

CHAPTER II THE EMIGRANT

The King of France, having the interest of Canada at heart, had founded *companies*, powerful associations composed of wealthy businessmen who undertook to contribute to the material and spiritual welfare of the colony. These companies engaged themselves in colonizing New France. They needed to attract French Catholic colonists, transporting a certain number every year, establishing them on the ground and assuring their subsistence until they could manage to live by themselves. They also undertook to maintain the priests who would serve the colonists, together with missionaries, who naturally could provide no source of revenue.

In return for these heavy obligations, the *companies* enjoyed great privileges. They alone had the right to engage in the fur trade with the savages. Only they could buy, transport and resell in France the products of the colony. In a word, they had a monopoly on all commerce with New France.

One of the most important of these companies was that of the Hundred Associates, founded by Richelieu in 1627, which lasted until 1663. The edict that conferred its legal existence was signed at La Rochelle by King Louis XIII.

This is why La Rochelle was for a long time the leadership and business center for the New France colony. It was the merchants of La Rochelle who organized the Canadian trade, provided the ships to go to Quebec, bringing with them livestock and merchandise, and transporting “working men,” because the company required the transportation of one “engaged person” for each 16 tons of cargo.

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“Engaged persons” was the name given to those immigrants who, not having the means to pay for their crossing, “engaged” themselves to live for several years in New France, sometimes as a soldier to garrison a fort, but more often as an employee in the service of a colonist, an official, or even a religious community.

In the 17th century, most of the French immigrants came as “engaged persons.” They agreed to serve in Canada an average three years in return for food, clothing and a token salary. To recover the cost of transport and equipment supplied to the “engaged person,” the merchants conveyed their contract, which was negotiable, to one of the established colonists on the banks of the St. Lawrence River, for a sum of money that varied according to the quality of the “engaged person” and the need for workers in the colony. The wages of the “engaged persons” were low, but their masters treated them well, and considered them as members of their families. These “engaged persons” could return to France at the expiration of their contract, but a good number prolonged their stay in New France, and finished by establishing themselves there permanently.

In the first half of the 17th century, the merchants only “engaged” the number of people they had to carry according to the tonnage of their cargoes. However, there came a time when labor became in great demand in New France, and so the list of “engaged persons” grew longer each year. No longer corresponding to tonnage, the “engaged persons” themselves became the object of a special commerce, a speculation. Sure of finding a

regular demand for new labor in New France, merchants now became providers of workmen.

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Among the merchants of La Rochelle who, in the name of the Hundred Associates, carried out recruitment for New France, one group stands out. That is the Gaigneur-Grignon association, composed of Antoine Grignon, his son Jean, his son-in-law Pierre Gaigneur, and Jacques Massé. This association undertook a first voyage in 1656. The following year, it recruited 40 men for Canada over a three-month period. Then, the list of “engagements” came to an abrupt end. It was Notary Pierre Moreau, who drew up all the contracts between the Gaigneur-Grignon association and the men it recruited.

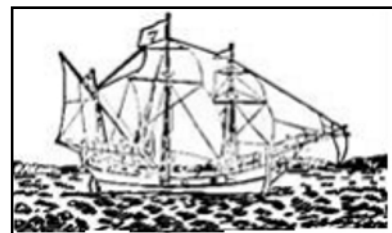
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Among these “engagements” was that of our first ancestor, Jean Durand. A document dated March 3 carries such importance for his descendants that we do not hesitate to reproduce it in its original form.

Know all men by these presents that before Pierre Moreau, royal notary and registrar in the town and government of La Rochelle, appeared and identified himself Jean Durant of the neighborhood of Doeuil, aged 21 years or thereabouts, of the first part, and Antoine Grignon, Pierre Gaigneur and Jacques Massé, merchants of this town, of the second part, who have voluntarily entered into the following agreement: the aforementioned Durant hereby hires himself to the aforementioned Grignon, Gaigneur and Massé to serve them or others who are in charge of the country of Canada in New France, and to do as he is commanded for three consecutive years, commencing on the day that he arrives in the said country of Canada. In return, the parties of the second part will transport him in a ship, will feed him during the journey and for the following three years, and in addition, will pay him annually at the end of each year the sum of 75 livres for his wages and for the upkeep of his clothes. Executed in La Rochelle in the office of the aforementioned notary on the morning of the third day of March, one thousand six hundred and fifty-seven, in the presence of Jean Combauld and Jean Airault, inhabitants of La Rochelle, and the aforementioned Durant and Grignon have declared that they do not know how to sign their names, but the aforementioned Grignon has set down his mark. Signatures: A.G. (mark of the aforementioned Grignon), Pierre Gaigneur - Jean Massé - Airault, Combauld - P. Moreau, Royal Notary.

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The contract executed, the upkeep of the engaged person was the responsibility of the engager, who installed his man in an inn, awaiting the day of embarkation, where he was free to move around, and received an allowance of a few pennies a day. The costs of recruitment, food, lodging, and transportation, together with the allowances for necessary expenses of the engaged person, all added up to about 100 *livres*. To reduce these expenses, the engager sought to bring about the day of embarkation as soon as possible.¹



In the spring of 1657, the Gaigneur-Grignon association had chartered a large ship, moored in the port of La

Figure 5 17th Century sailing ship

Rochelle, that was to depart for Quebec. It was *The Arms of Amsterdam*, a sailing ship of 250 tons. We have called it a “large ship,” but we must understand that it was not a freighter of forty, fifty or even eighty thousand tons such as we have today, but it was a ship of some importance for the period, because at that time most vessels weighed no more than 50, 60 or 70 tons.

Without doubt, this is the ship in which our ancestor, Jean Durand crossed the ocean.

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When was the departure? We cannot say exactly. However, we are certain that it was not before April 5, because it was on that day that the associates Gaigneur, Grignon, and Massé completed their engagements. On the other hand, since the list stops abruptly on this same date, we can presume that the ship was at the point of weighing anchor, letting out its sails, and flying before the wind to Quebec.

Oh! What dear images must have pressed on the spirit of our emigrant when they let slip the moorings and the ship decisively left the port of La Rochelle, that corner of the earth where he was born, the dwelling where he lived, the hearth which he had just left, and, above all, those dear beings which he had left behind and whom he would never see again! What emotions must have swelled his heart when France gradually receded in the ocean, and the last towers of La Rochelle disappeared in the distance!

In order to relive with him those painful days of the ocean crossing, let us come by his side in the sailing ship of another age, not very well equipped, and deliver ourselves in spirit to the physical and moral experiences of life at sea.

Monsignor Albert Tessier, in *Those Who Built Our Country*, relates in a manner both realistic and picturesque what an ocean crossing was like in the 17th century:

Those who embarked knew that they were going into the danger of death; therefore, they had previously taken the precaution of assuring their safety by putting themselves in order with their conscience. Most of them dictated their last wishes and disposed of their possessions left behind.

Death could come in many forms, unfortunately all too real: shipwreck, drowning, attack by pirates, scurvy, typhus, fevers, etc. They were often dispirited before the ships had even left the harbor.

The duration of this voyage could be as long as four months. One could consider oneself lucky, in general, to cross the sea in six to eight weeks.

The mobile lodging to which they were obliged to confine their lives for such a long period offered very limited comfort. These old sailing ships were of modest dimensions and very poorly adapted to the service of travelers. Everything was piled up higgledy-piggledy in those squat ships, which floated very well, but which obeyed the waves with a willingness that the stomachs of the passengers could not share.

A ship of 200 tons had approximately the following dimensions: length of the keel, 68 feet; overall length, 92 feet; breadth, 24 feet.

Cooking on these ships was rudimentary; generally, it was the lowest of the

sailors and often a cabin boy who were charged with the task of preparing meals. Some passengers furnished their own food for the duration of the voyage.

These personal provisions usually consisted of bread, maize, chickpeas, salted fish and salt pork, eggs preserved in melted fat, dry raisins, etc. Some brought chickens, sheep and live pigs.

They had to take care of these strange companions on board themselves, feed them, and when they wanted to regale themselves on fresh meat, they had to kill them. Despite these extras, the food problem was often disturbingly complicated, especially when circumstances prolonged the voyage. The rancid smell of the salted provisions and the foul water in the bilges, the diverse smells of the animals, the acrid fumes of the sailors' tobacco, the bad quality of the food, the twisting movements and the rolling of the ship – everything contributed to make digestion painful. Most of the travelers were stricken with seasickness.

Without the natural optimism and good humor of our ancestors, these living conditions would have made the ocean crossing unbearable.

One other force, supernatural, comforted the travelers. On all ships of the King, there was a chaplain. And the itinerant parish which the ship constituted regularly received the services of a priest. Public prayer and spiritual exercises were the rule. Blasphemy and improper proposals were strictly forbidden on board. One or two statues of the Virgin were enthroned in a place of honor on the bridge, where the passengers and crew came together at different times for hymns or prayers.

J. B. Chacot writes:

Hauling in or spreading of the sails, was accompanied by invocations to “Mary, Mother of God,” and the prayers were very frequent. On Saturday, they were recited in front of the statue of the Virgin Mary, placed at the entrance of the poop deck, and on special occasions, moments of peril or of victory or discovery of land, the *Gloria in Excelcis Deo*, the *Te Deum Laudamus*, and the Hail Mary were intoned by all the passengers and crew.

In a good wind, the ship ploughed on, buffeted, twisted, and deluged by breaking waves; but at least it proceeded onward. If the wind shifted, the sailors working the sails followed the same shift, and it was necessary to tack to and fro in order not to lose ground. In calm weather, the vessel was immobile in a gentle cradle, which gave some respite to upset stomachs and bruised limbs.

Towards the end, the passage by the banks of Newfoundland led to a feeling of relief. General rejoicing provided a somewhat madcap gaiety, and the abundance of fresh cod enriched the diet which had become too limited.

In approaching the Canadian coast, new dangers arose. Fog, sandbanks, and rocks made navigation much more perilous. Often the thick mist and the currents led ships off their route and led them unknowingly up against hidden reefs where they broke up. Hundreds of shipwrecks took place along the coast of Newfoundland and at the entrance of the St. Lawrence Gulf. The river itself had a very bad reputation among navigators, who feared it much more than the ocean.

If arrival in sight of Canadian soil did not diminish the perils of navigation, it at

least freed the voyagers' breasts of the oppression which the infinity of water and sky caused to weigh heavily on the tiny ship lost in an immense emptiness.

One could see solid earth, mountains, trees, and living things. Fishing boats, and sailing ships returning to Europe, broke the monotony of solitude. People communicated from ship to ship, receiving or giving news, passing along letters for friends or relatives left over there. All this seemed like the end of a long nightmare. One felt oneself come alive again!

Getting off the ship on the mainland permitted hunting game, stocking up with fresh water, and bartering possessions for various provisions. The proximity of the unknown new life revived energies to the point of almost erasing the distressing memories of the interminable weeks that had passed since leaving France.

One can easily imagine how the countryside appeared to the immigrants as they went up the St. Lawrence River. Virgin nature still ruled in all its savagery. The imprints of civilized man were rare in this new world with its scenes of grandeur. Isolated clearings were scattered here and there along the banks of the river, but these were far apart. Poor houses of the colonists were raised in the middle of these clearings, and occasional modest steeples preached hope in pointing to the sky. At last, Quebec appeared, clinging to its towering cliff. It was the most populous settlement, even though it contained only a few hundred French people.

The ship is berthed. People get off. The immigrants make their first contact with their new homeland. Most will stay and marry here. Their families will grow and prosper. Among them will be that of Jean Durand, which forms today a 300-year-old family tree, whose branches extend over all of North America.

¹ French coinage was in constant flux, and the relative value of coined money was fixed by royal decree and not a coin's precious metal content. The *livre* was not a coin, but a monetary unit used in accounting. French coins in circulation at this time were the *Louis d'Or*, and various denominations of the *écu*, the *sol*, and the *denier*. The *Louis d'Or* was a gold coin of limited circulation weighing about one-fourth ounce, comparable to an English "pound" in value. The *écu* was a silver coin (originally gold) comparable to today's *franc*. For accounting purposes, twelve *deniers* made up a *sol*, and twenty *sols* made up a *livre*. The *livre* was generally valued at about 1/10 of a *Louis d'Or*.