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ROADS IN NEW FRANCE AND THE POLICY OF EXPANSION

By G. DET. GLAZEBROOK

There is little need to stress the importance of transportation in a new country; and, indeed, writers from Parkman on have called up vivid pictures of the problems that faced the people of New France in long and short journeys through what was, to European eyes, little more than a wilderness. Each new colonial area to which Europeans found their way offered peculiar advantages and peculiar disadvantages for travel; a study of these conditions offers one avenue to the understanding of the manner in which each colony developed.

The successive French explorers who sailed up the St. Lawrence found themselves on a system of water communication such as they had never seen, and never imagined. Even now it is not easy to think of the St. Lawrence as a river or of Superior as a lake, although they are described in every book on geography. But the shock of surprise was not so great that the invading French failed to see the value of this extraordinary chain of lakes and rivers in a land where thick forests ran from the shore of one to the shore of the next. Their own vessels, they found, could be sailed up to Quebec, or—with greater difficulty—to Montreal; and from where the Lachine Rapids created the first barrier, smaller craft could be paddled, rowed, carried, or dragged to successive reaches of navigable water. The St. Lawrence system was gradually revealed and proved to cover astonishing distances. From Montreal the Ottawa route could be followed to Sault Ste. Marie; or lower Ontario could be crossed by the Trent Valley or the Toronto portage; or, again, the lower lakes could be followed to Detroit and thence north. To the further west, south-west, and north-west fresh chains of rivers and lakes took the enterprising French travellers to the Gulf of Mexico or within sight of the Rocky Mountains. In no other colony could there be found greater facilities for water transportation than in New France.

There were, however, limitations to the use of these facilities. Of these the most obvious was that even in New France navigable waters could not be found to lead everywhere. As a partial solution of this difficulty, the French made their settlements to a very large extent on the banks of the rivers. A second limitation arose out of the many breaks in water communication, consisting of rapids, falls, or breaks caused by the heights of land. To meet this problem, the French adapted to their purposes the Indian method of portaging, and learnt from the natives, too, the art of running rapids. Thirdly, was the fact that the northern climate of Canada prevented the use of even the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence for six months of the year.

It was, therefore, inevitable that there should be some travel by land. To some extent this could be accomplished without the building of roads: the old Indian trails were followed on foot in summer and on snowshoes in winter. When the rivers were frozen over, they could be used both for foot-travel and for sleighs. But there still remained transportation requirements which could be met only by roads. Owing to the natural conditions of the country, there was necessarily a reluctance to embark on any ambitious programme of road-building. The continuous forests

entailed not only the heavy preliminary work of cutting down trees and removing stumps, but also made it particularly difficult to get dry surfaces. Many streams called for bridge-building or ferries. The winter made travel by road easier rather than harder, but the spring meant a long period of deep mud. Added to the natural difficulties were the small number and the scattered settlement of the population.

Yet roads were built, and built in greater numbers than has generally been recognized. One significant aspect of travel by road may be noted at this point. Transportation by water involved little departure from the traditional methods employed by the Indians. The keeled boat and the use of the oar were new, but of much greater value to the French was the Indian bark canoe. In land travel, however, the newcomers introduced radical innovations. Not only was the road itself unknown in the St. Lawrence Valley, but the wheel had never been invented by the natives; and the wheel may be regarded as one of the most influential inventions of any age. With wheeled vehicles came horses. These were not native to Canada, and although La Vérendrye found some horses in the course of his travel in the West, these had presumably come from the Spanish colonies; thus it was from the French that Canada first received this most useful of domestic animals.

The appearance of roads is one of the first signs of civilization, and marks in the new world the rise of European economy. In the early years of New France there were few roads indeed, and no serious attempt was made to build them until after it had become a royal province in 1663. Then, when it became the policy of the government to encourage immigration, agriculture, and settlements, it naturally followed that the construction of roads had to be handled in an organized way.

The administration of roads, bridges, and ferries was under an official styled the "grand voyer",¹ the name being taken from an official in France with similar functions. The first *grand voyer* of New France was appointed in 1667. He was responsible for both new works and the maintenance of old ones, whether in town or country. Roads could be initiated either by the *grand voyer* or the inhabitants, but in any case there was a meeting between them. If the people of a district were dissatisfied with the *grand voyer's* policy, they could protest to the intendant. The authority of the *grand voyer* consisted in ordinances issued by the intendant. While the *grand voyer* was accustomed to go over the ground himself, and while the ordinances issued on his behalf were in some detail, he had various subordinates who saw that the work which had been called for was satisfactorily done. The assistants were in some cases deputy *grand voyers* and in others *commis*. In addition, the captains of militia were drawn in, as in other aspects of local administration. An ordinance of 1730 instructs captains, lieutenants, and other officers of militia to have repair work constantly done on the roads and bridges in their district,² and individual ordinances instruct captains of militia to look after particular roads.

For the most part the labour for the construction and repair of roads and bridges was supplied under the *corvée*, known as the King's *corvée*

¹For the office of the *grand voyer*, see I, Caron, "Historique de la voirie dans la Province de Québec" (*Bulletin des recherches historiques*, vol. XXXIX, no. 4, pp. 198-215).

²P. G. Roy, *Inventaire des procès-verbaux des grands voyers conservés aux Archives de la Province de Québec* (6 vols., Beauceville, 1932), vol. I, p. 49.

to distinguish it from the farm work due to the seigneurs.³ The general principle was that each habitant was responsible for working on the road in front of his own land, but as frontages were short, the obligation was not unduly burdensome. The number of days of *corvée* was fixed by the ordinance in each case. The *corvée* could be commuted for a small sum, in the manner of the later statute labour in Ontario. There were, however, not a few cases where road-work was evaded, and for recalcitrants fines were provided, ranging from 30 sous to 20 livres. Sometimes the money thus collected was given to the local church, and sometimes it was used as wages for road-work. In general it is hard to say how far road-building was done by hired labour, but there were certainly cases in which it was done in this way rather than by *corvée*. Peter Kalm speaks of seeing 250 men at work on a new road near Fort St. John, and says that they were paid 30 sous per day and their keep.⁴ It is probably a safe assumption that where roads were built through unsettled districts, in which there were no inhabitants on whom to levy *corvée*, labourers were brought in and paid by the day; but that in settled districts, most of the road-work was done by *corvée*. In 1708, the minister suggested to Vaudreuil that soldiers should be used in road construction,⁵ but there is no record of this being done, although it was a common device of the British government, especially in Nova Scotia.

In addition to the ordinary work of construction and repair, the inhabitants had special duties, only some of which could be done on the regular days of *corvée*. To mark the course of the road in winter each farmer was obliged to mark (*baliser*) the road along his frontage, and so save travellers from being lost. An ordinance of 1729 orders all those who live on the main roads to place poles (*balises*) at intervals of 24 feet and of not less than 6 feet in height. A fine of 6 livres was provided for failure to obey, and corporal punishment for removing the poles.⁶ Another ordinance, in 1727, gives the minimum height of poles as 8 feet and the number as three per arpent of frontage.⁷ On the smaller lakes, which were frozen, *balises* made of small pine trees were placed so as to show the path to be taken.⁸ Each inhabitant, too, must beat down the snow in front of his house so that sleighs could get through, and the road be marked. In 1727, the intendant ingeniously ordered that every person must lead his cattle up and down the road in front of his farm to trample down the snow.⁹

Such was the part played by the people in building and maintaining roads. What was the extent of roads built during the French régime? This is a difficult question to answer in view of the striking lack of evidence in either documents or maps. It is only possible, therefore, to put together what little evidence exists. There were a few local roads before the middle of the seventeenth century, for they are mentioned in contemporary accounts; but it appears that they were not of much significance. An examination of the number of ordinances issued on behalf

³W. B. Munro, *The Seigniorial System in Canada: A Study in French Colonial Policy* (New York, 1907), p. 132.

⁴P. Kalm, *Travels into North America* (2 vols., London, 1772), vol. II, p. 219.

⁵Caron, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁶Roy, *Inventaire*, vol. I, p. 46.

⁷*Edits, Ordonnances royales . . .* (Quebec, 1854), vol. III, p. 455.

⁸Franquet, *Voyages et mémoires sur le Canada* (reprinted in the *Report of the Institut-Canadien* for 1890), pp. 80, 130.

⁹*Edits, Ordonnances royales . . .*, vol. III, p. 455.

of the *grand voyers* shows little increase of activity in relation to roads from the establishment of that office until the eighteenth century.¹⁰ In the first four years, 1667-70, there were only three ordinances; then a gap until 1683, when there were three; another gap until 1688, when there was one; one in each of the two succeeding years; a gap until 1706, when there were six. From then on the numbers are larger, and in the years 1667-1763 there were in all 864 ordinances on the subject.

The two principal highways in New France were those which ran along the shores of the St. Lawrence. The reason for this is obvious: the river was the chief focus of settlement, and a road parallel to it would therefore serve the maximum of people, and at the same time run through land which was for the most part already cleared. Since all the principal towns were on the north shore, the road on that side was completed first. It was, of course, built in sections, some of which were the first roads in New France. It was, however, toward the end of the French régime before a through route was established. In 1727, Dupuy could still write that, "there is no road by land from Quebec to Montreal. This is a great inconvenience and an obstacle to the establishment of the colony. It sometimes takes a month to and from Montreal, according to the wind."¹¹ A few years later, however, under the energetic administration of Lanoullier, the gaps were filled up, and by 1734 carriages could go from Quebec to Three Rivers in four days.¹² In 1735, Lanoullier wrote that he had driven in a carriage during the summer from Montreal to Quebec in four and a half days.¹³ Franquet travelled from Quebec to Montreal in a carriole and described the road as in general "assez bon".¹⁴ The north shore road went as far east as Cap Tourmente where the frowning mountain made further building impossible.

The road along the south shore was intended to serve agricultural areas almost entirely. Like its companion across the river, it was built in sections, but unlike the north-shore road, it was not completed in the French period. According to the Murray map of 1763, the south-shore road ran from Pointe à Caron in the district of St. Roch des Aulnaies, continuing through Lévis to a point opposite the River Batiscan; after a gap there was a small section at Gentilly; a further gap and a section from L'Dorval to Ste. Angèle de Laval; a gap to Nicolet; a road from there to Baie St. François; a gap, and a short section at Sorel; a gap to opposite Lanoraie, whence a road to the Lachine Rapids. West of Lachine, only a short section on the south shore of Lake St. Louis had been completed.

For the shore roads and other main roads probably the most accurate record available is the map which was drawn up under Murray's orders by the engineers of the invading army. From it we can see that a road paralleled the Richelieu River from a point about fifteen miles south of Sorel to St. Jean. This connected with a road running across country from Laprairie, which was begun in 1739 partly to lead to Fort Chambly, and partly to open up the country. Roads, too, are shown in the neighbourhood of Montreal; and north of Quebec is a perfect network. A

¹⁰Roy, *Inventaire*.

¹¹H. A. Innis, *Select Documents in Canadian Economic History, 1497-1783* (Toronto, 1929), p. 396.

¹²E. Salome, *La colonisation de la Nouvelle-France* (Paris, n.d.), p. 372.

¹³Lanoullier de Boisclerc to Minister, Oct. 31, 1735. C¹A, vol. 64, p. 110, Public Archives of Canada.

¹⁴Franquet, *op. cit.*

road, too, ran beside the Chaudière, though its exact length is not clear on the map. There was also a road leading to the St. Maurice forges.

We have been concerned so far with main roads, or "chemins royaux et de poste", as they were officially called. There were, however, two further classes of roads: *chemins de communication* or *routes*, and *chemins de moulin*.¹⁵ The first of these were what we should call "side roads", and were intended to give access to the farms which did not front on the rivers. It does not seem possible to estimate how far apart they were built, and presumably their length varied according to the number of "ranks" of farms. The *chemins de moulin* were built at the order of the seigneur, and were no doubt simply for the purpose that the name suggests.

Either no record was kept of roads in use by the government of New France, or the record has been lost, as there is neither map nor document to tell anything but a small part of the story. It does appear, however, that the mileage was considerable when the three classes of roads are added together.

It may be well to examine briefly the method of construction and character of the roads. All royal roads were supposed to be 24 feet wide, with a three-foot ditch at each side. The bridges were 18 feet wide and provided with guard-rails. Communication roads were 18 feet wide, also with ditches. "Mill-roads" were of unspecified size. In building all roads special attention was given to the ditches, which was particularly necessary when soft surfaces were used. Sometimes, though rarely, stone was used, and corduroy was common in marshy sections. Bridges were, of course, made of wood, which was easily obtained locally. Small bridges were built by the owner of the land through which the stream passed; larger bridges were built and maintained by *corvée*. In a number of cases rivers were too wide to be bridged, and for these ferries were organized by private individuals and supported by tolls. An ordinance of 1734 laid down the tolls which might be charged on the ferries between Montreal and Quebec. A carriage paid from 1 livre to 1 livre, 2 sous, 6 denier, according to the particular ferry; a horse and rider paid 15 sous; a pedestrian, 4 sous; and a horse or cow, 4 sous.¹⁶

It is evident from the ordinances and from the correspondence of the *grand voyers* that orders were by no means always obeyed. Sometimes roads which were planned were never built at all; and more commonly they were built, but not according to the official specifications. Both roads and bridges were often narrower than they were supposed to be. No matter how many ordinances were issued, repairs were never carried out regularly; and as a result the roads must have been generally rough, except when there was good sleighing.

Such weaknesses, however, would be found in the history of any province of Canada until very recent years. It was, indeed, only with the Good Roads Associations of the beginning of the present century that serious steps were taken in Ontario to remedy the bad state of the roads. The methods of transportation in New France were not, as a matter of fact, fundamentally different from those in Ontario before the coming of the railway. In both cases waterways were used as far as possible; normally for long-distance travel, and frequently for short trips.

¹⁵For a description of the different classes of roads, see a pamphlet in the Public Archives of Canada (no. 507), F. J. Cugnet, *Traité de la police* (Quebec, 1775).

¹⁶*Edits, Ordonnances . . .*, vol. II, p. 366.

In both cases original settlements followed the lakes and rivers, and later settlers took the "back townships".

The picture of roads in New France is not hard to draw. There was a continuous highway on the north shore from Cap Tourmente to Montreal, and a broken highway on the south shore from Pointe à Caron to Beauharnois. Along the Richelieu was the third highway. In addition to this were roads of an unknown number running at right angles to the highways, and as far inland as was made necessary by the depth of the settlement.

The large number of horses in New France is an indication of the extent to which roads were used. The first census¹⁷ which shows the number of horses is that of 1681, when there were said to be 94 (36 of which were in Quebec). From then the figures show a rapid increase: 156 in 1685, 580 in 1695, 5,270 in 1720, and 13,488 in 1765. The last figure represents a proportion of about one horse to every five persons. The government of New France became alarmed lest the increase of horses should take place at the expense of the keeping of cattle, and passed an ordinance in 1709 forbidding the inhabitants of the district of Montreal to keep more than two horses or mares and one colt.¹⁸ In the following year Vaudreuil wrote to the minister that there were so many horses in Canada that the young men were losing the art of walking, with or without snowshoes. To remedy this, he says, it will be necessary to kill some of the horses; and to avoid loss, they can be salted, when the savages will eat them "en guise de boeuf".¹⁹ In 1749, Peter Kalm reported that it was a matter of general complaint that the country people kept too many horses. While horses may have been kept to some extent for purposes of pleasure, as was claimed, it can hardly be credited that this was the sole, or even the main, purpose that led to their being so commonly owned by the habitants.

It remains to examine what were the uses of roads in New France, and why more were not built. The two questions are bound up with each other. First, two obvious comments may be made: natural conditions made road-building and maintenance highly laborious, and at the same time made travel by water comparatively easy. The population of New France was always small and scattered, so that labour was scarce and the distances great. Such a condition invariably makes transportation of any type difficult. As later experience of railways was to show, even when labourers could be imported without trouble, there still remained the problem of paying for a transportation system which served a small population in a large area.

Apart from these considerations, however, the answer is to be found in the economic structure of New France. The chief occupations were agriculture, fishing, lumbering, and the fur-trade. Of these, agriculture was the only one which required roads. The fisheries and the lumber trade necessarily depended on water transportation, while the fur-trade—the chief industry of the colony—led to the building up of a complicated system of water transportation which is connected with the whole theme of expansion.

The issue between expansionism and concentrated settlement is sym-

¹⁷*Censuses of Canada, 1665-1871*, vol. IV.

¹⁸*Edits, Ordonnances . . .*, vol. II, p. 273.

¹⁹Vaudreuil to Pontchartrain, Nov. 3, 1710. *C¹A*, vol. 31, p. 88, Public Archives of Canada.

bolized by the birch canoe and the *calèche*. A variety of magnets drew the French along the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes system into the far West: exploration, missionary endeavour, adventure—but the chief magnet was the fur-trade. There is no need to retail here the various stages in the development of the French fur-trade, or the gradual penetration of the traders themselves into the West. Sufficient to say that by the eighteenth century groups of traders or military outposts were found in the far North-west, and along the Mississippi to New Orleans. The fur-trade was admittedly the chief source of immediate wealth in New France, and Miss Newbigin has effectively argued that the trade could not be continued successfully without expanding beyond the Great Lakes.²⁰ Yet the fur-trade was bound to be, by its very nature, self-destructive. That it also brought wealth to only a few cannot, perhaps, have been expected to deter those who were spurred on by hope of gain or love of adventure, or both.

Whatever may have been the exact proportions of its various causes, it may be argued that excessive expansion was one of the principal reasons for the weakness of New France. Courageous as the explorers and traders were, they none the less impeded the real growth of the colony. The water route to the Gulf of Mexico by way of the Mississippi seemed tempting, especially in view of the low water-shed between the St. Lawrence and Mississippi drainage basins; but the possible gain was small in comparison to the loss involved. Although New Orleans was a winter port, it was much too far from Montreal to be of any practical use, while the effort to hold the Mississippi merely helped to dissipate the strength of New France. Those explorers who devoted their energies to looking for a western sea were pursuing a purely imaginary gold-mine. The western sea was of no use to New France, but the able men who spent their lives and their fortunes in looking for it would have been invaluable in other work.

The French government has often been criticized both for lack of imagination in regard to exploration, and for its failure to establish a compact and diversified community on the St. Lawrence. In reality its chief fault lay in attempting to strike a mean between expansion and settlement. It was against the better judgment of the Court that the endless thrust to the West was carried on, and while the King was anxious to encourage the fur-trade up to a point for the sake of the revenue that it brought, he was opposed to having too many men engaged in it, and opposed to unlimited exploration.

With the chartered companies in charge little was done to encourage agriculture; the companies preferred to face the wrath of the King, and even resign their charters, rather than spend money on colonists. But with Canada as a province something could be done. Louis XIV (whose policy towards Canada was much wiser than he has ever been given credit for) sent one Gaudais to Canada in 1663 with instructions to report on the size and distribution of the population, the fertility of the soil, the area cleared or tilled, and the prospects of iron-mining and lumbering.

The Sieur Gaudais is to understand [the instructions run], that the principal thing to be examined for the maintenance and augmentation of the Colonies of the said country is, the clearing the greatest possible quantity of land and inducing all the

²⁰M. I. Newbigin, *Canada: The Great River, the Lands and the Men* (London, n.d.), chap. vii.

French settlers to live together in Villages and not at a great distance the one from the other . . . and . . . inasmuch as the Inhabitants have turned the best part of their attention to this trade [in furs], instead of applying it exclusively, as heretofore [*Psic*] to the clearing and cultivation of the soil . . . the King wills that the said Sieur Gaudais inform himself particularly of the means of retaining the said Trade for his Majesty's profit. . . .²¹

Colbert, writing to Talon in 1666, warns him of the danger of undue expansion:

The King approves of your policy of establishing his authority in the most distant parts of Canada and taking steps at the same time to acquire legal possession of the territory, since this extends his sovereignty. He does not doubt, however, that you have considered with Mr. de Tracy and the other officials that it is better to limit this expansion to what land the colony can itself control [*maintenir*], rather than to embrace a territory so great that it might one day be necessary to abandon a part of it, with a consequent diminution of the glory of His Majesty and the Crown.²²

Again and again in succeeding years this note is struck. Frontenac was several times warned that, "in regard to new discoveries, you ought not to turn your attention thereunto without urgent necessity & very great advantage, & you ought to hold it as a maxim, that it is much better to occupy less territory & to people it thoroughly, than to spread one self out more, & to have feeble colonies which can be easily destroyed by any sort of accident".²³

In 1682 the King instructed La Barre that private inhabitants should not be allowed to make further discoveries, as he does not think these will be of any value; but that La Salle should be allowed to go on to the Mississippi in case this discovery proved to be of use.²⁴ In the next year Louis writes that La Salle's discovery is "very useless", and such enterprises "tend only to debauch the inhabitants by the hope of gain, & to diminish the revenue from the Beaver".²⁵

In 1701, Callières and Champigny protested against establishing Louisiana at the expense of Canada. "We consider, Monseigneur, since you do us the honour of asking our opinion, that His Majesty wishes to colonize the Mississippi without destroying Canada. For this reason, it seems to us more suitable that France should establish this colony herself and not at the expense of Canada, for to weaken the latter, no matter how little, would be a serious blow."²⁶

While, therefore, an attempt was made to put a brake on expansion, in the end it ran without check. There is something splendid about the broad conception of a French empire in America, stretching from Atlantic to Pacific, from the Gulf of Mexico to Hudson Bay. But the French plan could not be carried out with the tiny population of Canada. Indeed, even in later years, when the population was considerably larger, the St. Lawrence Valley could not control the country west of Lake Superior. It was not until the age of railways that an effective link could be made between East and West. In the meanwhile, the population of New France was spread too thin, and enough energy was not left for the ex-

²¹E. B. O'Callaghan and B. Fernow (eds.), *Documents relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (15 vols., Albany, 1856-87), vol. IX, p. 9.

²²P. Margry (ed.), *Mémoires et documents* (6 vols., Paris, 1874-88), vol. I, p. 77.

²³O'Callaghan and Fernow, *op. cit.*, vol. IX, p. 126.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 168.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁶Margry, *op. cit.*, vol. V, p. 356.

plotation of the colony proper. There were, of course, other obstacles to economic growth: immigration policy, mercantilism, *etc.* But the chief obstacle was unchecked expansion which weakened the colony and brought war upon it.

Thus road-building and all that it stood for was limited and hampered in New France, but in spite of that the old régime left an achievement more considerable than has always been realized. Not only had the basis of a system of roads in the lower St. Lawrence Valley been laid down, but organization and methods had been worked out that proved to be of no little value in the next century.