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**Engagements: Guide to Fur Trade Employment Contracts,  
1670-1821**

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Most of us cherish fanciful notions about our French-Canadian ancestors. Many imagine their ancestors as rugged voyageurs paddling along singing in unison with their companions as they journey to a distant fur trading post. The real voyageurs took their canoes across Canada from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Hudson's Bay to the Gulf of Mexico. They paddled their canoes for eighteen hours a day. At portages they endured incredible hardships carrying two ninety pound packs (pièces) at a time. Many of them undertook the trip from Montréal to Fort William (Thunder Bay, Ontario). This journey was approximately a thousand miles and involved more than thirty-six portages. It took a brigade of freight canoes an average of five to six weeks to cover this distance, although an express canoe could do it in as little as eighteen days.<sup>1</sup> At Fort William the voyageurs would exchange their cargo of trade goods for beaver and other fur pelts. They would then start the gruelling return trip home. It was a dangerous occupation which saw many men drowned or accidentally maimed. However, its adventure, comradery, and a certain kind of wilderness freedom appealed to many French-Canadians.

Every year men from the St. Lawrence River Valley would seek employment as voyageurs in the fur trade. Researchers at the University of Montréal estimate that of those boys born from 1640-1719 in New France who reached the age of fifteen some 16.4% of them eventually became involved in the fur trade at one time or another. In the district of Montréal the rate was closer to a third.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, for many of us the romantic image we have of voyageur ancestors is true. In fact, if your ancestors lived in a town devoted to the fur trade, such as Lachine near Montréal, then you should have several voyageur ancestors.

Initially the men involved in the fur trade were known as coureurs de bois [runners of the woods]. They lived in the wilderness with the Indians and adapted to their ways. They caused many troubles for the French administrators who sought to regulate them. The best known examples of coureurs de bois would be Pierre-Esprit Radisson and Médard Chouart, sieur de Groseilliers. These renegades founded the Hudson's Bay Company. Around 1681 the authentic voyageurs [travellers] emerged. They were employed by legitimate-licensed traders and they signed a contract for their services. These men became professional paddlers and their regular employment was as voyageurs. Lastly, around 1700 the engagés [pledged or engaged to labor] began to appear in voyageur records. These habitants would travel as a voyageur in their youth for adventure and as

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Black, Old Fort William: Not the Definitive, Authorized, Shrinkproof, Cling-Free Story... (Thunder Bay, Ontario: Old Fort William Volunteer Association, 1985), p. 48. Jean Morrison, ed., The North West Company in Rebellion: Simon McGillivray's Fort William Notebook, 1815 (Thunder Bay, Ontario: Thunder Bay Historical Museum Society, Inc., 1988), p. 7. Background information for this articles came from the following books: W. J. Eccles, The Canadian Frontier, 1534-1760 (rev. ed., Albuquerque: Univ. of Mexico Press, 1983); Harold A. Innis, The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History (rev. ed., Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1956); and Robert C. Wheeler, A Toast to the Fur Trade: A Picture Essay on Its Material Culture (St. Paul, Minnesota: Wheeler Productions, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>Hubert Charbonneau, Bertrand Desjardins, and Pierre Beauchamp, "Le comportement démographique des voyageurs sous le régime français" Social History 11:21 (1978): 120-133, p. 124.

adults to earn extra money or to escape the monotony of farm life. I refer to all three types of fur trade workers as voyageurs.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I will discuss the labor contracts used to hire voyageurs. I will cover the information found in them and the available published abstracts and indexes. Lastly, I will mention several valuable tools to use in understanding these records.

### The Contents of Engagements

In New France, as well as in France, a labor contract is called an *engagement* because the worker engages to labor for an employer for an agreed upon wage for a specific time span. There are many kinds of labor contracts, in fact, many Frenchmen signed one to pay for their passage when they emigrated to Canada. The person who signs such a labor contract is known as an *engagé*. Like so many other legal documents in New France, the notary was the person who prepared the engagement. The notary clearly stated the respective rights and duties of the laborer and the employer to one another and thus protected everyone's interests. Although voyageurs were hired throughout the year, most of the contracts were made in the Spring and Summer. April was especially busy because the canoes left around May first when the ice broke on the Ottawa River.

Not every voyageur bothered to have a contract especially during the earliest period of the fur trade. Moreover, some of them would informally renew their contracts once they reached the west. According to Allaire, only 55.4% of the men mentioned in other documents used to regulate the fur trade were found in the notarial engagements for the period 1716-1745.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, a significant number of voyageurs left a paper trail behind them.

The voyageur engagements contain several interesting items for genealogists. They will of course contain the name of the voyageur often including the "dit" name. If the voyageur was a minor, then the contract will often mention the name of his parents. The names of witnesses might also be found on some engagements. The residence of the voyageur is mentioned on most the engagements. Most of the voyageurs came from Montréal and the surrounding area.<sup>5</sup> The occupation of the voyageur is recorded for roughly half of the contracts.<sup>6</sup> All this information was recorded to properly identify the person signing the contract.

The engagement usually makes clear the position the voyageur held in the canoe or in the fur trading company. The job title was a reflection of the man's skill and was important because it had a pay range associated with it.<sup>7</sup> The four positions in the canoe were:

1. *Les milieux*, the paddlers who sat in the middle. They were the least experienced and their pay was at the bottom of the scale.
2. The *avant* who stood in the bow of the canoe and was in charge of it.

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<sup>3</sup>Gratien Allaire, "Fur Trade Engages, 1701-1745" in Rendezvous: Selected Papers of the Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1981, ed. Thomas C. Buckley (St. Paul: North American Fur Trade Conference, 1984), pp. 15-26, p. 15. Allaire's article is of special interests to genealogists since he identifies the towns and families which contributed a disproportionate share to the voyageur life.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 16

<sup>5</sup>Allaire found that 94.8% of the contracts he studied recorded residence and 80% of all the contracts were for men from the Montréal area. Ibid., pp. 17-18.

<sup>6</sup>Allaire found 53.6% of the contracts recorded occupation. Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>7</sup>Black, Old Fort William, pp. 13, 41-43, and 47-48.

3. The *gouvernail* was the steersman who stood in the stern of the canoe. The *avant* and *gouvernail* were know as *les bouts* and were paid more than *les milieux* because of their advanced skills.
4. The *guide* was in the bow of the lead canoe in a brigade. He was paid at the top of the scale because he was in command of several canoes travelling to the same post.

In addition to these four job titles you might also find a voyageur employed as a *commis*. This is a clerk whose job it was to keep the records of the fur trade at the distant posts. This was an important position since it often led to promotions. A *commis* could hope to become a *bourgeois* eventually. The *bourgeois* was a partner in a fur trade company or to put it simply, a boss. Lastly, some men hired on as craftsmen, such as blacksmiths or carpenters.

The engagement will also mentions the name of the bourgeois hiring the voyageur. During the British period of the fur trade most of the employers were Scottish or English with only a handful being French-Canadians. To get a precise idea of who your ancestor worked for you can consult the appendix of the following work on the North West Company (NWCo.):

Wallace, W. Stewart, ed., Documents Relating to the North West Company. Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1934.

See Appendix A, "A Biographical Dictionary of Nor'Westers," pp. 425-505. See also his edited The Macmillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography (4th ed., rev., enlarged, and updated by W. A. McKay, Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1978).

Wallace provides brief biographical summaries for most of the fur trade bourgeois, even those only indirectly involved in the NWCo. Using the information he provides you will be able to identify if the bourgeois who hired your ancestor was a partner in the NWCo., the competing XYCo., the Michilimackinac Co., or some other independent operation. For example, if your ancestor signed on to work for McGill and Todd you will find that this was an independent company which operated in the fur trade south-west of Michilimackinac.

From its founding in 1784 to its merger in 1821 with Hudson's Bay Company, the NWCo. and its associated partners hired a disproportionate number of voyageurs. However, it is a rare engagement that will clearly state that the employer is the NWCo. Rather, it will usually state the names of the associated partners. For example, if your ancestor worked for McTavish, Frobisher, and Co., then he was an employee of a firm associated with the NWCo. In fact, McTavish was the main founder of the company.

To identify clearly the correct company you will have to consider the date of the contract and the destination. A bourgeois in one year operating out of a particular area might be working for a competing company. A few years later he might be a member of the NWCo.

There were also several companies and a series of monopolies which employed voyageurs during the French regime. The Dictionary of Canadian Biography will be of help in determining the company affiliations for the bourgeois mentioned in the engagements for this period as well as the British period.

Dictionary of Canadian Biography. 10 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 1966-1987.

Each of the following volumes is organized by surname and contains the biographies of people who died between the years indicated:

- Vol. I, 1000-1700, 1966,
- Vol. II, 1701-1740, 1969,
- Vol. III, 1741-1770, 1974,
- Vol. IV, 1771-1800, 1979,
- Vol. V, 1801-1820, 1983,
- Vol. VI, 1821-1835, 1987,
- Vol. VII, 1836-1850, forthcoming,

Vol. VIII, 1851-1860, 1985,  
Vol. IX, 1861-1870, 1976,  
Vol. X, 1871-1880, 1972,  
Vol. XI, 1881-1890, 1982.

See also the Dictionary of Canadian Biography: Index to Volumes I to IV, 1000 to 1800 (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981).

The justification for tracking information about an employer is that it will reveal interesting details about your voyageur ancestors. In general, looking at the people who had control over an ancestor's fate often uncovers otherwise hidden facts. An important illustration of this principle, as it relates to voyageurs, is that many men signed engagements to work for famous explorers on their journeys of discovery. During the French period you might find an ancestor who paddled with Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet, Nicolas Perrot, René-Robert Cavalier de La Salle, or Pierre Gaultier de La Vérendrye.<sup>8</sup> During the British period your ancestor may have helped Simon Fraser, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, or David Thomas.

The destination the voyageur must travel to will be stated in the engagement. Some typical destinations include Detroit, Michilimackinac, Chequamegon or La Pointe, the Illinois country, the land of the 8ta8ois, Hudson's Bay, Grand Portage, New Orleans, Fort Orange [Albany, New York], the Athabasca region, or simple the vague pays-d'en-haut [the up country]. Obviously some of these are now cryptic place-names. For instance, 8ta8ois or 8ta8ats means the land of the Ottawa, that is, the area around Michilimackinac.<sup>9</sup> There are several valuable resources that you can use to identify these destinations:

Morse, Eric W. Fur Trade Canoe Routes of Canada / Then and Now. 2nd ed. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1971.

A guide to the river routes, lakes, and portages along the voyageur trails. He provides maps which show the waterways and the portages. He also makes mention of the key posts along these waterways.

Voorhis, Ernest, comp. "Historic Forts and Trading Posts of the French Regime and of the English Fur Trading Companies." Typewritten and bond mss., Ottawa: Department of the Interior, 1930.

This is an excellent resource available at the Burton Historical Collection. It provides details about all the known forts and posts involved in the fur trade. Many of these sites simply no longer exist. Voorhis is very thorough in locating even the most obscure spots. He carefully shows all the known variations in place-names.

During the French period of the fur trade the most important post was at Michilimackinac. With the British period Grand Portage in Minnesota was the center of the trade until 1803 when it was determined that the fort was within American boundaries. The British removed the center of the fur trading to Fort William in Ontario. These were the rest stations and rendezvous points of the fur trade. Most of the engagements will be for one of these centers of trade. However, a significant minority will be for some of the smaller more remote posts. Voorhis will help pinpoint these rare locations mentioned in the engagements.

Your voyageur ancestors travelled among Indians and were dependent upon them for furs, food, and friendship. The Indians were key to the success of the fur trade. A knowledge of tribal distribution and

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<sup>8</sup>In the case of La Vérendrye I know that engagement and congé records exists for many of the men he directly hired or indirectly engaged through business associates. They can be found in Rapport des Archives nationales du Québec [hereinafter RAQ], 1922-1923, pp. 200, 205, 229, & 233; 1929-1930, pp. 278-283, 317-324, 340-342, 353-363, 396-408, & 370; 1930-1931, pp. 362-365. See Nellis M. Crouse, La Vérendrye: Fur Trader and Explorer (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1956), pp. 56, 98-99, 126, 131, 168, 169, 192, 198, 200, 204, and 216. I have not made a systematic search of biographies dealing with other explorers, but I am confident that many of the better documented ones will list the voyageurs accompanying the discoverers.

<sup>9</sup>The "8" was a symbol the French Jesuits derived to stand for the Indian sound "wa."

locations is important in understanding the places voyageurs travelled to pick up furs. The following works will be of some help:

Tanner, Helen Hornbeck, ed. Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History. Norman, Oklahoma: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

Provides several maps showing the location of fur trading posts and nearby tribes.

Trigger, Bruce, vol. ed. Handbook of North American Indians. Vol. 15: The Northeast. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978.

This handbook covers the Indians of the Atlantic coast, the St. Lawrence Valley, and the Great Lakes region. It is an ongoing effort that will eventually cover all the tribes in Canada and the United States. The volumes are being released as they are completed and not in sequence. Each volume contains articles devoted to a different tribe or theme and written by an expert in the field. The chapters summarize the best available anthropological, archeological, and historical data. This is a valuable work to consult for background information about Indians and the lands they inhabited.

Lastly, the engagements will make mention of the length of the contract, the wages to be paid, any advances on the wages, and special arrangements--such as, allowances for the voyageur to bring extra merchandise along for personal trading. You can also use the engagements to gauge the literacy of your ancestors. Most of them only leave a simple mark. Allaire only found 10.1% of the engagements were signed for the period from 1701 to 1745.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Fur Trade Under the French and British**

There are several differences in the fur trade between the French and British periods which affected the voyageurs and their engagements. The most important difference was distance. During the French period when Michilimackinac was the rendezvous the Saskatchewan region was the furthest west the voyageurs traveled. During the English period the Athabasca region was the furthest north and the Pacific coast the furthest west a voyageur might travel. Because of the extreme distances, some 3000 miles between Montréal and the Athabasca Country, no canoe brigade could travel the whole distance and hope to return within the five ice free months. Therefore, necessity imposed a division of labor.

The British employed two teams of voyagers. One worked the main line from Montréal to Grand Portage or Fort William. The other took the cargo from the rendezvous point and brought it deep into the interior. Due to this division of labor, a new set of distinctions arose among the voyageurs. *Les mangeurs du lard*, or pork-eaters, travelled the main line leg. They got their name from the pork lard they carried from Montréal which they mixed with their food. *Les hommes du nord*, or the northmen (also known as, *hivernants*, winter residents), worked deep in the wilderness. Each team had their own type of canoe. The *canot de maître* was larger, about 35-40 feet, carried four tons, and had a crew of eight to twelve. It was used in the trip from Montréal and on the Great Lakes. The *canot du nord* was smaller, 25 feet, carried one and a half tons, and had a crew of four to six. Most of the engagements recorded in the published abstracts and indexes will be for the voyageurs working the Montréal to Michilimackinac, Grand Portage or Fort Williams leg of the system.

The NWC's activities covered such a broad territory that it was necessary to divide the operation into departments. For example, in 1813-1814 the departments were Athabasca, Fort des Prairies (Saskatchewan River), Upper English River, Lower Red River (or Rat River), Athabasca River & Lesser Slave Lake, Fort Dauphin, Rocky Mountain Portage, Lac Ouinipique (Lake Winnipeg), Red River, Lac Le Pluie (Rainy Lake), Fond du Lac, Fort William (or Kaministikwia) Lake Nipigon, Michipicoten, and Sault Ste. Marie.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Allaire, "Fur Trade Engages," p. 24.

<sup>11</sup>Morrison, North West Company in Rebellion, pp. 41-44.

There were also changes in social stratification between the French and British periods. With the Conquest of Canada the French-Canadians came to fill most of the jobs at the lowest levels. In contrast, the Scottish and English came to occupy the top positions. Moreover, even at the middle level fewer clerks were French-Canadian and more were Scottish or English. Only a handful of French-Canadians were able to remain in the fur trade as leading bourgeois.

This is not to say that the business was not stratified in the past. During the French period many of the prominent fur trade families were tied to the military and administrative elite, were directly from France, or, after the conquest, they moved to France. However, French-Canadians had more opportunities during the French period to move up.

As the fur trade grew and became more complex the paper work and the bureaucracy involved also changed. The French were already using account books and packing lists, however, by the time of the British, these documents as well as the engagements were often on printed forms with fill-in-the-blank sections. The sample translated engagement which accompanies this article is such a printed form. This engagement is for a young man hired to work for the bourgeois McTavish, Frobisher, and Co., therefore, he was an employee of the NWCo. The notary is Louis Chaboillez, he was a relative of one of the few French-Canadian partners of the NWCo.

Despite the change in leadership from French to British bourgeois, and the growing complexity of the fur trade, the craft of the voyageur remained relatively stable across time. It was always hard dangerous work for modest pay.

#### **Published Abstracts and Indexes to Engagements**

Fortunately for genealogists many of the engagements have survived. Moreover many of them have been abstracted and published in indexes. Most of the work was done by Massicotte, the former archivists for Montréal. The following citations typically list the date of the contract, the employee's name, the employers' names, the destination, and the notary. The works published in the Rapport des Archives nationales du Québec are organized chronologically and are also indexed.

Hansen, James L. "Mackinac Fur Trade Engagements in the Archives of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1807-1821." The Detroit Society for Genealogical Research Magazine 48:2 (Winter 1984): 66.

This one-page article complements the work done by Russell (discussed below). It lists some additional Mackinac engagements found among the Charles Reaume papers in the Grignon, Lawe, and Porlier collection, vol. 56-57, Wis. Mss. B, Archives Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. These engagements are only a handful of the over 200 contracts in this collection. Most of them are for the Green Bay area from 1805 to 1840. This collection is available on microfilm through interlibrary loan from the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

Lawrence, Roger W. "The Voyageurs." The Genealogist 14:1 (Winter 1988): 6-23.

Contains a computerized and sorted list of the voyageur contracts found in the papers of the notary François Lepailleur of Montréal for the year 1738. Lawrence also provides background information about engagements and the fur trade. Many of these contracts will be found in Massicotte's abstracts.

Lefebvre, Jean-Jacques. "Répertoire des engagements pour l'ouest 1778-1788." Rapport des Archives nationales du Québec (1946/47): 301-369.

Lefebvre covers the ten year period which Massicotte neglected.

Massicotte, Edouard-Zotique. "Répertoire des engagements pour l'ouest conservés dans les Archives judiciaires de Montréal (1670-1821)." Rapport des Archives nationales du Québec:

1670-1745, (1929/30): 191-466,  
1746-1752, (1930/31): 353-453,  
1753-1758, (1931/32): 243-365,  
1758-1778, (1932/33): 245-304,  
1788-1797, (1942/43): 261-397,  
1798-1801, (1943/44): 335-444,  
1802-1804, (1944/45): 307-401,  
1805-1821, (1945/46): 225-340.

This stands as the single most important source on published engagements. However, it is not very thorough for the latter years. Even the earlier volumes are incomplete. The last volume in the series only covers the contracts produced by the notaries Louis Chaboillez and J.G. Beek. The vast majority of these contracts in the last volume are for the NWCo. Some other miscellaneous legal documents are included such as obligations to settled fur trade related debts. Also, some of the engagements are for whole groups, that is, all the men travelling in a brigade.

Russell, Donna Valley, ed. Michigan Voyageurs: From the Notary Book of Samuel Abbott, Mackinac Island, 1807-1817. Detroit: Detroit Society for Genealogical Research, 1982.

This work abstracts engagements of men from Québec who worked out of Mackinaw Island for the American Fur Co., the Mackinac Co., or other independent fur traders.

These indexed abstracts are valuable clues, but to complete your research you will have to acquire copies of the original engagements. You should be aware that these guides often make mistakes in transcribing names, miss contracts, or neglect to abstract all the notaries doing engagements in an area. You should also consult the published abstracts or original repertories of the notaries from your ancestor's community. This will allow you to locate any possible engagements not found in the above sources. The original engagements are in the regional depositories of the Archives nationales du Québec, especially the one in Montréal. When you contact the archives for a photocopy of the original you should state the name of the voyager, the name of the notary, and the date of the contract.

There are several other valuable tools which you can use to uncover information about your ancestor's engagements.

Burton, Clarence M., comp. "Records from Montreal Notarial Archives in Palais de Justice, Montreal, Including Business Contracts, Indentures for Apprentices and Servants, etc., Pertaining Principally to the Fur Trade, 1682-1822." 22 vols. and an index, transcribed manuscript copy, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit, 1895-1898 [Canadian Archives MS/M76: 1682-1822].

These notarial papers were hand copied between 1895 and 1898 at the request of Burton. The Works Projects Administration prepared an index in 1939-1940. Each page is stamped with a number and the ranges of these numbers are printed on the spine of each volume. The index lists only page numbers and not volumes. Many of these documents are not complete copies but only extracts. The emphasis is on documents relating to Detroit history. It of course contains many engagements. You can not assume the accuracy of the transcript and the original should still be consulted. Nevertheless, this is an excellent shortcut for Detroit related engagements.

Jetté, René. Dictionnaire généalogique des familles du Québec. With the collaboration of the Programme de recherche en démographie historique. Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1983.

Another valuable lead for finding voyageur engagements is Jetté. He often records "engagé Ouest" and a date which means a voyageur contract was found for that person.

Margry, Pierre, comp. Mémoires et documents pour servir à l'histoire des origines françaises des pays d'outre-mer: Découvertes et établissements des Français dans l'ouest et dans le sud le l'Amérique septentrionale (1614-1754). 6 vols., Paris: Maisonneuve et cie, 1879-1888.

The Burton Historical Collection has an English translation of these volumes, done by B.F. Stevens and Brown, Ltd., London at the request of Burton. They are 6 vols. in 7, typescript, and bound. Unfortunately the volumes are not indexed. You will find them listed in the regular card catalog and not the manuscript card catalog. These volumes are also available for use in the library on three microfilm reels (microfilm number 43). Burton published parts of this translation as the "Cadillac Papers," Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collection 33 (1903): 36-715. This set is especially valuable in tracking information about men who La Salle or Cadillac may have engaged as voyageurs. However, the lack of an index makes searching it problematic.

Masson, L.R. Les bourgeois de la compagnie du Nord-Ouest. 2 vols., New York: Antiquarian Press Ltd., 1960.

See "List des 'bourgeois,' commis, engagés, et 'voyageurs' de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest, après la fusion de 1804," vol I., pp. 395-413. This is a list of NWCo. employees, clerks, and partners after the merger of Sir Alexander Mackenzie and Co. (also known as the XYCo.) with the NWCo. It is arranged by fur trading departments.

Osborne, A. C. "The Migration of Voyageurs from Drummond Island to Penetanguishene in 1829." Ontario Historical Society: Papers and Records, vol. III. Toronto: Ontario Historical Society, 1901, pp. 123-166.

This article contains a list of the voyageurs, pp. 149-166, who removed to the Penetanguishene peninsula on the bottom of Georgian Bay when Drummond Island was turned over to the Americans in a boundary settlement.

Quaife, Milo M., ed. The John Askin Papers. Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1928.

Contains many biographical sketches of the French and British fur traders of Detroit and documents about them.

White, Bruce M., comp. The Fur Trade in Minnesota: An Introductory Guide to Manuscript Sources. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977.

This is an excellent guide to the manuscripts available in the Minnesota Historical Society collection. It is also a detailed introduction to the records available in other American and Canadian archives and libraries. Although the emphasis is on Minnesota, there is a wealth of information about the whole Great Lakes region. It is very helpful in pointing to the existence of other various fur trade records of interest including account books and journals. An appendix is also provided which lists many voyageurs, see "A Preliminary Roster of Fur Traders in the Fond du Lac and Upper Mississippi Regions, 1795-1822," pp. 30-57.

Not all of the engagements have been abstracted and indexed. Notaries who rarely did voyageur engagements are ignored. Furthermore, as time proceeds, the coverage narrows until it focuses on a handful of notaries. Most of the work has only been done for the Montréal region. For engagements during the British period the bias is towards those voyageurs who worked for the NWCo. If your ancestors worked for another company, such as the XYCo., then you will have to delve into original notarial records to find their engagements. White's guide will prove very helpful in identifying original manuscripts to further your research.

The Archives nationale du Québec à Montréal, the National Archives of Canada, Hudson's Bay Company Archives, the Burton Historical Collection, the Minnesota Historical Collection, and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin are all important centers for doing research on your voyageur ancestors. These institutions have a wealth of original manuscript materials and microfilm copies relating to voyageurs and the fur trade. Although these institutions will usually answer written queries for specific information, they are not equipped to do in depth research for you. A visit is necessary and will prove rewarding.

In addition to these research centers, I would also suggest a visit to the Resource Library of Old Fort William. The Old Fort William museum surrounds this library which is located in one of the reconstructed

buildings. It is an excellent place to absorb the history of the fur trade. Within the collection of this research library is a card catalog of contracts for NWCo. engagés and clerks.<sup>12</sup>

The addresses for these archives and libraries are as follows:

Archives nationale du Québec  
Centre régional de Montréal  
1945, rue Mullins  
Montréal, Québec H3K 1N9  
(514) 873-3064

Hudson's Bay Company Archives  
Provincial Archives of Manitoba  
200 Vaughan St.  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3C 0P8  
(204) 945-3971

National Archives of Canada  
[formerly the Public Archives of Canada]  
395 Wellington St.  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0N3  
(613) 955-5138

State Historical Society of Wisconsin  
816 State St.  
Madison, WI 53706

Burton Historical Collection  
Detroit Public Library  
5201 Woodward  
Detroit, MI 48202  
(313) 833-1480

Minnesota Historical Society  
690 Cedar St.  
St. Paul, MN 55101

Old Fort William  
Resource Library  
Vickers Heights P.O.  
Thunder Bay, Ontario P0T 2Z0  
(807) 577-8461

## Congés and Licenses

Besides the engagements there are two other closely associated documents which should not be neglect, congés and licenses. In essence, they were permits that the French or British officials issued to fur traders. You can use them to uncover more information about your voyageur ancestors.

Congés are authorizations to take canoes into the pays-d'en-haut to trade with Indians for furs. The French used them from 1681 onward. The administrators of New France established the congé system to control the fur trade. Thus they hoped to regulate the glutted market and to limit the excessive numbers of men involved in fur trading illegally (the coureurs de bois). Originally the government issued only a few permits but eventually the number grew. At the beginning they were often granted to widows or charitably organizations who in turn sold them at a profit to the fur traders. To trade with the Indians in the wilderness it was mandatory to acquire a congé.

Congés contain the name of official issuing the permit, the name of the person receiving it, the names of voyageurs in the canoes, the number of canoes, the destination, the cargo, the date issued, and the date registered. The following guides list the congés for the period from 1681 to 1752.

Massicotte, Edouard-Zotique. "Congés et permis déposés ou enregistrés à Montréal sous le régime français (1681-1737)." Rapport des Archives nationales du Québec (1921/22): 189-225.

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<sup>12</sup>The Mackinac Island State Park Commission also has an archives with abundant materials relating to the fur trade at the straits of Mackinac. This archives is in their Lansing office. It is only opened when the museums at the straits are closed. It is not setup to handle outside researchers. If you have a specific research question relating to a Michilimackinac voyageur, then you might be able to make special arrangements for permission to visit this archives. Contact Mackinac Island State Park Commission, P.O. Box 30028, Lansing, MI 48909, (517) 322-1319.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Congés de traite conservés aux Archives de la province du Québec (1739-1752)." Rapport des Archives nationales du Québec (1922/23): 192-265.

\_\_\_\_\_. "A propos de congés (1682-1725)." Les Bulletin des recherches historiques 32:5 (May 1926): 296-300.

These are organized chronologically and the first two citations are also indexed by surname. Only the volume for the period from 1739 to 1752 lists the names of the voyageurs. This volume frequently identifies the guides of the brigades. The Archives nationales du Québec has the original congés.

With the Conquest the British adopted a similar scheme for regulating the fur trade. They issued licenses to trade with the Indians. In addition to the information provided in the congés, the trade licenses also mention the names of business associates placing bonds for the fur traders. The following guide to trade licenses is available in the Burton Historical Collection:

Stevens, Wayne E., comp. "Abstract of Indian Trade Licenses in Canadian Archives, Ottawa, 1767-1776, with Photostats of Consolidated Returns and Sample Licenses, 1767-1790." 3 vols. in 4., mss. Burton Historical Collection [Canadian Archives MS/Q89: 1767-1790].

Stevens includes an index to the voyageurs listed in the trade licenses. The original licenses are at the National Archives of Canada which has microfilmed them and made them available for interlibrary loan (RG 4 B 28, vols. 110 and 115).

The congés and licenses are important because they provide supporting documentation for an engagement. From them you can learn who was on the trip, how many canoes were used, and what was carried for trade. Again, you can use Wallace's biographical sketches and the Dictionary of Canadian Biography to get a better idea of the bourgeois involved in the congés and licenses.

### Genealogical Value

The voyageur engagement records are not standard genealogical documents. They frequently lack information showing parentage or other family relationships. However, they are of genealogical value for a number of reasons.<sup>13</sup> They often show residences for workers who by their nature were often very mobile and difficult to trace. You can use them to trace migration patterns. You can also use them to help prove where an ancestor living among the Indians originated in Québec. For this reason alone Métis researchers will find these engagements of particular interest. Although the engagement rarely delineates family relations, the evidence you find in these documents can be used to support a relationship. Often father and son, uncles and nephews, brothers, or cousins would join the same brigade. This same situation also causes some genealogical difficulties since it is easy to confuse relatives with the same name. You will have to make some effort to untangle the *père* active in the fur trade during the 1720's from his *fils* working in the 1740's. Lastly, we can use these records to discover if any ancestors accompanied the great explorers. These explorations were often financed with the profits collected from trading for furs along the way. Consequently, the men on these famous expeditions often signed regular voyageur engagements.

I want to conclude with two examples from my own family of what can be found in voyageur engagements. Although I do not have any French-Canadian ancestors who settled in colonial Detroit, I do have two who were involved in the early history of the community. I found both of them in the voyageur engagement records.

My ancestor François Brunet dit Le Bourbonnais was from Lachine. He signed an engagement to work for the Compagnie de la Colonie du Canada before the notary Antoine Adhemér on 30 May 1705. He agreed

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<sup>13</sup>For an introduction to doing further genealogical research on voyageur ancestors see, James L. Hansen, "Tracing the Voyageurs," In the Footsteps of the Habitant, 1986 Seminar Annual (Toronto: Ontario Genealogical Society, 1986), pp. 3-13.

to travel to "fort Le pont Chartrain du lac Érié" (Detroit).<sup>14</sup> He latter rented property on Ste. Anne street in Detroit on 20 June 1708.<sup>15</sup> Brunet eventually decided to return to Lachine near Montréal. His father had also been a voyageur and his sons and their descendants would become voyageurs. Several generations worked in the family occupation for well over a hundred years.<sup>16</sup>

Robert Réaume, my other voyageur ancestor, had a more substantial role in Detroit's history. Like Brunet, he was from Lachine. On 5 September 1701, Réaume along with Joseph Trottier des Vaisseaux [sieur des Ruisseaux] and Toussaint Pothier [dit Laverdure] signed a contract before the notary Antoine Adhemér. They promised that they would travel to Detroit in the service of the King for François-Marie Picoté, sieur de Belestre. Réaume was to receive 200 livres for his effort. The interesting fact about this contract is that they took as passengers the Madames de Lamothe and de Tonti and party. This was Antoine Laumet de Lamothe, sieur de Cadillac's wife, his lieutenant's wife, and their children.<sup>17</sup> The Detroit Public Library has a mural by Gari Melchers commemorating this arrival of Madame Cadillac. Every time I see it I recall the romantic image of my voyageur ancestor Robert Réaume helping to convey the first European women to frontier Detroit. Réaume did not settle in Detroit, but his brother Pierre and his son Pierre did.<sup>18</sup> Like the Brunet dit Bourbonnais family, the Réaumes became an active voyageur family. Both families touched the history of Detroit.



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<sup>14</sup>RAQ, 1929-1930, p. 210.

<sup>15</sup>Detroit's First Directory, in the "Cadillac Papers," Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collection, 33 (1904): 373-382, p. 378.

<sup>16</sup>Allaire, "Fur Trade Engages," p. 22, identifies the Brunets as one of the main voyageur families of Pointe-Claire.

<sup>17</sup>Burton, Montreal Notarial Records, vol. 2, p. 763. RAQ 1929-1930, p. 206.

<sup>18</sup>Ernest J. Lajeunesse, The Windsor Border Region: Canada's Southernmost Frontier (Toronto: Champlain Society, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1960), pp. 340-341.

