

# The Improbable Success of the Petit-Poitou Company, 1650-1720: Agency and Management at the Crossroads of Social and Environmental History

## Le succès improbable de la Société de Petit-Poitou, 1650-1720. Agentivité et gestion à la croisée de l'histoire sociale et de l'histoire environnementale

## El improbable suceso de la sociedad de Petit-Poitou 1650 – 1720. “agenciabilidad” y gestión en la encrucijada entre la historia asocial y la historia del medio ambiente

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Résumé de l'article

Le Société de Petit-Poitou se distingue comme ayant été la première entreprise de drainage à grande échelle à avoir réussi, en France. Créée en 1640 et composée d'un groupe de fonctionnaires et de propriétaires fonciers de sa région, la Société a complété, en 1646, les travaux d'assèchement d'environ 4000 ha de terres humides destinées à l'agriculture. Dans cet article, nous examinons les 70 années qui ont suivi ce succès initial, afin de mieux comprendre comment la Société a surmonté les défis environnementaux, sociaux et politiques auxquels elle a été confrontée avant d'émerger comme entreprise stable et lucrative. Il s'est agi là d'un succès très improbable. Les travaux ont été menacés par des inondations, des disputes entre associés, les actions de cultivateurs sous bail et la rivalité avec d'autres élites régionales. De ses erreurs initiales, la Société a su apprendre à créer des consensus à l'interne, puis à se défendre contre les attaques juridiques de ses rivaux, grâce à un modèle de leadership solide et souple, ainsi qu'à une bonne compréhension de l'aménagement territorial et de l'importance d'une représentation efficace à la cour. Notre article s'appuie sur une recherche originale à partir des archives peu connues de l'assemblée générale de la Société de Petit-Poitou. Ces documents historiques donnent un aperçu global de la période de formation de l'entreprise. En somme, nous proposons ici une approche microhistorique afin de contribuer aux débats actuels, en histoire environnementale et en histoire sociale, sur le concept d'*agentivité* humaine.

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# The Improbable Success of the Petit-Poitou Company, 1650-1720: Agency and Management at the Crossroads of Social and Environmental History

*Le succès improbable de la Société de Petit-Poitou, 1650-1720. Agentivité et gestion à la croisée de l'histoire sociale et de l'histoire environnementale*

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*El improbable suceso de la sociedad de Petit-Poitou 1650 - 1720. "agenciabilidad" y gestión en la encrucijada entre la historia asocial y la historia del medio ambiente*

## Abstract

The Petit-Poitou Company stands out as the first successful large-scale drainage enterprise in France. Created in 1640 by a group of local officials and landowners, by 1646 the Company had completed the operation of draining nearly 4,000 hectares of marshland for farming. This article examines the seventy years following this initial success in order to better understand how the Company overcame significant environmental, social, and political challenges to emerge as a stable and profitable enterprise. This success was highly improbable. Flood disasters, dissension amongst the associates, the actions of tenant farmers, and challenges from regional competitors all threatened to destroy its work. But the Company was able to learn from its early mistakes, build consensus internally, and defend itself from the legal attacks of its rivals through a flexible but firm leadership model and a solid understanding of territorial management and court patronage. This article is based on original research using the unique and previously little-known records of the General Assembly of the Petit-Poitou Company and proposes a more comprehensive view of this period of development for the Company. In other words, it offers a microhistorical analysis that can add to current debate about human agency in the environmental and social history fields.

## Keywords

Marshland, drainage, management, agriculture, company, state.

## Résumé

La Société de Petit-Poitou se distingue comme ayant été la première entreprise de drainage à grande échelle à avoir réussi, en France. Créée en 1640 et composée d'un groupe de fonctionnaires et de propriétaires fonciers de sa région, la Société a complété, en 1646, les travaux d'assèchement d'environ 4000 ha de terres humides destinées à l'agriculture. Dans cet article, nous examinons les 70 années qui ont suivi ce succès initial, afin de mieux comprendre



comment la Société a surmonté les défis environnementaux, sociaux et politiques auxquels elle a été confrontée avant d'émerger comme entreprise stable et lucrative. Il s'est agi là d'un succès très improbable. Les travaux ont été menacés par des inondations, des disputes entre associés, les actions de cultivateurs sous bail et la rivalité avec d'autres élites régionales. De ses erreurs initiales, la Société a su apprendre à créer des consensus à l'interne, puis à se défendre contre les attaques juridiques de ses rivaux, grâce à un modèle de leadership solide et souple, ainsi qu'à une bonne compréhension de l'aménagement territorial et de l'importance d'une représentation efficace à la cour. Notre article s'appuie sur une recherche originale à partir des archives peu connues de l'assemblée générale de la Société de Petit-Poitou. Ces documents historiques donnent un aperçu global de la période de formation de l'entreprise. En somme, nous proposons ici une approche microhistorique afin de contribuer aux débats actuels, en histoire environnementale et en histoire sociale, sur le concept d'*agencitivité* humaine.

## Mots-clés

Marais, drainage, gestion, agriculture, société, état.

## Resumen

La Sociedad de *Petit-Poitou* se distingue como la primera empresa de drenaje a gran escala, con buen resultado en Francia. Creada en 1640, constituida de un grupo de funcionarios y de hacendados de la región, en 1646 la Sociedad terminó de desaguar casi 4 000 hectáreas de tierras húmedas destinadas a la agricultura. Este artículo examina los setenta años que siguieron ese éxito inicial, para comprender la manera cómo la Sociedad superó los desafíos ambientales, sociales y políticos, puesto que llegó a establecerse como empresa estable y lucrativa. Se trata, pues, de un éxito muy improbable. Sus trabajos fueron amenazados por inundaciones, peleas entre socios, actividades de hacendados y rivalidades con otras élites regionales. Desde un comienzo, la Sociedad ha comprendido de sus errores, cómo favorecer el consenso interno para defenderse de ataques jurídicos de sus rivales, mediante un modo de liderazgo sólido, flexible, así como de una cabal percepción de la planificación territorial y de la importancia del empresariado en la Corte. El artículo propone un enfoque micro-histórico a partir del estudio de archivos poco conocidos de la asamblea general de la Sociedad de *Petit-Poitou*, documentos que resumen el período de formación de la empresa, para así acrecentar los debates contemporáneos sobre la historia ambiental y la historia social relativa al concepto de "agenciabilidad" humana.

## Palabras claves

Tierras inundadas, drenaje, gestión, agricultura, sociedad, Estado.

## INTRODUCTION

During the early modern period, wetlands in many parts of Europe and its colonies were drained for agriculture. These areas had not been protected, natural wetlands in the modern sense. In France, many people already fished, hunted waterfowl, and raised livestock in or around wetlands. Some wetlands had been deliberately modified so as to contribute to the protection of forts and castles, or to facilitate regional trade over water. However, these new drainage initiatives were different. Farms were needed to meet the demands of a growing population for land and food as well as to increase state tax revenues (Le Comte de Dienne, 1891: 16-19; Ciriaco, 2015).



2006: 209). Encouraged by royal privileges, companies were formed to undertake drainage projects. However, most of these companies lacked the capital, expertise, or commitment needed to achieve their goals. The Petit-Poitou Company (*la Société de Petit-Poitou*) stands out as the first successful large-scale drainage enterprise in France. Established in 1640, the Company was composed largely of officials and landowners from Fontenay-le-Comte, near the Poitevin Marsh. Within two years, it obtained tax exemptions from the king, recruited Dutch and French financiers as associates, and acquired rights to over 6,000 hectares of contiguous wetlands in four adjoining parishes. By 1646, two-thirds of this territory had been drained for agriculture, with the remaining third reserved for pasture. The associates proceeded to divide up the land, based on the proportion of their stake in the Company. They then leased out their properties – called *cabanes* – to reputable farmers. The first harvest produced wheat valued at 16,500 *livres tournois* (l.t.).<sup>1</sup>

I have previously compared the techniques, organization, and early successes of marshland colonization initiatives carried out by the associates of the Petit-Poitou Company with those undertaken by the colonists of Port Royal, in Acadia (Kennedy, 2013: 37-66). The Poitou project was far more centralized and on a far larger scale than the subsistence farming practiced by the Acadians. There is a growing historiography of wetlands during the early modern period. Some analyses focus on the role of the State and elites in organizing, financing, and, in some cases, opposing these projects (Dienne, 1891; Massé, 1957; Ciriaco, 2006). Others analyze the techniques and practices involved, such as dyke-building and water control mechanisms, as well as the transmission of knowledge from other parts of Europe to France and to the New World (Billaud, 1984; Butzer, 2002; Suire, 2006). All these studies emphasize that the transformation of wetlands caused profound ecological and social change. While Yannis Suire lauds the ability of marshland companies in Poitou to adapt, and to maintain sustainable development over four centuries, Jean-Paul Billaud draws attention to the negative effects of the repressive and sometimes violent measures they took to gain and keep control over the land and the water (Billaud, 1986: 79; Suire, 2006: 140). These experts follow many other historians of France in prioritizing an approach to environmental history focused on the *longue durée* (long term), including the complex social ranks and categories that contributed to the evolution of a regional identity (Ingold, 2011: 22; Quenet, 2014: 198). Some North American historical geographers have also adopted this approach (Hatvany, 2003).

This article focuses on the Petit-Poitou Company from the aftermath of the initial drainage and partition of the marshland up to the end of the reign of Louis XIV. Every other marshland company established in France during the first half of the seventeenth century failed almost immediately. The Petit-Poitou Company was the first to actually complete its proposed drainage project and thus the first to face the challenge of post-drainage management (Billaud, 1986: 78). The survival of this Company was also threatened on numerous occasions, notably by a flood disaster and by serious court battles with regional competitors. Zeroing in on this crucial period assures a better understanding of both the environmental and social challenges created by large-scale drainage schemes and also of the actions of the Company in the particular contexts

1 16 août 1647, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, Série 135 J, Archives départementales de la Vendée (La Roche-sur-Yon). The *livre tournois* was the principal French currency of account during the early modern period.



within which its members lived. These contexts included the growing absolutism of Louis XIV and a new form of corporate entrepreneurship stemming from a sense of scarcity at home and the windfall opportunities arising from colonialism abroad.

People easily forget that during the seventeenth century, western France suffered numerous harvest shortages caused by many factors including nearly perpetual warfare, climatic instability associated with the Little Ice Age, a rising population, and aristocratic control of the means of production (Kennedy, 2014: 30-31). The discovery of the New World and its seemingly unending natural abundance led to new models of management for leveraging markets, knowledge and capital investment in order to create wealth and material comfort (Richards, 2006: 22). The Petit-Poitou Company was part of this movement. However, it is important to recognize that the field of environmental history is sometimes too quick to apply anachronistic definitions of capitalism, modernization and human ecology to past groups and societies (Quenet, 2014: 198). The present article aims to mitigate this risk by employing a micro-historical approach based on original research and sensitive to early modern contexts and terminology. The recorded deliberations of the Company's General Assembly constitute a unique and rich source of documentation that provides an annual description of the Company's activities, concerns, and decisions over the first several decades of its existence. Profit for its own sake and promoting sustainable development were simply not on the agenda in the early modern period.

**Figure 1 Detail of 17<sup>th</sup> Century map of Chaillé-les-Marais and surrounding area, showing some of the drained marshland farms of the Petit-Poitou Company**



Source: Archives départementales de la Vendée

My approach represents the kind of integration of social and environmental history called for by some experts. The drainage of the Poitevin Marsh was a “disruptive process” designed to bring “the natural wealth of the earth under corporate and colonial control” (Mosley, 2006: 927). However, the associates of the Petit-Poitou Company were not conquering a pristine landscape. They brought a particular vision of reality to their work; a pragmatic and subjective view that did not call for

opposing the concepts of ‘cultivated’ and ‘wild’ but rather built on and supplemented past human use of the environment to make it even more productive for their own ends (Ingold, 2011: 23). They sought to make money, of course, but even more important was the privilege, patronage, and prestige that local elites craved in a political order still based on rigid social categories. The Petit-Poitou Company was a means for these elites to challenge the landholding monopoly of the Church and secure their own standing as nobles, lords, and officers (Billaud, 1986: 77).

Simply making it to 1720 was one form of success for the Petit-Poitou Company, given the failure of so many other drainage projects in France. However, the associates achieved much more than this; the initial work had been refined and improved, the books were balanced, most of the farms were productive and generating revenue for associates and tenant farmers alike, and the Company's privileges and autonomy were entrenched. In general, the stakeholders of the Petit-Poitou Company were able to appoint or hire effective leaders, marshal considerable financial and human resources, and use to their advantage the political, fiscal, and legal systems of early modern France. In time, the Company's accomplishments inspired further drainage initiatives in Poitou and elsewhere. The project also had consequences, profoundly changing the landscape and the local economy in ways that did not benefit everyone. How did the Company protect its newly-drained properties while managing environmental change? How did the Company direct its affairs, turn a profit, and resolve disputes? How important was state support for the Company's success? These are some of the questions this article seeks to answer. In so doing, it will contribute not only to our knowledge of the history of early modern France, but also suggest new lines of research integrating social, economic, and environmental history so we can better understand contemporary debates about the use of natural resources, effective management techniques, and the relationship between private enterprise, the state, and local communities.

## DRAINAGE OPERATIONS

The Petit-Poitou Company could not rest on its laurels after draining much of its territory and bringing in the first harvest. If a dyke was breached or a canal obstructed, the consequences could be devastating and widespread. Water flows were managed manually on a daily basis, while construction and repairs were carefully planned and supervised by officials and security agents. I use the term "drainage operations" deliberately to evoke the almost military organization involved, complete with a hierarchical leadership structure that functioned with considerable autonomy and discretion. Statutes, rules, surveillance and upkeep, these were "without a doubt" the "secret" to the Company's longevity (Suire, 2006: 137).

The Company's Master of Dykes (*maître de digues*) was responsible for managing drainage operations. He was an appointed, salaried official who lived on-site in a communal house and his duties included inspecting, repairing, and improving the system of dykes, canals, and dyke doors that protected the marshland farms. The first Master of Dykes was the Sieur de Maisonneuve. His strong work ethic and thorough reports made a profound impression. During the summer of 1648, Maisonneuve visited each individual property in order to determine what work needed to be done. A grateful General Assembly gave him a salary bonus and a horse.<sup>2</sup>

The funds for drainage operations, including salaries, came from annual "contributions" that were set at a flat rate per *arpent* (about one-third of a hectare) of drained marshland. In practice, under most property leases it was the tenant farmers (called *cabaniers*) who were responsible for paying these fees. The Company set an initial rate of 10 *sous* per *arpent* but, in each of its first three years of operations, increases were required to cover costs. In fact, the Company spent at least 10,000 l.t. to repair or improve its

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2 21 mai 1648, août 1647, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.





initial drainage structures during this period alone. The work included adapting and, in some cases, re-digging ditches and canals, reinforcing dykes, and removing man-made and natural obstacles. A critical element of the entire system was the “water doors” (*portes*) - water control mechanisms in the two major evacuator canals (the Clain and the Vienne) that allowed or blocked water flow in and out of the drained area. Most of these doors were gates that were opened and closed on command by hired agents. The “doormen” (*portiers*) were paid to live nearby in constant readiness and to keep their gate in good working order. The original doors were too weak and had to be replaced for both the Clain (in 1649) and the Vienne (in 1655).<sup>3</sup>

All these early problems illustrate the difficulty of applying a theoretical concept to an actual landscape. The Company had to learn as it went. For example, the first experiences of seasonal flooding demonstrated that the exterior ditch (*achéanal*) bordering the pasture of the Abbey of Moreilles was not deep enough, and had to be enlarged to a depth of 15 feet. Furthermore, the belt dyke (*ceinture*) of Maingean had to be reinforced.<sup>4</sup> Innumerable smaller re-adjustments were required. The expertise of the Dutch associates in the Company was a significant help, but drainage operations in Poitou were different from the sea reclamation projects in the Dutch Republic. In the latter, windmills pumped out water in one direction from a relatively uniform below-sea-level landscape, albeit on a massive and intensively managed scale (Richards, 2006: 53). However, in Poitou, water had to be removed but also brought in at different times over a complex terrain that included drained areas, “wet” areas (*marais mouillés*), and the higher elevation “islands” where most of the population lived (Billaud, 1986: 75).

The behaviour of the tenant farmers was another contributing and unanticipated factor. Far from being docile, subordinate peasants, these were experienced farmers with their own entrepreneurial spirit, looking to squeeze every *livre* out of their new leases. Regulating livestock-raising became an issue of permanent concern for the General Assembly. In September, 1653, for example, the associates ordered that all damage caused by livestock be reported and condemned. Superficial repair work was hurriedly undertaken by certain *cabaniers*. The Assembly also ordered a halt to the planting of tobacco (*petun*) and willow trees on the belt dykes.<sup>5</sup> The long, aggressive root systems of willow trees could threaten the structural integrity of the dykes. The concern about tobacco, a shallow plant with an annual crop, was more of a legal issue; tobacco was a New World product subject to a state monopoly and tax. I am not sure how the tenant farmers even had access to tobacco plants, although western France certainly did already have a long tradition of salt smuggling and contraband (Collas, 2000). The General Assembly deliberations reflect the increasingly strong concerns about *cabanier* misbehaviour felt by all those present.

No one anticipated the severity of flooding due to storms during the winter of 1657. An emergency meeting of the General Assembly was called on 23 November 1657 but it was too late to shore up the defences. Even the largest dykes were breached, flooding farms, drowning large numbers of livestock, and forcing many tenant farmers to flee for their lives. Some environmental historians have called for recognition of the place of

3 16 août 1649, 30 avril 1655, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

4 5 mai 1648, 16 août 1649, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

5 23 septembre 1653, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

nature in history (Ingold, 2011: 16). Although the image of a disfigured nature wreaking vengeance upon the Petit-Poitou Company holds a certain romantic appeal, the 1657 flood crisis is far more revealing when used as a prism for examining the resilience and response of humans in constant interaction with their environment. Other drainage projects had failed over far less. But the Company's associates were chiefly local officials and landowners and they had staked their livelihood on success. They decided to rebuild.

An emergency fund of 3,000 l.t. was raised in order to re-establish the crucial perimeter dykes, and the rest of the year was spent repairing the extensive damage. The associates also hired a new Master of Dykes – le Sieur de Gargouilleau – who immediately set out upon an ambitious and expensive reconstruction project featuring a complete overhaul of the two major evacuator canals and the replacement of several of the principal dyke doors.<sup>6</sup> Gargouilleau had been enticed away from similar responsibilities at the newly-established and rival drainage project of the *Seigneur* of Champagné. Encouraged by these efforts, just two years later, the Company embarked on an extension of drainage operations to the north.<sup>7</sup> The Company clearly blamed humans, not nature, for the flooding disaster; Gargouilleau prevailed upon the General Assembly to hire a number of security guards specifically to patrol the belt dykes (*gardes-ceintures*) and enforce regulations concerning livestock. They also bought a boat so that the Master of Dykes could inspect not only the drained marshland but also conditions in the “wet” marshes outside the belt dykes.<sup>8</sup>

The Petit-Poitou Company proved its resilience, its ability to learn from the past, and its effective leadership model in the aftermath of the 1657 flooding. In 1672, for example, the Master of Dykes pre-emptively ordered the belt dykes reinforced due to early summer rains that swelled water levels in the “wet” marshes, months before the flooding threat in the drained areas could come to a peak. This time the Company was ready when the water crested in December. Furthermore, complacency and corruption among the guards was not tolerated; many of them were fired and replaced in 1675.<sup>9</sup> Of course, there were always limits to what surveillance could achieve. For example, in 1677, a section of the canal of Autize caused localized flooding after a buildup of sediment went undetected for several months, while in 1679 several *cabanes* were flooded in another area when water spilled out due to a malfunctioning dyke door.<sup>10</sup> As the next section details, the Master of Dykes and his team were also frequently hampered by a lack of money, as was the case in 1692 when several dyke doors needed to be replaced but the funds were simply not available.<sup>11</sup>

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6 23 novembre 1657, 19 décembre 1657, 2 avril 1658, 16 août 1658, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

7 20 juillet 1659, 15 septembre 1659, 5 novembre 1659, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

8 5 novembre 1659, 27 mars 1664, 16 août 1666, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

9 17 août 1672, 26 octobre 1675, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

10 17 août 1677, 17 août 1679, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

11 18 septembre 1692, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.





## COLLECTING THEIR DUE

The non-payment of annual “contributions” was the primary cause of shortages of funds for upkeep and repair. This issue had plagued the Company from its inception. For example, Louise de Bessay de la Chevrotière, one of the top ten shareholders, believed that her land allotment was too low and she withheld all fees until her appeal was resolved.<sup>12</sup> In response to this and other challenges, the Company ordered a new general survey of the entire territory in 1652, a project that was unfortunately delayed when the chosen surveyor suddenly died.<sup>13</sup> La Chevrotière’s case was not resolved until 1660 when a compromise was reached and she agreed to pay back the outstanding dues at a reduced rate.<sup>14</sup> Property disputes continued to sow discord throughout the seventeenth century. In 1688, the Director called for a new inventory of deeds and leases to help sort out contested inheritances after the deaths of several of the original associates.<sup>15</sup> The issue of subdivided inheritances had led to considerable confusion by the early eighteenth century (Billaud, 1986: 78).

In another particularly egregious case, an associate failed to pay any fees for seven years, claiming that he had a “previous arrangement” with the Director. He must have had proof because the General Assembly voted to forgive his debt of 850 l.t. on condition that he paid from then on.<sup>16</sup> Late payments were widespread: the Assembly threatened to seize the livestock of *cabaniers* in arrears as early as 1652.<sup>17</sup> In fact, defaults were contributing factors in the flooding crisis of 1657. In both 1652 and 1656, the Director declared that there was no money left in the Company’s accounts to meet ongoing requirements.<sup>18</sup> In the fall of 1657, a frustrated Maisonneuve reported that the Company owed him over 3,500 l.t. because he had put up his own money to cover the most urgent repairs.<sup>19</sup> Maisonneuve nevertheless became the scapegoat and was replaced as Master of Dykes, but he did not go quietly, taking the Company to court over his unpaid salary and expenses. In 1661, the royal court at Fontenay-le-Comte ordered that he be paid over 4,000 l.t. plus interest. Unable to pay the full amount, the Company then offered him his job back. In 1664, Maisonneuve retired definitively, and the following year he received 2,000 l.t. as part of a final settlement package.<sup>20</sup>

The problems arising from late or non-payment of fees continued, despite the lessons learned during the 1650s. There was even an emergency levy in 1675 to cover the outstanding salaries of Company officials and guards.<sup>21</sup> In 1677, the Director and

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12 2 juillet 1652, 23 septembre 1653, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

13 2 juillet 1652, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

14 5 novembre 1659, 15 septembre 1660, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

15 17 août 1688, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

16 23 septembre 1653, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

17 9 septembre 1652, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

18 2 juillet 1652, 26 mai 1656, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

19 15 septembre 1657, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

20 Novembre 1662, 19 septembre 1664, 5 octobre 1665, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

21 8 janvier 1675, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

Master of Dykes again reported paying out over 2,200 l.t. to cover urgent repair needs, while a particularly boisterous General Assembly later that year pitted associates who regularly paid their fees against those deemed to be consistent offenders.<sup>22</sup> This may have been a turning point. After 1677, there are only sporadic mentions of outstanding unpaid fees in the register of deliberations. In addition, the Company was able to reduce fee rates to less than half those of the early years because the major work had been completed and a larger number of cabanes (tenant farms) were leased and productive. In the budget for 1717, the Company declared that it had collected the full 2,680 l.t. in annual fees for that year as well as 218 l.t. from previous years. There was still work to be done, however; eight of the Company's 101 tenant farms (*cabanes*) had been seized for non-payment of fees over three consecutive years and an additional 1,300 l.t. in back-payments remained outstanding.<sup>23</sup> Even so, defaults on annual fees had ceased to be a crippling problem.

## POLICING THE TENANTS

Although the minutes of the General Assembly tended to be written in a dispassionate style, issues like the non-payment of fees clearly aggravated Company officials who, in some cases, used their own personal funds to deal with emergency requirements. However, nothing enraged the associates more than the destructive behaviour of some of the Company's tenant farmers. Neglect of Company property by bad tenants, or damage, especially by their livestock, threatened everyone because of the close interrelationship between the farms and the network of dykes, canals, and dyke doors. While the General Assembly expressed its concern about livestock as early as 1653, the matter seems to have come to a head during the 1670s, as did the issue of non-payment of fees. In 1675, the assembly decried the ravages of unsupervised livestock "incessantly on the dykes" and fired all the guards, ordering the Director to replace them with more efficient personnel.<sup>24</sup> These new guards must have been more vigilant because the following year the Master of Dykes reported that several confrontations with tenants had occurred. There was a lot of shouting, and a few situations became violent. The resolve of the General Assembly remained firm. They ordered the guards to carry arms and gave them the right to kill on the spot any livestock found on the dykes.<sup>25</sup> This extreme justice seems to have provoked dissent even among the associates, who were often the owners of the livestock. Two years later, the General Assembly revised this policy, ordering that the guards only seize the livestock, then go to the Director for a final decision.<sup>26</sup> This practice seemed to suffice for a time. However, in 1692, the guards were again replaced due to perceived negligence and an automatic fine of 1 écu (three l.t.) was levied for each head of livestock found on the dykes.<sup>27</sup>

22 3 juin 1677, 17 août 1677, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

23 1717, «Budget,» Comptabilité, Association syndicale du marais du Petit-Poitou, Série 135 J, AD Vendée.

24 26 octobre 1675, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

25 16 août 1676, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

26 17 août 1678, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

27 17 août 1692, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.



It is unclear why so many tenants chose to let their livestock loose on the dykes. Since most tenants were leasing the livestock (often from the associates), they certainly wanted to collect their share of meat, milk, and wool with the least effort possible. Some *cabanes* (tenant farms) may have had limited access to pasture, so it could have been difficult to transport and/or supervise the animals. Letting animals roam free might also have saved money on hay or fodder, particularly during the winter. Some tenant farmers showed remarkable ingenuity in squeezing the most revenue possible out of their *cabanes*. In addition to tobacco smuggling, the General Assembly was also combating unauthorized fishing and woodcutting. These activities infringed on the property rights of the associates, and could potentially affect drainage operations, with fishing nets obstructing water flow and floating logs creating jams and barriers.<sup>28</sup>

The Petit-Poitou Company changed significantly after the 1657 floods and through the 1670s as a second generation of associates and tenant farmers took charge. Through the deliberations of the General Assembly and the actions of the director and his staff, the Company was able to curtail the worst excesses of bad tenants and delinquent associates. Increased vigilance and harsher penalties for violating the statutes were an important part of this success. However, there were clear limits to these strategies. Dyke guards could not be everywhere and it was difficult to force people to obey rules. If the guards acted too arbitrarily, the associates themselves balked in defense of their individual rights as property-owners. Furthermore, if the Company had simply evicted every tenant who broke a rule or every associate who was late on a fee payment, there would have been no one left to develop Company properties. The Company needed its shareholders and its farmers, so it also had to work through consensus and goodwill. This was best accomplished by consultation through the General Assembly, keeping annual fees low, often five sols per *arpent* or less during the 1670s and 1680s, and ensuring that continued expansion and improvement benefited all.

## DEFENDING COMPANY PRIVILEGES

At the same time that the Petit-Poitou Company was struggling to manage drainage operations and police its associates and tenants, it also had to fight to protect its privileges, especially exemptions from state taxes and the tithe system (*dîme*). These exemptions were a considerable boon in the early stages of development of the Company and made it easier to recruit associates and tenant farmers. The principal tax in seventeenth-century France was the *taille*, a sort of poll-tax dating back to the medieval era, but that had since been modified to include a lump sum package of annual taxes assigned to each parish (Kennedy, 2014: 74-75). The Petit-Poitou Company obtained a twenty-year exemption from these taxes, beginning in 1641.<sup>29</sup> However, local parishes tried to include the new *cabanes* (tenant farms) on their tax registers. They began by targeting the associates, as can be seen when, in 1648, the Company secured a court ruling protecting its members from the tax collectors of Chaillé-les-Marais.<sup>30</sup> By 1655, the parish assemblies of Chaillé-les-Marais, Champagné, and Sainte-Radegonde-des-Noyers had changed tactics, targeting the tenant farmers

28 17 août 1677, 17 août 1688, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

29 4 mai 1641, «Déclaration du Roy contenant les privileges accordez pour le desseichement des marais des Provinces de Poictou, Xaintonge & Aulnix,» F-21045 (23), Bibliothèque nationale de France.

30 21 mai 1648, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

instead. The General Assembly was advised that many of the tenants had been bullied into paying.<sup>31</sup> The Petit-Poitou Company successfully lobbied the government to renew its tax exempt status in 1659, and the new edict specified that the exemption covered both the associates and their tenant farmers. Any parish attempting to tax either group would be subject to a fine of 1,000 l.t..<sup>32</sup>

The minutes of the General Assembly reveal that royal support did not come cheaply. The Company secured an influential patron, Antoine III de Gramont, a favoured Minister of State who had recently been elevated to the titles of Duke and Marshal of France (Bluche, 2004: 107, 135). While the Duke appears to have been interested in drainage projects, his support was secured more concretely by regular financial outlays – amounting to 26,050 l.t. between 1655 and 1659.<sup>33</sup> These were significant amounts of money, nearly three times the total annual fees owed to the Company during the same five-year period. Clearly, the tax exemption status mattered. By 1659, the Company had opened a new office in Paris to manage its creditors and maintain its influence at court.<sup>34</sup> The payments to Gramont continued until at least 1667; he died in 1678.<sup>35</sup>

The power of the Gramont family over the Petit-Poitou Company did not end there. In 1685, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Louis XIV ordered the confiscation of all Dutch property in the kingdom. This included about thirty per cent of the Petit-Poitou Company's holdings, despite the fact that the associates concerned, such as the Hoeufft family, had been naturalized French.<sup>36</sup> Gramont's son, Antoine Charles IV, Comte de Guiche, was gifted these properties and thus instantly became the Company's largest associate. It was a rich reward for a royal favourite (Bluche, 2004: 557). As late as 1717, some of those properties were still in the hands of various royal officials, although it appears that certain families had achieved partial restitution.<sup>37</sup>

Parish priests were as aggressive as tax collectors in their pursuit of the tithe, a payment of about 1/12th of the harvest (the amount varied regionally in France). The Company had obtained a ten-year exemption beginning in 1646, but the clergy argued that the arrival of 250 new families to work on the new marshland farms increased their work and expenses significantly.<sup>38</sup> This was undoubtedly true; some of the parishes saw their populations double as a result of this immigration. Once again, the Company's influence at court seems to have worked in its favour, as the exemption was renewed through the 1660s. Beginning in 1670 and continuing through 1688, a series of court

31 22 oct 1655, 6 décembre 1655, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

32 1659, «Renouvellement de la déclaration du roi du mai 1641,» Extrait des Registres de la Cour des Aides, copy preserved in the Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

33 22 octobre 1655, septembre 1656, 2 avril 1658, 5 novembre 1659, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

34 15 septembre 1659, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

35 3 février 1667, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

36 «Pièces relatives aux marais du Petit-Poitou confisqués à cause de la guerre,» C17 Intendance de Poitiers, Archives départementales de la Vienne (Poitiers).

37 «Mémoire pour servir d'éclaircissement aux biens appartenant aux descendants et représentants Jean Hoeufft hollandais situé dans les marais de Petit-Poitou et de Champagné» (1705), C17 Intendance de Poitiers, AD Vienne.

38 23 septembre 1653, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.



cases pitted Company lawyers against representatives of the Church. A compromise agreement of 1/50th (2 per cent) of the grain harvest was accepted, then rejected, by local clergy. After the priests won a decision ruling that the entire tithe of 1/12th be paid, the Company appealed to the *Parlement de Paris*, the highest court in the land and won a significant reduction in the annual fees.<sup>39</sup>

## BATTLING THE LORDS

Disputes with local lords (*seigneurs*) similarly involved lengthy court cases and appeals to patrons. The most serious involved the Abbot of Moreilles, the lord who had provided about three-quarters of the Company's marshland territory in 1642.<sup>40</sup> Under this agreement on the use of a property (called a *baillette*), the Abbot retained considerable seigneurial rights. He was owed the annual *cens et rentes* which acknowledged the lord's "eminent ownership" of the land (Kennedy, 2014: 147). This was a small payment set at the rate of 1 *sol* per *arpent*: about 700 l.t. in total. More significantly, the Abbot also retained the right to a 1/12th portion of the harvest, called a "*terrage*", and was further entitled to retain his own marshland farm of approximately 35 hectares. For its part, the Company was obliged to drain and cultivate two-thirds of the marshland as well as to maintain routes and bridges throughout the territory for the monastery's livestock and shepherds.

The five Cistercian members of the monastery already "lived pretty well" on an annual revenue of 20,000 l.t. (Dugast-Matifeux, 1865: 84). Conceding marshland that was little used in return for significant annual payments in money and grain was certainly in the Abbot's interest. However, in 1653, the Abbot claimed that the *terrage* for that year had not been paid.<sup>41</sup> Two years later, the Abbot and the Company disagreed on the amount due for the *cens et rentes*. In a fit of pique, the Abbot sent his estate manager, the Sieur de Corneilles, to seize five Company horses. The Abbot also reminded the Company of its obligation to preserve clear passage through the marshland for his shepherds, citing the poor condition of several bridges over major canals.<sup>42</sup> The dispute continued for several years and eventually wound up in the Châtelet de Paris, which pronounced in favour of the Abbot in 1659.<sup>43</sup>

Unwilling to admit defeat, the Company appealed to the Parlement de Paris in 1664, sending the director and a select team of "businessmen" to argue their case. The dispute dragged on, with the Parlement requesting additional information in 1669. In a rare display of emotion, the General Assembly recorded that "the incompetence of the Abbot had to be revealed" and that François Brisson, the man who had negotiated the original agreement with Moreilles, would be sent to answer the magistrates' questions.<sup>44</sup> After hearing Brisson, the Parlement decided to appoint a team of lawyers to arbitrate the

39 6 novembre 1670 to 19 octobre 1688, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

40 10 janvier 1642, « Baillette de la Société de Petit-Poitou avec l'Abbé de Moreilles, » copy in Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

41 23 septembre 1653, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

42 19 mars 1655, 6 décembre 1655, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

43 4 décembre 1658, 15 septembre 1659, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

44 20 avril 1664, 31 août 1669, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

dispute, and they in turn sent surveyors to confirm the boundaries of the land concerned. The timely intercession of another Company patron, the newly promoted *premier medecin du roi*, Antoine D'Aquin, led to a compromise agreement in 1673. The court upheld the Abbot's rights to seigneurial dues, but found that he had greatly exaggerated the amount of land conceded. Instead of the almost 5,000 hectares claimed, only about 3,300 hectares of marshland had been given. In other words, the court found that the Abbot had short-changed the Company approximately 1,700 hectares in 1642. Clearly, Moreilles was on the losing end of this deal.<sup>45</sup> That the Abbot was unhappy at being forced to accept the settlement is apparent from his subsequent actions. The following year, he returned to the issue of safe passage through the marshland.<sup>46</sup> His successor tried another tack in 1691, accusing the Company of failing to cultivate two-thirds of the drained area, as specified in the original agreement.<sup>47</sup>

While the dispute with Moreilles was about money, conflicts with neighbouring areas threatened the Company's drainage operations more directly. Livestock from neighbouring communities that wandered (or were deliberately released) onto the dykes could be just as destructive as animals belonging to the Company's own tenant farmers, while the depredations of the "*habitants des bois*" who engaged in illegal hunting and fishing on Company territory were considered particularly heinous.<sup>48</sup> Some communities were upset about how the Company's dyke and canal constructions re-directed water, causing flooding or, in some cases, summer drought, for everyone else. A few, like the residents of Chaillé-les-Marais, resorted to sabotage to get their point across.<sup>49</sup>

The most serious threats involved local *seigneurs* who, no doubt inspired by the Company's success, decided to drain their own marshlands. One example is the Count of Marans, who obstructed the exterior ditch along one of the Company's perimeter dykes as part of his own construction in 1655, causing localized flooding. The eventual solution was to bring the Count in as an associate, merging his drained marshland into the Company's network of constructions in exchange for the usual annual fees.<sup>50</sup> No such amicable agreement was possible with the *Seigneur* of Champagné. His plans to drain a large marshland area to the west threatened to "absolutely ruin" the Company, according to the General Assembly of 1658. This was a complicated matter because some of the associates were involved with both projects – and the Company had just coaxed away Champagné's leading engineer to become its new Master of Dykes. It seems that Champagné grew impatient with the long court battles, because in 1677 he sabotaged the Company's perimeter dyke and also barricaded several canals.<sup>51</sup> After the lord's death, his son carried on the

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45 8 janvier 1675, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

46 17 août 1674, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

47 21 juillet 1691, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

48 23 septembre 1653, 16 août 1676, 17 août 1687, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

49 6 décembre 1655, 17 août 1679, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée; Suire, *Le Marais poitevin*, 97, 121.

50 6 décembre 1655, 5 octobre 1665, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

51 30 septembre 1658, 16 octobre 1658, 3 juin 1677, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.





fight well into the 1690s, pursuing the matter all the way to Paris.<sup>52</sup> Once again, the Company's patrons came to its aid, and the court confirmed the Company's land rights and fiscal privileges. While Champagné could do as he wished on his own lands, he could not legally interfere with the Company's drainage operations.<sup>53</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The detailed annual report of the Petit-Poitou Company in 1717 presents the image of a successful enterprise with a balanced budget, productive farms, and effective drainage operations. This financial independence, along with adept political manoeuvring, ensured that the Company enjoyed considerable and virtually exclusive power over its domain (Billaud, 1986: 82). This success was less about human's predetermined conquest over nature, and more about the ongoing evolution of people's ways of life in the Poitevin Marsh, reflecting the ambitions and needs specific to the early modern period. Perhaps the real secret to the success of the Petit-Poitou Company at this time was how it positioned itself in relation to the ambitions and needs of a range of social orders and groups, along with its ability to learn and adapt over time by leveraging the knowledge, capital, and influence of its associates.

Success is a complex concept closely linked to that of agency. Did the associates, tenant farmers, and other actors in this historical tableau achieve their goals? Although some individuals failed or gave up along the way, the overall answer is "yes". Of course, success can also be evaluated in the longer term and by different criteria applied retrospectively, such as sustainability. Some experts have emphasized the social and environmental disruptions caused by the Company's drainage operations as well as the reduced agricultural production experienced later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This led, for example, to the adoption of a fallow rotation system and, later, a concentration on livestock-raising (Billaud, 1986: 80).

Debates about human agency have shown that our intentions and decisions "do not emerge in a vacuum" (Nash, 2005: 69). For example, the Petit-Poitou Company would not have been possible if the region selected had not been able to support further colonization (Quenet, 2014: 198). This article sheds light on the particular vision that shaped and constrained the agency of the Petit-Poitou Company. In the minds of Company associates, there was no fundamental opposition between nature and culture. Their project was about enhancing their livelihood (Giblett, 2014: 21) and achieving very specific ambitions: the ambition of local elites to break the medieval landholding monopoly of the Church, the ambition of French and Dutch financiers to increase their wealth and influence, the ambition of the State to improve productivity, the ambition of ordinary farmers to secure a better way of life. But people need more than ambitions to act; agency requires ideas and the conditions necessary for those ideas to be manifested. Previous studies that have looked at four centuries of marshland farming in Poitou have tended to put the emphasis on long-term perspectives based on assumptions about human rationality, the importance of technological expertise, and the gradual evolution of contemporary capitalist ideals (Suire, 2006: 140). From this point of view, a similar end result would have occurred one way or another.

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52 26 juin 1688, 26 avril 1694, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

53 10 novembre 1698, Registre de délibérations, La Société de Petit-Poitou, AD Vendée.

However, this present article's focus on the difficult process and period of management that followed the initial drainage project challenges these assumptions. There was nothing inevitable about the emergence of a successful, stable Company by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Success was far from likely during this period of experimentation, failure, conflict, and frequent transitions. The very survival of the Petit-Poitou Company was far from assured, in light of the disastrous flooding of 1657, bitter internal conflicts during the 1660s and 1670s, Louis XIV's seizure of almost a third of Company property after 1685, and serious legal challenges from regional competitors. To understand this improbable success, at a time when so many other drainage projects sorely failed, we need to examine the particular challenges and solutions of this crucial period.

I began this article with three specific questions. First, how did the Company protect its newly-drained properties while managing environmental change? At first, it did not. The initial designs were flawed. The major evacuation canals were not deep or wide enough. Several of the dyke gates and doors were too frail. The perimeter dykes were not high enough. The proof was the flooding disaster of 1657. And even if the Company had been more proactive, money was just not there and officials had already gone into debt just to keep up with routine maintenance. Sometimes, it is through failure that we learn the most. The disaster galvanized the associates into collecting emergency funds and starting over, hiring a more knowledgeable Master of Dykes to be responsible for the work, and creating a surveillance and security structure to enforce regulations. This in turn sparked a power struggle within the Company, one that could easily have torn it apart. But the new initiatives worked and most of the associates decided to support this success. Over time, greater collaboration resulted in lower annual fees that were more consistently paid and easier for the tenant farmers to bear.

How did the Company direct its affairs, turn a profit, and resolve disputes? The General Assembly was not a radical departure from previous local governance models. Parish assemblies that brought together local heads of household had existed in western France for centuries (Kennedy, 2014: 187). However, the Company's General Assembly was an exclusive and robust corporate body that empowered the associates to address questions and concerns and resolve disagreements of their own initiative. The directorship changed every one to two years and the favouritism that had marred the initial meetings soon gave way to a more professional culture. The General Assembly set the conditions, but the officials and staff who ran daily operations were the real glue that held the Company together. An ineffective Master of Dykes would be replaced, a corrupt or negligent guard would be fired, and tenant farmers who consistently broke the statutes were prosecuted. The entire solvency of the operation rested on consistent and sufficient annual fees to cover the costs of drainage. Once this was achieved, the associates could profit individually from the regular revenue they received by leasing their properties. A typical marshland farm in Petit-Poitou secured an annual lease of 500 *livres* by the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>54</sup> In short, the Company provided a viable framework for individual associates to make money and enjoy the privileges and prestige that came with land ownership. The economic benefits of this initiative extended beyond the associates and tenant farmers to the Company's guards, doormen, and workers, as well as a host of local traders and artisans.

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<sup>54</sup> Fonds notariaux, Jean Sernin, étude de Chaillé-les-Marais, 1700-1712, série 3E 51/28, AD Vendée.



How important was state support for the Company's success? My article comparing marshland farming in Acadia and Poitou downplayed this factor in the early success of marshland drainage projects (Kennedy, 2013: 66). While tax exemptions were certainly good incentives, the initial work relied on local expertise, organization, and manpower. However, the analysis I propose in the current article, looking at the following seventy years in Poitou, demonstrates that state support, both officially through privileges granted, and also unofficially by influencing favourable court decisions, could be critical to the Company's survival. Not everyone was happy with the Petit-Poitou Company; many fishermen, woodcutters, and trappers were displaced, while some local farmers faced flooding or drought because of how the Company's drainage operations changed water flows. Local *seigneurs* and parishes grew resentful of the Company's privileges and profits. But when these groups appealed to state officials and courts, their claims would almost invariably be rejected. The crucial importance of these factors should not be underestimated. If those decisions had gone against the Company, it would have faced mounting financial obligations for taxes, tithes, seigneurial dues, and compensation to its neighbours.

The Company clearly recognized that patronage was important. During the 1650s, as the General Assembly reported mounting bills and unpaid fees, the associates borrowed large sums of money in order to secure a powerful patron who had the king's ear. Even with all their work in ruins after the floods of 1657, they saw to it that the Duke of Gramont received his annual payment. Gramont did not disappoint. He not only ensured that the Company's tax exemptions were renewed and extended to include its tenant farmers, he (and others) also worked behind the scenes to ensure that the Parlement de Paris resolved critical disputes in the Company's favour. Little was said about these payments in the minutes of the General Assembly. We might call them bribes, but the associates clearly felt that this was smart business. Early modern notions of corruption were quite different from our own (Kettering, 1986: 192). Gramont no doubt saw the payments as intrinsic to his privileged status, while the associates understood that success came at a price.

This study of the formative period of the Petit-Poitou Company highlights the value of microhistorical approaches based on original research to contribute to our understanding of human interaction with the environment. While theory can help situate events in relation to long-term historical processes, the detailed analysis of original documents in their own space and time can shed light on the motivations, goals, and decisions of actors on the stage of history as they respond to immediate and multiple contexts. In other words, archival research of this kind can potentially reconcile "human intentionality" with the "actor-networks" that shaped those intentions (Nash, 2005: 67), thereby creating a better understanding of the role of agency in our past history.

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