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## **Canoes and *Canots* in New France: Small Boats, Material History and Popular Imagination**

### *Résumé*

*Chez les anglophones du Canada, l'imagerie populaire associe encore les Français de la Nouvelle-France aux voyageurs de la traite des fourrures. Parallèlement à cette association, le discours nationaliste fait de la traite des fourrures une des pierres d'angle de la nation canadienne moderne. Au coeur de cette vision stéréotypée, le canot d'écorce de bouleau, particulièrement sa version grand format conçue pour la traite, joue le rôle d'embarcation de prédilection des Français de la colonie. Renforcée depuis le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle par la puissante iconographie du voyageur au canot d'écorce – on pense surtout aux images de Frances Hopkins – cette conception fait l'impasse sur beaucoup de preuves du contraire. Cet article suggère que les Français n'étaient nullement amoureux du canot d'écorce : en fait, il montre que dès le début, les colons français, autant que possible, avaient recours à d'autres types de petites embarcations en bois pour répondre à leurs besoins. La prédominance du canot en écorce de bouleau sur les eaux du Nord-Ouest et du Pays-d'en-haut ne s'applique pas à l'ensemble de la colonie française.*

### *Abstract*

*Among Canadian Anglophones, there is a persistent popular association of the French in New France with the voyageurs of the fur trade. Coupled with this association is a nationalist narrative that sees the fur trade as laying the foundations of the modern Canadian nation. Part of this stereotype is that of the birch bark canoe, especially the large fur trade versions, as the preferred watercraft of the early French. Reinforced by the powerful iconography of the birch bark voyageur canoe since the late 19th century, especially in the images of Frances Hopkins, this notion overlooks much contrary evidence. This paper suggests that there was no love affair between the French and the birch bark canoe: rather, it suggests that from the beginning French colonists turned wherever possible to other forms of small wooden boats to serve their needs. The prevalence of the birch bark canoe for water transportation in the pays d'en haut and the northwest does not apply to the French colony overall.*

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Over the past half-century museums have grappled with the dilemmas of reinterpreting their artifactual collections. Collections acquired over long periods or by amateur enthusiasts may cease to speak in whole or in part either to current popular interest or to current scholarly preoccupations.

Reinterpretations may require the display of artifacts not in the collection. On another level, even where artifacts inspire interest, recent scholarship often challenges long-standing popular notions of what the objects mean. Museum curators may welcome the challenge of reinterpreting their collections in

order to engage visitors with alternate meanings, but the task is seldom straightforward. Volunteers committed to existing themes and messages may resist radical revisions—so may visitors. Revisions can raise serious political controversies that intimidate museum boards or managers into playing things safe (Ames 1991: 7-12; Hogan 1996: 200-32).<sup>1</sup> Of course, there are ways of surmounting these and other hurdles to the reinterpretation of collections, but they are seldom simple (Ames 1991: 12-15; Peers 1999).

The experience of assisting with the design of exhibits for the Canadian Canoe Museum reminded me of how deeply entrenched a popular artifactual stereotype can be, even a seemingly innocuous one, and how a museum's collection and exhibits can serve to reinforce that stereotype. This essay results from the reflections on that design process.

### **French Usage of the Canoe in New France**

A simple inquiry into the appropriate French translation of "canoe" raised questions about the extent and use of birchbark canoes by the French in New France. In the documentation of the 17th and 18th centuries the researcher encounters complexity and ambiguity in the use of the term *canot*, and is reminded that the French world included a plethora of small boats other than birchbark canoes.

In English-speaking Canada there is a popular association of the French use of canoes with early explorers and with the large freighter birchbark

canoes developed in the 18th century during the fur trade.<sup>2</sup> This association perpetuates an old stereotype of the French as voyageur traders, despite scholarship that proves voyageurs to have comprised only a fraction of the population of New France by the 18th century. The vast majority of colonists were farmers inhabiting the St. Lawrence River valley below Montreal, with town dwellers of multiple occupations accounting for 20 per cent or so of the population (Charbonneau, Desjardins et Beauchamp 1978: 120-33; Dechêne 1992: 117-22).<sup>3</sup> The fur trade and birchbark canoe stereotype excludes by silence the wide variety of other types of small boats employed by the French in the St. Lawrence colony. Even though the standard authority on birchbark canoes, Edwin Tappan Adney, was careful to note that the French used different kinds of wooden boats, not just bark canoes, most students have ignored his caveat (Adney and Chapelle 1983: 13). Rather, they have fixed upon a supposed French embrace of the birchbark canoe.

The usual claim is that the birchbark canoe was so admirably suited to Canadian waterways that the French did not alter it, except in size, for more than two hundred years (Jennings 2002: 10, 15, 17). Yet early French sources that admire the canoe also voice the canoe's drawbacks, notably its fragility, instability, uselessness in high winds and the great skill needed to navigate it. Joseph François Lafitau, Jesuit missionary and student of Amerindian customs, was brief in praise and lengthy in criticism of the birchbark canoe:



**Fig. 1**  
*Frances Hopkins,*  
Shooting the Rapids,  
*Library and Archives*  
*Canada, Accession*  
*Number 1989-401-2,*  
*C-002774.*

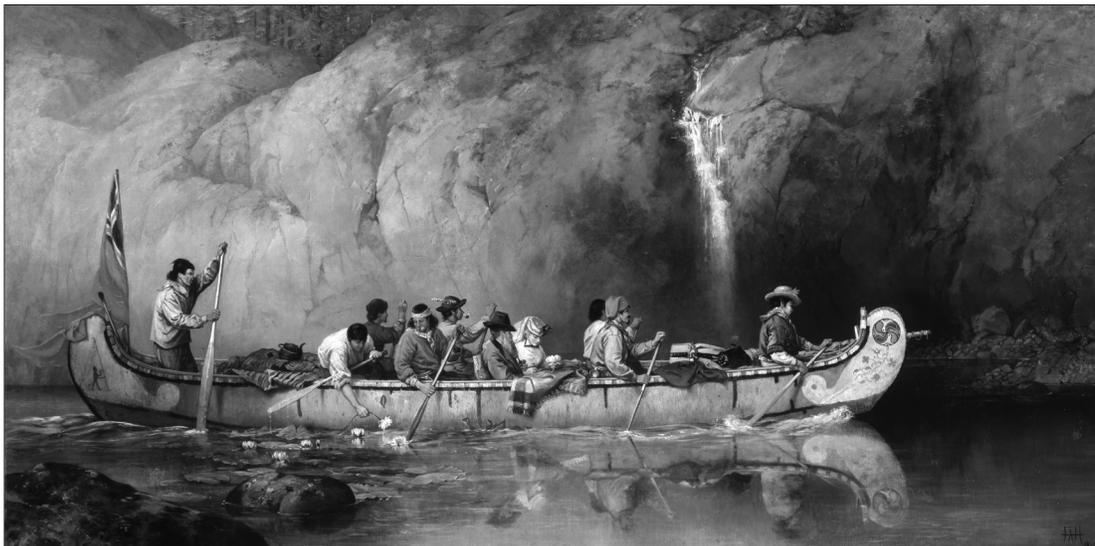
Birch bark canoes are masterpieces of native art. Nothing is prettier and more admirable than these fragile craft in which people can carry heavy loads and go everywhere very rapidly....

If these little boats are convenient, they have also their inconveniences, for it is necessary to use great care in getting into them and to be careful not to upset and keep the balance of the canoe when it is in motion. They are very fragile besides. If they so much as touch on sand or stones even a very little, they open chinks by which the water enters and spoils the goods or provisions which they are carrying; so that scarcely a day passes in which there is not some place which needs to be gummed. In gentle and quiet waters one can paddle in them seated or standing; but it is better to paddle on one's knees in the rapids. Another inconvenience is that one cannot carry much sail and, in moderate winds, it is impossible to make use of sail without exposing oneself to the risk of perishing. For that reason, crossing lakes is very dangerous. The wisest scarcely undertake it without considering the weather. They keep as close to land as they can or cut from cape to cape, and try to reach from island to island. Every time one enters or leaves the canoe, one has to be barefooted and when one disembarks it is necessary to unload the canoe, to draw it up out of the water, and put it safely at shelter on the sand or mud for fear that the wind may break it. When cracks develop, it is necessary to gum them, as I have already said, and because of that, it is necessary to be careful to go over them almost every time.... (Lafitau 1977: 124-25)

There is no doubt that west of Montreal in the *pays d'en haut*, or upper country as it was called, and north of the St. Lawrence valley in the Laurentians, the birchbark canoe served the French as the

primary, though not exclusive, means of water transport (Kent 2001: 53, 65). In the settlement colony proper, however, the notion that the French embraced the birchbark canoe is not borne out by the evidence. The attention paid to the birchbark canoe seems due to the large place assigned to the fur trade in traditional English-speaking historiography of New France, and to the persistent attraction of the romanticized voyageur in popular imagination.<sup>4</sup>

The romanticized voyageur in his birchbark canoe has been indelibly reinforced by powerful iconic representation. The numerous canvasses of Frances Anne Hopkins record scenes of voyageur work in brilliant detail. She painted these from sketches made in the 1860s while accompanying her husband, secretary to Governor George Simpson of the Hudson Bay Company, along the major canoe routes of the Great Lakes (Clark and Stacey 1990: 13-17, 19-31; Johnson 1971: 4-19). Her images of voyageurs and giant birchbark canoes, appearing at the moment when commercial canoe transport on the Great Lakes ended, provided nostalgic appeal for later generations of urban bourgeois, including historians, who found in the fur trade the genetic imprint of the developing Canadian nation. Harold Adams Innis gave primacy to commodity staples, first the cod fishery then the fur trade, in the economic development of colonies and saw "the work of the French *voyageur*" laying the foundation for Confederation (Innis 1930: 262). Donald Creighton attributed to the commercial empire of the St. Lawrence, first in furs then in wheat and timber, the basis of the northern Canadian nation-to-be (Creighton 1937).<sup>5</sup> In the past half-century, this



**Fig. 2**  
Frances Hopkins,  
Canoe Manned by  
Voyageurs Passing  
a Waterfall, *Library  
and Archives Canada*,  
Accession Number  
1989-401-1, C-002771.

meta-narrative, the unifying Laurentian thesis of Canadian national formation, has been challenged by historical scholarship providing contradictory evidence of disunity, conflict and limited regional focus. Such evidence, however, has been ignored by much of Canada's elite, especially Anglophone males, who have pursued avidly the nation-building narrative of their early 20th-century predecessors (Ricketts 1996: 23-41; Taylor 1990).<sup>6</sup> Faced with industrial congestion, urbanizing society and alien immigration, many then found anti-modernist comfort in the idea of a robust, purer and simpler wilderness encounter such as the voyageurs were imagined to have experienced. Nationalism, romanticism, nostalgia and anti-modernism combined as a harmonious, irresistible siren that enticed many to a narrative that centred the nation's values in the northern wilderness and in the fortitude of the intrepid voyageurs in their canoes (Benidickson 1997: 65-93; Francis 1997: 128-51; Hodgins 1988: 45-58).<sup>7</sup> Nationalism craves symbols of commonality and of historical justification. The canoe has been offered up to serve both (Dean 2006: 43-67; Jennings 1999: 1-14; Raffan 1999a: 242, 1999b: 15-27).<sup>8</sup>

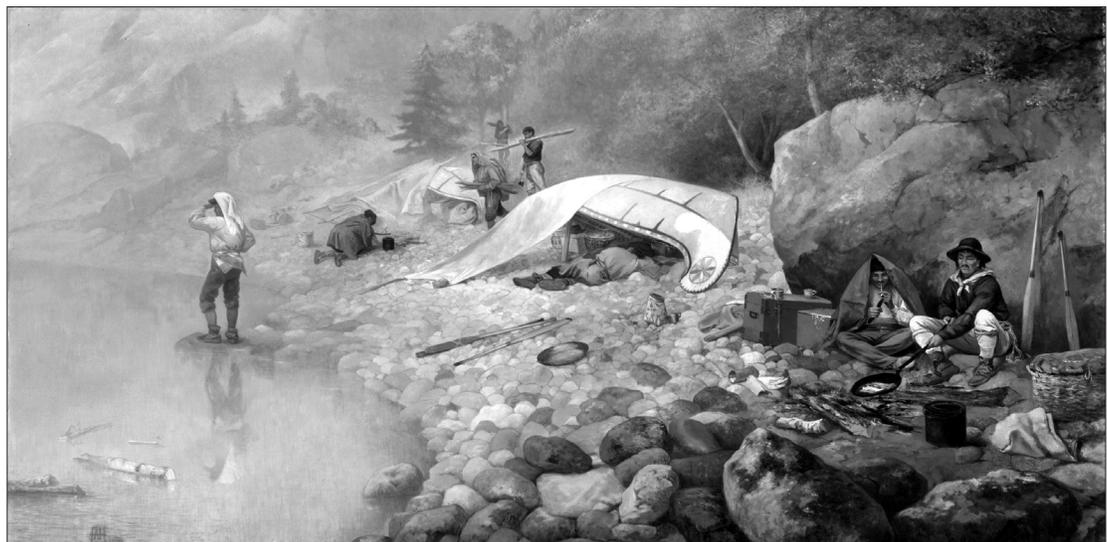
The canoe canvasses of Frances Hopkins are astonishing in their accuracy of detail and human sensitivity compared with those of other artists. Arthur Heming's depiction of voyageurs shooting rapids is sheer fantasy but, like the images of C. W. Jefferys, widely reproduced in school textbooks and elsewhere, also reinforced the stereotype (Gibbon 1951: 66).<sup>9</sup> Probably because Hopkins's paintings combined authenticity with aesthetic and emotional appeal, they have been used repeatedly to illustrate

historical accounts of fur trade and voyageur life, regardless of time and place.<sup>10</sup> The Canadian Canoe Museum employs Hopkins's powerful images extensively in its fur trade gallery.<sup>11</sup> By simple choice of subject matter these and other images reinforce the popular stereotype of the voyageur as the significant French contributor in early Canadian history, and of the birchbark canoe as the universal vehicle of the French.

### A Problem with Terminology

The French relationship with the birchbark canoe needs to be placed in a wider context than that of the fur trade: that of the material culture history of small boats in all of New France, not just in the *pays d'en haut*. There is no comprehensive study of boat building for the entire colony, but monographic and specialized studies leave no doubt that the French built carpentered boats of all sizes on a large scale from very early on. Much scholarly attention has been paid to the construction of larger vessels, especially those commissioned or encouraged by the Crown, such as the shipbuilding ventures of the Intendant Jean Talon after 1668, and the ambitious construction of fifteen naval vessels begun under the Intendant Gilles Hocquart in 1739 (Lunn 1942: 243-79; Mathieu 1971; Pritchard 1971). Réal Brisson has documented construction at Quebec from 1663 to 1763, finding references to almost 700 boats of all sizes having been built, of which 450 were small *bateaux plats* for military troop transport. He enumerated 146 marine carpenters in Quebec over the same period (Brisson 1983: 215-43; 246-57; 275). And Brisson's documenta-

**Fig. 3**  
Frances Hopkins,  
Voyageurs at Dawn,  
Library and Archives  
Canada, Accession  
Number 1989-401-3,  
C-002773.



tion would not include small boats—*bateaux* or *canots*—built by *habitants* on the shores of the St. Lawrence, or in the jurisdictions of Montreal and Trois Rivières. Nor would it include all the small craft built by ship carpenters without a notarized contract. As one would expect, these studies reveal a predilection for carpentered boats that French colonists brought with them from France. What can we say more particularly about the variety of small boats and the extent of their use in the colony?

There is diverse terminology in the documentation of the 17th and 18th centuries, but to begin, it will help to understand what the French in Canada understood by a *canot*. Prior to Christopher Columbus's encounter with America, the word does not exist in the French lexicon (Godefroy 1883/1961).<sup>12</sup> All authorities are agreed that the French *canot* and the English *canoe* derive from the Spanish *canoas*, which was the Arawak term introduced by Columbus to describe the dug-outs, or *pirogues*, of the Caribbean peoples (Huguet 1932; Imbs 1977; Rey 2000).<sup>13</sup> The word *canot* does not appear in French sources until the end of the 16th century. Jacques Cartier referred to Amerindian canoes as *barques*; André Thevet used the word *canoue* (Biggar 1924: 23; Huguet 1932: tome 2). However, by the time of Samuel de Champlain

and Marc Lescarbot at the turn of the 17th century, usage of *canot* had become common to describe Amerindian canoes (Biggar 1922: 104-05, 337; 1924: 23 note e).<sup>14</sup> Yet Champlain displays ambiguity in the use of *canot* by employing it to describe the small ship's boat that he and his crew used to go ashore in their explorations along the New England coast in 1605 (Biggar 1922: 336-37).<sup>15</sup> He thus illustrates early on a broadening, generic use of *canot* to describe any one of a variety of small undecked boats, whether Amerindian canoes or small French *chaloques*, *barques* or *bateaux*. By the 18th century, *canot* could be used as a synonym for a small, open boat, or *petite embarcation*. In *L'Encyclopédie*, Diderot recorded one meaning as that of a ship's small boat, even though his most lengthy entry is a description of various kinds of *canot de sauvages* (Diderot 1751-1780/1966-67: 620-21). Clearly, usage of the word *canot* evolved.

In France and in French-speaking Europe from the late 18th century, the meaning of *canot* continued to evolve in the direction of a generic small, open boat or dinghy, a trend possibly encouraged by the cutting of ties with New France. In Canada, where Amerindian canoes remained ubiquitous and interior commerce continued to use them, *canot* retained its more specific meaning



**Fig. 4**  
Arthur Heming,  
Shooting the Rapids  
(1930), reproduced  
from Roberts and  
Shackleton, *The  
Canoe*, Macmillan of  
Canada, 1983: 195.

of an Amerindian canoe. A century later, with the development of carpentered and light board canoes associated today with recreation and sport, North American French usage continued to describe them as *canoës*. In French-speaking Europe, on the other hand, all these new sporting canoes, though modelled on Amerindian templates, were referred to as *canoës*, a term evidently borrowed from English and American usage where the new phenomenon of competitive regattas—reflecting increased leisure—first flourished (Imbs 1977: tome 5, 114; Johnston 1988: 59-72).

The problem of interpretation can be attributed to the documentation of the 17th and 18th centuries. When a reference to a *canot* is encountered, how does one know which kind of small boat is at issue? It could be an Aboriginal birchbark canoe; a dug-out or *pirogue*; a variety of *barque*, *chaloupe*, *bateau* or other *petite embarcation*, as all these terms are found repeatedly throughout the documents. These documents include numerous series in the official correspondence in the Archives des Colonies; notarized contracts and judicial records in the Archives Nationales du Québec; and various journals, histories and correspondence of contemporary observers. In many instances the documents

are explicit about what is meant by reference to a *canot*. Elsewhere, the context in which the word is used will usually suggest the meaning. In some cases, however, meaning is ambiguous.

We can infer from an *ordonnance* issued by the intendant, Michel Bégon on June 28, 1720, that the *trois canots* to which he referred were dugout canoes. A partnership of entrepreneurs with a contract to supply masts for the King complained to Bégon, “that the habitant named Le Sage of Rivière du Loup cut up one of the masts they had prepared and made three *canots* out of it, the said masts being about 96 feet long by thirty one inches in diameter at the large end” (LAC MG8, A6: 4v-5).<sup>16</sup> The intendant was ordering Le Sage to Quebec to answer the charge. A cut pine log of that girth must have been irresistible to *habitants* whose farms bordered the river. Robert Lionel Séguin (1967), the noted historian of Quebec’s rural material culture, concluded from his study of *inventaires de biens*, or estate inventories, that the boats most often used by *habitant* farmers were *canots de bois*, which he interpreted to be dugouts, rather than birchbark canoes (1967: 581).<sup>17</sup>

**Fig. 5**  
C. W. Jefferys,  
Frontenac on the Way  
to Cataragui 1672,  
Library and Archives  
Canada, Accession  
Number 1972-26-1366,  
C-070237.



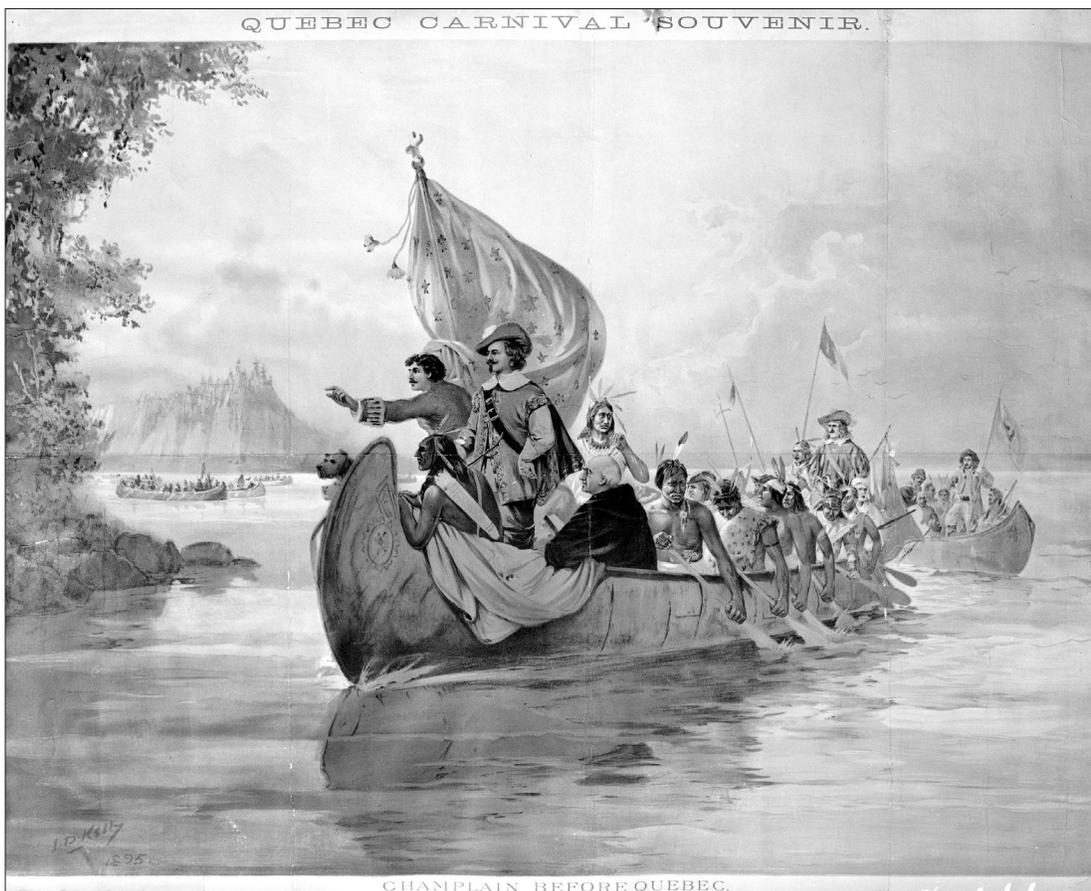
Although the term *canot de bois* could refer to a dugout, or *pirogue*, it appears frequently to have referred to a carpentered boat of some kind. Small carpentered or board boats often were described as *bateaux* or *barques*, though there is evidence of them also being referred to simply as *canots* (Brisson 1983: 215; Pritchard 1971: 11).<sup>18</sup> An *ordonnance* of Bégon of June 15, 1717, mentions *bateaux* and *canots* with ambiguous distinction.

Having been informed that habitants of some quarters have carried off *bateaux* or *canots* belonging to the King, and have taken them home either to use them or to dismantle them for their nails and boards, we order all who find *canots* or *bateaux* belonging to the King to notify within twenty four hours the local captain or officer of the militia, whom we direct to advise us: we forbid the said habitants to appropriate or dismantle the said *canots* on pain of condemnation to be pilloried and to reimburse the King the price of the said *canots*.... (LAC MG8, A6: 284-284v)<sup>19</sup>

The use of *canot* here implies a generic meaning for more than one kind of small boat. Elsewhere we can find legislators more careful to distinguish between various kinds of small boats. A *règlement* of the Conseil Souverain de Québec of May 11,

1676, forbade people from stealing, moving or otherwise helping themselves to small boats and their equipment moored or beached in the harbour and anchorage of Quebec. In this case specific reference was made to “*des chaloupes, canots de bois ou d’écorse*” (LAC MG8, C6, article xxiii: 269-70). The reference to *canots de bois* may nevertheless refer to a variety of dugouts, *bateaux* or other small carpentered boats.

This generic meaning of *canot* as a synonym for any small boat occurs frequently. In 1736 the Superior of the Hospitaler nuns of Québec complained that habitants bordering on their seigneurie of St. Ignace in the parish of Charlesbourg were regularly helping themselves to the boats belonging to the habitants of St. Ignace. Not only did this prevent the habitants of St. Ignace from crossing the Saint Charles River for their business, those who stole the boats then used them to steal wood and resources from the nuns’ seigneurial property. In his *ordonnance* of November 21, 1736, to condemn these acts of theft, the *commissaire*, Honoré Michel de la Rouvillière, referred to these boats interchangeably as *embarcations* and *canots* (LAC MG8, A6, vol. 25: 3v-4).



**Fig. 6**  
John David Kelly,  
Champlain before Quebec,  
Library and Archives  
Canada, Accession Number  
1935-049 PIC, C-001423.

A special kind of *canot de bois* makes its appearance in the records at the end of the 17th century, underscoring the need for care when interpreting the documentary references. This was a carpentered board *canot*, patterned to some degree after the Aboriginal birchbark canoe. On June 5, 1700, in Quebec, the Intendant Jean Bouchart de Champigny contracted with a ship carpenter, Guillaume Pagé de Carsy (Quercy), to build three wooden boats patterned on bark canoes (“*canots de bois en façon de canots d’écorce*”) (ANQ, Greffe Genaple no.1622, Marché). The contract describes in some detail how they were to be constructed. They were to be 30 feet (9 metres) long and four feet one inch (1.2 metres) wide amidships. The bottom was to be three pieces of oak planking, and the sides were to be pine, all no more than half an inch thick. Ribs of cedar were to be placed seven to eight inches apart, over which were pine floor boards. There were eight thwarts between the gunwales. Characteristic of boats of European construction, tar, caulking and nails were required. The price for each of these boats was 300 *livres*.

How closely the appearance of these *canots de bois* resembled Aboriginal birchbark canoes is not entirely clear. Certainly they tapered to a point at both bow and stern, and most likely had a sheer that curved upwards from amidships fore and aft. The proportion of length to width and the placement of ribs and thwarts followed that of bark canoes. However, we do not know if the bow and stern were

curved and shaped like birchbark canoes or whether they were straight, or whether they were vertical or tapered. Likewise, we do not know if they were flat-bottomed with a hard chine and vertical sides, or rounded like birchbark canoes. The reference to the bottom being made of three oak boards may or may not suggest a flat bottom. And there is no indication from this contract whether they were to be fitted with oars and rowed, or paddled like a canoe, which would have been practical given the narrow beam of this *canot de bois* (Lom d’Arce 1705/1974: 41; ANQ, Greffe B. Basset, Montréal, Marché).<sup>20</sup> But in view of the explicit instruction in the contract to make these carpentered canoes “*en façon de canots d’écorce*,” one would expect them to have followed closely the lines of a birchbark canoe: soft chine, graceful sheer and curved bow and stern. The craft, though larger, may have been similar in appearance and construction to the Gander River Boat, adapted from freighter canoes in Newfoundland two hundred years later at the turn of the 20th century (Rich 1999: 36-38; Saunders 1986).

How common were these *canots de bois* patterned after birchbark canoes? The notarial *greffes* contain scores of *marchés*, or contracts, for the construction of *chaloupes* and larger boats, but few for *canots de bois* of whatever kind. However, two *marchés* in Montreal in 1740 and 1741 give us a glimpse of widespread use of something similar. On March 6, 1740, a carpenter of Chambly, Michel

**Fig. 7**  
Gander River Boat, Courtesy  
of the Canadian Canoe  
Museum, Reference Number  
2002.40.1, photo by Don  
Rankin.



Lagu, contracted to produce a carpentered *canot de bois* for Paul Tessier, a stone-cutter of Montreal who presumably needed it for bulk transport of stone from a quarry. It was 40 feet (12 metres) in length, tapered at both ends with thwarts across the gunwales. The following year, on February 20, Jean Chevalier, bourgeois of Montreal, ordered an identical *canot* from Lagu (ANQ Montréal, Greffe J. B. Adhémar, Marchés). If used as bulk carriers, these *canots de bois* were likely a variant of flat-bottomed *bateaux*. The absence of notarized *marchés* for *canots de bois* for the Crown is probably explained by an alternate procedure of procurement. Instead of ordering *canots*, the Intendant contracted the labour of craftsmen by *engagement*. An example is that of Jean Thomas, *maître charpentier de navire*, who on August 19, 1701, signed an *engagement* in Montreal. The following year on August 28, Charles Viger, *charpentier de navire* in Montreal, signed an *engagement*, "...to work on the construction of *canots de bois* and on everything that he will be ordered to do in the service of the King..." (ANQ Montréal, Greffe A. Adhémar, Engagements; LAC MG8, A6, vol. 27: 21-21v).<sup>21</sup> These ship carpenters were paid a salary to produce whatever small boats the Crown required. The absence of notarized *marchés* to build individual boats for the Crown is therefore not surprising.

The annual *bordereaux* of general expenses for the colony provide additional evidence of the variety and extent of carpentered boats used by the Crown for civil and military purposes in the 18th century. Each year several thousand *livres* were expended on the construction, maintenance and purchase of *bateaux* and *canots* (AN Col., C<sup>11</sup>A 113: 200, 281v, 286v).<sup>22</sup> Following the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713) the *bordereaux* are more detailed in itemizing expenditures. In several years expenditures are recorded for the construction of between two and four *canots de bois*, or "*canots de bois façon de ceux d'Écorce*," at 300 *livres* apiece to replace those worn out (AN Col., C<sup>11</sup>A 113: 295v, 319-19v; 114: 365v, 411, 446v; 50: 305v). A distinction is clear between these *canots de bois* and the *bateaux* that were also being constructed almost annually for only 40-50 *livres* apiece. The more expensive *canots de bois*, equal in price and probably in template to the *canots de bois* that Champigny ordered from Guillaume Pagé in 1700, were used by the governors, the Intendant, majors, commissaires, controllers and other officers "in the travel that they are required to do in the service of the King."<sup>23</sup> They were the government and military

VIP limousines of the St. Lawrence River. In 1719 there were fifteen of these *canots* in the colony (AN Col., C<sup>11</sup>A 113: 295v-96). The less expensive and more numerous *bateaux*, numbering between two and five for each of the twenty-six companies of *troupes de la marine* in the colony, were used for troop and other transport. The *bordereaux* of expenditures also reveal extensive support services required to maintain the King's fleet of small craft in the St. Lawrence colony. Apart from the annual construction, repairs and maintenance, there were boat sheds that had to be built and guarded, and a clerk to administer the whole operation (AN Col., C<sup>11</sup>A 113: 298v-99). In pursuit of *le canot* in New France, we need to revise the exclusive characterization of the fur trade birchbark canoe as symbolic of the French use of *le canot*.

Notwithstanding the above, the birchbark canoe is, of course, abundantly in evidence as well. Its primary domain was the interior rivers and waterways of the *pays d'en haut* above Montreal, in the Laurentian Shield to the north and in the unsettled areas of Acadia. It was also commonplace in the settled area of the St. Lawrence valley, used by the several Aboriginal communities who resided there (Kahnawake, Kanésétaki, Odanak, Bécancour, Jeune Lorette), by the colonial government for police and military purposes and by French outfitters and voyageurs engaged in the interior commerce and who are the basis of the popular stereotype. Significant numbers of Aboriginal travellers in birchbark canoes visited the settlements and towns annually on official and private business.

## The Freighter Canoe

Because the interior commerce, or "fur trade" as it is commonly known, has attracted the attention of historians, we tend to know most about the large fur trade canoes produced specifically for this commerce. A frequently quoted passage from the journal of Louis Franquet, a military engineer visiting the colony in 1752 and 1753, identifies Trois Rivières as the location where the best *canots d'écorce* were manufactured. The large trade canoes measured about eleven metres in length, one and a half metres in width, and about three quarters of a metre in depth, and cost 300 *livres* apiece (Franquet 1889/1974: 17).<sup>24</sup> These were the large "Montreal" canoes that carried cargoes between Montreal and the major posts on the Great Lakes, and were the mainstay on this leg of the transportation route well into the 19th century. Away from the Great Lakes

on rivers and shallower waterways smaller “north” birchbark canoes were used, about seven-and-a-half or eight metres in length. Although scores of these canoes were produced each year, notarized *marchés* for their purchase are extremely rare (ANQ Trois Rivières, Greffe L. Pillard, Marché).<sup>25</sup> The reason for this is probably the steady demand for them, which assured builders that they could sell all that they could produce. Three families of builders are prevalent in the canoe building trade of Trois Rivières: Le Maître (also Auger), Leclerc (Leclair), and DuGuay (DuGuey). By the 1750s the three families had intermarried, and had extended their union to Montreal families as well (Kent 1997: 37-63, 314-18). The name of the canoe-building clan of Le Maître became an alternate appellation for the large, eight place Montreal canoe – *le canot du Maître*.

The Crown likely maintained some of these large freighter canoes in its military fleet for service to and from the *pays d'en haut*, but the more frequent annual purchases were for smaller and less expensive birchbark canoes for police work against illegal traders and fugitives from the law in the Montreal area (Franquet 1889/1974: 17; AN Col., C11A 113: 296; 114: 365v; 50: 305v-306).<sup>26</sup> The requirement of birchbark canoes for this task underscores the environmental factor in determining the choice between birchbark canoe and carpentered boat. Where pursuit of an outlaw led to shallower rivers, swift water, rapids and portages, there was no substitute for a birchbark canoe. The Montreal region, as the departure point for the vast *pays d'en haut* or for contraband trade with Albany, was the locus for prohibited commerce and fugitives. Both these purposes were abetted by the Mohawks resident at Kahnawake who, despite their ostensible attachment to the French alliance, in fact exercised their sovereignty and independence as regular carriers of commerce between Montreal and Albany (Lunn 1939: 61-76). They showed little hesitation in selling canoes and provisions to French colonists evading the law, a practice that the Governor General of the colony was powerless to prevent (Eccles 1984: 475-510; LAC MG8, A6, vol. 22: 67v-68).<sup>27</sup> So common was the use of birchbark canoes for these outlawed ventures that mere ownership of one in the Montreal region raised official suspicions, especially following the Peace of Utrecht in 1713 and the reopening of commerce in the *pays d'en haut*. On December 23, 1723, the Governor and Intendant proclaimed an *ordonnance* requiring the registration of all birchbark canoes in

the colony, on pain of confiscation of the canoe and a fine of 300 *livres*. If the canoe was used, rented or sold for the purpose of unlicensed commerce in the *pays d'en haut* the fine was 500 *livres*, and for the purpose of unlicensed travel to the English colonies, 1500 *livres* (LAC MG8, A6, registre 10: 79v-81).

Warfare in the *pays d'en haut* increased the demand for birchbark canoes. In 1728 Governor Beauharnois purchased and commandeered 334 canoes from as far down river as the Isle d'Orléans to transport a force of 2000 men in a campaign against the Mesquakies in the Wisconsin region (AN Col., C<sup>11</sup>A 50: marginal note 305v). Following the campaign against the Chicasaws in 1739, commanders at some western posts sought reimbursement for canoes they had been obliged to purchase for the transport of returning militia and Amerindian allies (AN Col., C<sup>11</sup>A 73: 193, 209, 219).<sup>28</sup> It is safe to assume that most of these references to *canots* for service in the *pays d'en haut* are to birchbark canoes. They also underscore the fact that the Crown, like French merchants engaged in the interior commerce, purchased directly or indirectly a significant number of the canoes they needed from Aboriginal sources. It should come as no surprise that French canoe builders in the St. Lawrence colony employed Aboriginal labour, notably women and children (Dechène 1992: 13; Franquet 1889/1974: 17; Kent 1997: 45-46).<sup>29</sup>

Clearly then, the French found they could not do without the birchbark canoe in war and commerce in the *pays d'en haut*. As Champlain and numerous subsequent observers exclaimed, lightness, portability, maneuverability, serviceability in the forest and substantial cargo capacity rendered it indispensable for transportation on the fast-flowing rivers and extensive waterways of the Canadian Shield and boreal forest. But Frenchmen were also acutely aware of the shortcomings of the birchbark canoe: it was unstable, depreciated rapidly because it was easily damaged in rocky shallows, could not be used on open water in windy conditions, and required a high degree of skill to operate. As a result, the French never abandoned the search for more durable substitutes. As early as 1671 Governor Daniel de Rémy de Courcelle, in order to impress the defiant Iroquois with his ability to reach them on Lake Ontario, mustered a force of volunteers with a large, flat-bottomed *bateau* to carry heavy supplies up the St. Lawrence River despite the rapids (Eccles 1964: 75; Preston and Lamontagne 1958: 104). Two years later his successor, Louis Buade

de Frontenac, in order to build a fort at Cataract, sent a large contingent that included two *bateaux* to carry six small cast iron cannons (Preston and Lamontagne 1958: 110).<sup>30</sup> The use of *bateaux* to transport men and *matériel* to Lake Ontario became regular practice. For transport between the posts of Frontenac, Niagara and Toronto on Lake Ontario, colonial officials authorized the construction of two sailing *barques* (AN Col., C11A 113: 339-39v; 114: 450v). Wherever conditions permitted, the French introduced carpentered boats.

Even where conditions were marginal, carpentered boats were contemplated. In October 1728 the Governor, Charles de Beauharnois, and the Commissaire, François Clairambault D'Aigremont, appealed to the Minister of Marine and Colonies for permission to build one hundred *canots de bois* to have at the ready for military campaigns against the English or to respond to Amerindian wars in the west. Beauharnois cited an increasing scarcity of *canots d'écorce* in the colony, their higher cost and several other shortcomings.

These *canots [de bois]* would cost the King 60 *livres* each and would last five or six years, whereas bark canoes, which cost much more, last only one campaign and are subject to frequent damage: moreover, not anyone can navigate a bark canoe, whereas anyone who comes along can handle a *canot de bois*. (AN Col., C<sup>11</sup>A 50: 3-4)<sup>31</sup>

Although denied for financial reasons, the governor's request underscored a military bias in favour of more durable craft than the birchbark canoe. There was no love affair here with the *canot d'écorce*.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

None of this diminishes the importance of the Aboriginal birchbark canoe in the history of the *pays d'en haut* and in the commerce of the northwest. On the contrary, try as they did, the French were unable to develop satisfactory substitutes for all transportation and communication on the rivers beyond the St. Lawrence valley. Yet in the settlement colony, where the vast majority of French colonists lived different lives, the identification of the French with the voyageur trade canoe, or the birchbark canoe more generally, is a misleading stereotype. As with their social institutions and other objects of material culture, the French in Canada brought their metropolitan nautical craft and preferences with them. These *bateaux*, *barques*, *chaloupes* and other *petite embarcations* inexorably replaced the birchbark canoe wherever possible. And as with social institutions, there were some visible adaptations. One certainly was the *canot de bois à la façon de canot d'écorce*, a carpentered watercraft patterned on Aboriginal bark canoes, making its appearance at least a century-and-a-half before new industrial technologies made possible the development of carpentered canoes on a mass scale and of a lightness and versatility that matched that of the original Aboriginal birchbark models. The love affair with the large birchbark canoe of the fur trade is a reality more in the nostalgic and myth-prone hearts of the present than with the early French who turned to a variety of serviceable small boats.

## Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the meetings of the French Colonial Historical Society in Toulouse, May 2003. Research for this project was assisted by a grant from the SSHRC Committee on Research of Trent University.

1. Both authors provide examples of some consequential political controversies over museum exhibitions.
2. Fred Johnston (1988: 59), when writing about the early development of sport canoeing in the 19th century, also noted the popular bias to associate canoe images with explorers and traders.
3. Among Québécois, ancestral stereotypes were more likely to emphasize religious devotion, farming vocation and cultural survival. The demographic profile of voyageurs is complex and rests upon sophisticated analyses of different documentary records. Calculated decade by decade, anywhere from 11 per cent to 20 per cent of the adult male population (over 15 years of age) travelled west as voyageurs or canoeemen. Half came from the district of Montreal, and most of the rest from Trois Rivières, so that 30 per cent or so of adult men of these districts would have participated. However,

most made only one trip west in their lifetime as canoeemen or *engagés*, and many more only two, amounting to 70 per cent or so of the total. The number of professional voyageurs who made their living by the trade was much smaller: Louise Dechêne identified about 100 in the decade before 1717. Voyageurs recruited their kin, so that a quarter of them came from "professional" fur trading families. As the 18th century progressed, the colony's population increased at a greater rate than did that of the voyageurs. Dechêne argues that neither the character of the population at large nor its material culture were significantly shaped by fur-trading.

4. Overwhelmingly, popular English-language writing focuses on the post-French Regime fur trade, and particularly from the 1780s to 1821, a brief period affording dramatic possibilities in colourful characters and rough-and-tumble competition among the North West Company, the Hudson Bay Company and other rivals. The Hudson Bay Company's popular (and promotional) history magazine, *The Beaver: Canada's History Magazine*, launched in 1920, ran many articles and illustrations that also reinforced the voyageur stereotype. American scholarship on New France likewise

- focuses heavily on the fur trade, reflecting the early history of Great Lakes states from New York to Minnesota, and reinforcing the traditional fur trade historiography of English-speaking Canadians. A recent example of popular interest in voyageur lore is the impressive work of Timothy J. Kent (1997), a devoted time-traveller who has scoured the extensive documentary sources, primarily printed ones, and applied careful judgment in documenting French sources on the use and material history of the birch bark canoe. Less careful are the volumes of Peter C. Newman (1985, 1987, 1989). For a scholarly critique of Newman's fur trade and voyageur stereotypes, see Jennifer Brown (1986) and the Newman (1986) response to Brown. An antidote to the romanticized voyageur post-French regime is the recent scholarly study by Carolyn Podruchny (2006).
5. **The staples approach to economic development has been effectively challenged** in such works as those of Louise Dechêne (1992) and Douglas McCalla (1993).
  6. **These predecessors were a relatively small group of politically well-connected, largely Anglophone, male professionals, who were instrumental in establishing the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada in 1919, and whose driving force was to instill historical, national self-consciousness in the citizenry.**
  7. **Francis provides a succinct essay on the canoe, early explorers and wilderness in Canadian national mythology, in which he describes the canoe image as "the mother image of our national dreamlife"** (1997: 129). Bruce Hodgins (1988) notes the irony of the symbolism of wilderness popularly attributed to the canoe, since the canoe also opened up the wilderness to exploitation and ultimate destruction.
  8. **The federal government's Centennial Commission that orchestrated the national centennial celebrations of 1967 embraced enthusiastically a proposal that became the Centennial Voyageur Canoe Pageant, involving ten teams representing eight provinces and two territories in a race from Rocky Mountain House in Alberta to the Expo 67 site in Montreal.** It was one of the most successful events of the year, being the centre of countless community celebrations en route, and consciously portraying the voyageurs as "the founders of Canada." It was used and promoted by the Commission as the legitimization of Canada as a "culturally and geographically unified nation." Dean (2006: 49) discusses the "fetishization of the canoe" in the context of how material objects acquire mythical significance. Raffan (1999) and especially Jennings (1999) are recent examples of claims of emblematic and nation-building significance of the canoe. English-Canadian nationalism has been most obsessed with national unity. French-Canadian nationalism, especially in Quebec, embraces a different historical narrative with separate identifying symbols, notably language and culture.
  9. **In his art, C. W. Jefferys often depicted French explorers and officials in association with birchbark canoes, sometimes inaccurately.** For example, in a 1673 illustration, "*Frontenac on the way to Cataragui by Canoe*, Jefferys has the governor in a canoe that is rather large for the time, and with no sign of the two *bateaux* in the flotilla that were used to transport cannons. A print by John D. Kelly depicts Champlain in 1609 in a canoe larger than a *canot de maître* of the next century would have been, accompanied by a flotilla of similarly oversized birchbark canoes. These images illustrate the iconic association of the French with large birchbark canoes, and are just two of the many images used by John Murray Gibbon when he wrote *The Romance of the Canadian Canoe*. (Three images by Francis Hopkins were also included in that publication.) A publicist for the Canadian Pacific Railway, Gibbon promoted the idea that the canoe "did most to pave the way for the development of the Dominion of Canada" (1951:1).
  10. **Among the numerous publications using Hopkins's images** are Roberts and Shackleton (1983), who also used one of her images for the dust jacket; also Jennings (2002), Newman (1985), Kent (1997), Adney and Chapelle (1964); many articles in *The Beaver*.
  11. **The Canadian Canoe Museum:** [www.canoemuseum.net](http://www.canoemuseum.net).
  12. **Godefroy gives no entry for canot, canoue or canoe.**
  13. **The most extensive authority is Alain Rey.**
  14. **Note that Champlain employed various spellings, *canau, cano, canot*.** Lescarbot, in his 1609 edition of Cartier's *Voyages*, edited by Biggar (1924), added a clarification in the margin, "Barques ou Canots des Sauvages."
  15. **It is unlikely that Champlain was using bark canoes as his ship's dinghy or shallop.** He makes no point of saying so, while he does make a point of describing the bark canoes of the Amerindians who greeted him.
  16. **Translated from:** "...que le nommé le Sage habitant de la Rivière du Loup a coupé un des mats qu'ils avoient fait et en a fait trois canots, lequel mats étoit d'environ 96 pieds de longueur sur trente un pouces de diametre au gros bout..."
  17. **Séguin, basing his conclusions on evidence in estate inventories, was skeptical of the statement of the Swedish naturalist, Peter Kalm, who wrote that habitants made bark canoes after the Amerindian fashion.**
  18. **A *barque* could refer to boats of varying size, from a very small open boat to a two-masted vessel of 40 tons, usually with a single deck. A *bateau* could also vary greatly in size.**
  19. **Translated from:** "Sur ce qui nous a été représenté que quelques habitants des Costes s'emparent des Bateaux ou canots du Roy, lorsqu'ils vont a leur costé soit pour s'en servir ou pour les dépésser pour en avoir les cloux et planches, Nous ordonnons a toutes personnes qui trouveront des canots ou Bateaux appartenant au Roy d'en avertir dans vingt quatre heures le Capne ou officier de milice de leur coste ausqueles nous enjoignons de nous en donner avis faisons defenses ausdt habitants de s'approprier ou dépésser lesd. Canots a peine du Carcan et de payer au Roy le prix desd. canots..."
  20. **As with the word *canot*, we face a similar ambiguity of meaning with the words *aviron* and *rame*, which could mean either oar or paddle.** In his description of canoe paddles, Lom d'Arce (1705/1974) used the word *rames*; nowhere have I encountered the modern word *pagaie* for paddle. A contract of February 16, 1696, between the Intendant and one Jean Petit de Boismorel to provide 1600 *avirons de canot* does not entirely clarify usage, though since these *avirons* were for *bateaux*, one might infer that they were oars. Boismorel was required "*de faire bien et devouement...seise cent avirons de canots servants a bateaux de bon bois, bien fait, bien polies, de longueur et largeur necessaire pour naviger dans lesd. bateaux...*"
  21. **Translated from:** "...à travailler à la construction des canots de bois et a tout ce qui luy sera commandé pour le service du Roy..." By a commission of 1739, the Intendant Gilles Hocquart appointed LeClerc, père, Maître Charpentier du Roy in Trois Rivières, for the construction and repair of *canots* and *bateaux* of the King.
  22. **For example, 2162 livres 1 sous was spent on the "construction et radoub des battimens et canots" in 1705; 5232 livres 15 sous was spent on *bateaux et canots* in 1715; 6334 livres 10 sous in 1716.**

23. Translated from: "...dans les Voyages qu'ils sont obligés de faire pour le service du Roy."
24. The dimensions given by Franquet are 33 *pieds* long, 5 *pieds* wide midships and 2.5 *pieds* deep. French linear measures were slightly larger than the English ones at the time.
25. There is a *marché* dated 19 November 1765, between an English merchant, Aaron Hart, and Jacques Leclair (Leclerc) dit Blondin, builder in Trois Rivières. The terms of this *marché* convey a tone of distrust, which may reflect the anxiety of a newly arrived English merchant unfamiliar with the conventions and customs of canoe contracts in the Canadian trade.
26. The usual price of canoes purchased for police work was 90 *livres*, compared with 240 to 300 *livres* paid for the largest fur trade canoe.
27. Eccles demonstrates the continuing sovereignty of the Amerindians. An *ordonnance* of Governor Beauharnois dated 31 May 1734, shows the futility of efforts to prevent Kahnawake Mohawks from assisting fugitives.
28. The Chicasaw nation occupied present day western Tennessee and northern Mississippi states.
29. Louise Dechêne concluded that for the 17th century most birchbark canoes used by the French for any purpose were purchased from the Amerindians, explaining why there are few notarized contracts for their purchase. This likely held true for the 18th century as well.
30. Catarauqui is present day Kingston, Ontario.
31. Translated from: "Ces canots [de bois] reviendront au Roy a 60 # chacun et dureront cinq a six annees, au lieu que les canots d'ecorce qui coutent bien d'avantage, ne peuvent servir q'une campagne, et sont sujets a bien des accidents, tout le monde d'ailleurs n'est pas proper a conduire des canots d'Ecorce, et les canots de bois peuvent ester conduits par les premiers venus."
32. A growing scarcity of birchbark canoes in the colony is plausible in view of coincidental increasing prices and an expansion of western commerce that demanded more, and larger, canoes. Dale Miquelon (1987: 146-64) provides the best synthesis of the French and Amerindian western commerce following the Peace of Utrecht in 1713.

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