a wider variation from farm to farm in the acreage cropped here. The agricultural market had apparently had the effect in St. Denis of separating commercially unsuccessful farmers from prosperous ones who used large fields, and often hired labour, to produce substantial surpluses.

Table 4 — Extent of Cultivated Land in Sorel and St. Denis Farms, 1831

arpents	SOREL		ST. DENIS	
cultivated	number	per cent	number	per cent
0-9	82	19.0	3	1.5
10-19	115	26.6	4	2.0
20-39	146	33.8	32	15.9
40-59	61	14.1	52	25.9
60-79	15	3.5	53	26.4
80-99	4	0.9	28	13.9
100-149	4	0.9	20	9.9
150+	0	0	9	4.5
unspecified	5	1.2	0	0
total farms	432	100	201	100

Relying largely on wages for all but the food needs of their households, Sorel habitants had little reason to maintain extensive land holdings. Farms in Sorel always tended to be smaller than those of St. Denis, partly because original concessions by the local seigneur were small; sixty *arpents* each was the rule from the 1760s. Between 1765 and 1831, however, average holdings declined in size here. There was a decline in St. Denis also, but individual holdings in this wheat-growing parish were still much larger than they were in Sorel by 1831 (see Table 5). Before speaking too hastily of the effects of partible inheritance systems and of "fragmentation of holdings," one should recall that censuses give figures on the total landholdings of individuals and this often included two or more farm lots, some of them located outside the parish where the owner lived. Also, many new con-

33. Normand Séguin, *La conquête du sol au 19e siècle* (Sillery, 1977), p. 166. The 1880 census, using English units, gives a figure of twenty-four cleared acres per farm, equivalent to thirty *arpents*.

cessions were made between 1765 and 1831, most of them for smaller lots than had been granted earlier. Thus, average holdings in a community could decline in size without any farm being subdivided.

Unfortunately, the sorts of land records *(terriers, aveux et dénombrements)* that would make it possible to determine whether fragmentation occurred in St. Denis are not available. Studies of other similar grain-growing localities, however, have indicated a complete absence of any lasting subdivision over the course of two centuries and more.[34] But in Sorel, farms were definitely split into smaller units in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. By 1831, about one-third of the parish's habitants held less than sixty *arpents*, the normal size of a seigneurial concession here. One row of lots, the "rang du chénal du moine," was divided among fifteen habitants in 1724; by 1861, the same area had been subdivided to the point where there were fifty-two lots owned by forty-five individuals.[35] An additional, though very rough, indication of the prevalence of subdivision through inheritance is the fact that, in the 1831 census, 24 per cent of Sorel's habitants lived next to a neighbour with the same family name; in St. Denis, the figure was only 10 per cent. The subdivision of holdings, often presented as the inevitable result of the inheritance laws of the Custom of Paris or of the French-Canadian habitant's mentality, seems then to have been a local, not a universal phenomenon, and one connected with specific economic circumstances.

Table 5 — Habitant Land Holdings in Sorel and St. Denis According to Censuses of 1765 and 1831

Arpents owned	Sorel 1765 (%)	Sorel 1831 (%)	Change (%)	St. Denis 1765 (%)	St. Denis 1831 (%)	Change (%)
0-19	3.5	5.3	+1.8	2.0	1.5	− 0.5
20-39	5.0	13.0	+8.0	0	0.5	+ 0.5
40-59	9.2	14.1	+4.9	2.0	6.5	+ 4.5
60-79	40.4	33.1	−7.3	8.0	16.9	+ 8.9
80-99	18.4	12.0	−6.4	16.0	31.3	+15.3
100-149	16.3	14.4	−1.9	34.0	18.4	−15.6
150-249	7.1	6.2	−0.9	32.0	18.9	−13.1
250+	0	1.4	+1.4	6.0	6.0	0
unspecified	0	0.5		0	0	
Total	100	100		100	100	
Cases	141	432		50	201	

By altering the local economy and encouraging the profusion of minuscule holdings, the intrusion of the wage system also had a profound effect on Sorel's demography. During the period when men from Sorel were most active in the fur

34. Dechêne, *Habitants et marchands*, pp. 284-98; Pauline Desjardins, "La Coutume de Paris et la transmission des terres—le rang de la Beauce à Calixa-Lavallée de 1730 à 1975", *RHAF*, 34 (December 1980), p. 339.
35. Greer, "Habitants", p. 201.

trade, the parish's population grew enormously. Between 1790 and 1831, the annual rate of growth here was 3.5 per cent, while the rate for Lower Canada as a whole was 2.6 per cent and for St. Denis 1.4 per cent.[36] These different growth rates were connected, above all, with different patterns of in- and out-migration. The wheat farms of St. Denis could only be kept intact at the cost of a net emigration; that is, more people left the parish than entered it from the last quarter of the eighteenth century on (see Table 6). Sorel too suffered from a negative migratory balance before the advent of the Northwest Company but, from 1784 to 1822, there were substantially more immigrants than emigrants.

As a result of this rapid growth, Sorel's population density came to exceed that of St. Denis even though the *engagé* parish had a much larger area. Excluding the "urban" (or village) portion of each community, there were 12.1 *arpents* of land for every rural inhabitant of St. Denis in 1831 and only 10.1 *arpents* for each man, woman and child living in rural Sorel. If these were Malthusian populations, their size controlled by the food-producing capabilities of the lands they occupied, one would expect to find the richer soils of St. Denis supporting larger numbers on every square mile of territory. Reality was just the opposite in the Lower Richelieu, largely, it seems, because fur-trade earnings enabled Sorel habitants to get by on small holdings that would not otherwise have been viable agricultural units.

Marriage patterns in Sorel were also unusual. Figures from the 1825 census suggest that males tended to marry at a younger age here than in St. Denis (the census does not give any indication of female marriage practices).[37] It was less difficult for young people in Sorel to establish new households in their home parish, perhaps by buying or inheriting part of an existing farm, when they did not require more than a basic food supply from the land. Furthermore, service in the fur trade may have allowed some local habitants' sons to accumulate the capital needed to marry and raise a family earlier than they could have hoped to inherit their parents' property. Not only was the age at marriage in early nineteenth-century Sorel lower than it was in St. Denis, it was also lower than it had been at earlier periods in Sorel. A study of the parish registers of Sorel from 1740 to 1840 indi-

36. Corrected census figures indicate 1790 populations of 1208 for Sorel and 1694 for St. Denis and 1831 populations of 5063 for Sorel and 3074 for St. Denis (*ibid.*, pp. 20-9). Henripin's and Péron's revised estimates for Lower Canada are 141,900 for the 1786-1790 period and 401,200 for 1826-1830 ("The Demographic Transition of the Province of Quebec", in D.V. Glass and Roger Revelle, eds., *Population and Social Change* (London, 1972), pp. 213-31).

Note that the formula for calculating the annual rate of population growth is $r = \frac{\log e\,(P_2/P_1)}{n} \times 100\%$, where P_1 is initial population, P_2 is end population and n is the number of intervening years.

37. Among males aged 18 to 24 years, 40 per cent in Sorel were married, while only 19 per cent in St. Denis were married. *Journals of the House of Assembly of Lower Canada*, 1826, Appendix Q, census of Lower Canada, 1825.

Table 6 — Migratory Balance, Catholic Populations of Sorel and St. Denis, 1739-1831

year	Catholic population	increase	Catholic natural growth	net immigration
		SOREL		
1739	342	328	287*	41
1765	670			
1784	934**	264	510*	−246
1822	3521***	2591	1957	634
1831	4804	1279	1183	96
		ST. DENIS		
1770	996	698	955	−257
1790	1694			
1801	2197	503	806	−303
1822	2906	709	1415	−706
1831	3074	169	813	−644

*Interpolation to cover gap in birth and death registration, 1757-61 and 1771-72.
**The 1784 census was taken in the midst of the (Protestant) Loyalist migration to Sorel. According to one estimate, there were 132 Loyalists in the parish in December 1783; another source indicates the number had risen to 316 by the following October (Azarie Couillard-Després, *Histoire de Sorel, de ses origines à nos jours* (Montreal, 1926), p. 128; Ivanhoë Caron, *La Colonisation de la Province de Québec* (Quebec, 1923-27), I, p. 126). The average of the two figures is 224; subtracted from the total population given by the census (1158), this suggests a Catholic population of 934.
***Only the census of 1831 gives population figures by religion. To find the Catholic population in 1822, the total population (3711) was multiplied by the 1831 ratio of Catholic to total population (4804/5063).

cates a long-term tendency for the mean age at first marriage to decline slightly.[38] This change goes counter to the pattern one finds in other pre-industrial populations faced with a worsening man-land ratio. Elsewhere, incipient rural overpopulation generally led to a rise in the age of marriage which had the effect of redressing the balance somewhat by limiting fertility.[39] Sorel's overcrowding instead worsened as people married earlier and fertility remained high. The best explanation of this unusual pattern is the local economic system combining subsistence agriculture and part-time wage labour. The introduction of domestic industry into

38. Greer, "Habitants", p. 61.
39. Richard A. Easterlin, "Does Human Fertility Adjust to the Environment?", in Maris A. Vinovskis, ed., *Studies in American Historical Demography* (New York, 1979), pp. 389-97; Helena Temkin-Greener and A.C. Swedlund, "Fertility Transition in the Connecticut Valley: 1740-1850", *Population Studies*, 32 (March 1978), pp. 27-41.

agrarian households in eighteenth-century Flanders had a similar effect: population grew, holdings were subdivided, and overcrowding became severe.[40]

Although rural Sorel was more densely populated than rural St. Denis, paradoxically it was inhabited to a much greater degree by landowning agriculturalists and this characteristic made it the perfect recruiting and breeding ground for fur traders requiring a flexible and self-supporting labour force (see Table 7). In St. Denis, by contrast, the importance of the grain trade and the consequent absence of land subdivision ensured that a large proportion of men who chose not to emigrate would have to remain as day labourers (one-quarter of rural family heads in 1831). Comparative agricultural prosperity also had the effect of encouraging investment in land and, so, many cultivators were tenant farmers or sharecroppers by 1831. The "commercialization of agriculture" had a divisive effect on the habitants of St. Denis, accentuating inequalities in the distribution of land and separating landowners, tenant farmers, and rural proletarians. By providing a market and clientele for artisans, teachers, and notaries, it also contributed to the diversification of the parish's occupational structure. Rural Sorel, however, remained a community dominated numerically by peasant proprietors, encouraged by fur trade wages to multiply despite the poverty of their agriculture.

Overcrowding, fragmentation of holdings, unproductive agriculture, impoverishment: all these can be discerned in rural Sorel by 1831 and all are associated with the agrarian malaise of pre-Rebellion French Canada. The dominant explanation of Lower Canada's rural crisis emphasizes two factors, one demographic, the other cultural.[41] Rapidly expanding population, it is claimed, produced misery when it passed the limits that could be sustained by available land resources. Overcrowding need not have had disastrous results if only agricultural techniques had been improved, but the atavistic mentality of the French-Canadian habitants led to their irrational refusal to accept technical improvements and other "reforms"

Table 7 — Status of Heads of Households, Rural Sorel and Rural St. Denis, 1831

	rural Sorel		rural St. Denis	
	number	%	number	%
peasant proprietors	432	68.3	201	47.6
tenant farmers	15	2.4	58	13.7
labourers	143	22.6	102	24.2
artisans	15	2.4	21	5.0
other	27	4.3	40	9.5
total	632	100	422	100

40. Franklin F. Mendels, "Agriculture and Peasant Industry in Eighteenth-Century Flanders", in William N. Parker and Eric L. Jones, eds., *European Peasants and their Markets* (Princeton, 1975), pp. 179-204.

41. Fernand Ouellet, *Lower Canada 1791-1840: Social Change and Nationalism* (Toronto, 1980).

that would have paved the way for capitalist development. It was the merchant bourgeoisie, the Northwest Company fur barons and their heirs, who, according to this interpretation, pointed the way towards progress, modernity, and economic development. Unfortunately, the peasants frustrated these reformers with their stubborn traditionalism.

The case of Sorel seems to challenge both elements of this interpretation. First, it suggests that rural overcrowding was due, not simply to the working of nature, but rather to particular economic forces originating outside the rural community. Secondly, it provides an example of poverty and backwardness that arose primarily through the introduction of a certain form of capitalism. For Sorel in the early nineteenth century, as for many other Quebec communities affected similarly in later years by the seasonal labour needs of the forest industry,[42] the "merchants' programme" was, in its practical effects, a recipe for poverty and underdevelopment. To echo the commercial bourgeoisie of Lower Canada in blaming the habitants for their own agrarian predicament would be adding ideological insult to economic injury.

42. Normand Séguin's study of Hébertville in the Saguenay region in the late nineteenth century describes the formation of a semi-proletariat of poor subsistence farmers dependent on seasonal work in the woods. Séguin, *La conquête du sol*; Normand Séguin, ed., "Problèmes théoriques et orientation de recherche", in N. Séguin, ed., *Agriculture et colonisation au Québec: aspects historiques* (Montreal, 1980), pp. 181-97. This author is presently involved in a group research project on the history of the St. Maurice region in the second half of the nineteenth century; preliminary findings indicate a similar process of semi-proletarization and dependence on forestry wages. On the liquidation of this peasant-worker system in the mid-twentieth century, see Gérald Fortin, "Les changements socio-culturels dans une paroisse agricole", *Recherches sociographiques*, 2 (April-June 1961), pp. 151-70. Fortin, along with Léon Gérin and other sociologists, might be criticized for calling this semi-proletariat "traditional," and for stressing the continuity of French-Canadian rural society from the seventeenth century to the twentieth when, in fact, the social and economic structures of Quebec's peasant-woodsman communities had been shaped through the effects of the capitalist labour market.