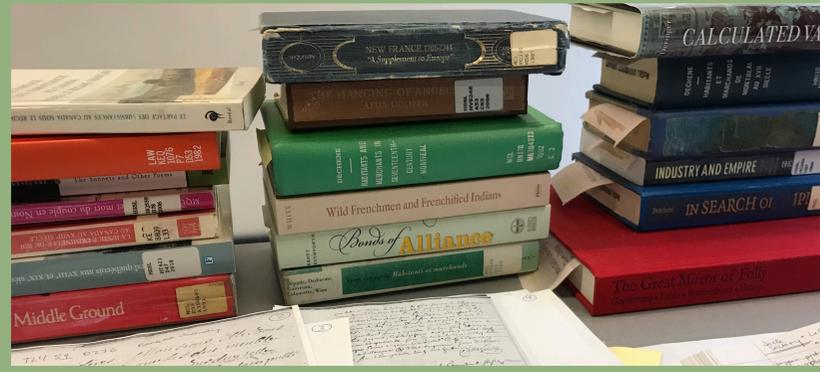


Money and Credit in France's North American Empire

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 Special thanks to **Mark Gallop**!

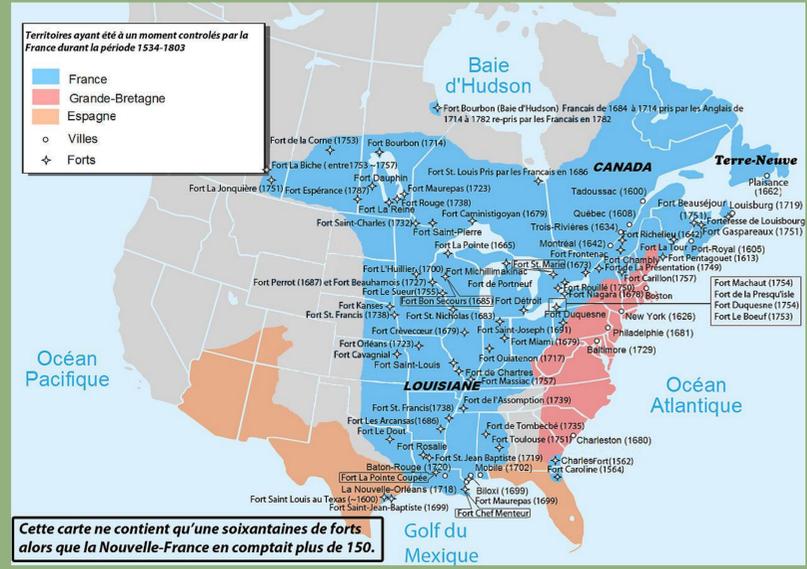
Abstract

Considering debt and credit networks in 17th and 18th centuries in New France is intriguing for a few reasons. For one, there were several major reformations of silver coins in the reign of Louis XIV and Louis XV. The value of any French coin could not be trusted to be worth it's face value of a livre, sol or denier. Some transformed their coins into silverware as a safer method of securing assets. Second, from 1685 onwards, card money and negotiable bills of exchange made up a large amount of what was exchanged. The "monnaie de carte" were subsequently outlawed, then later deemed to be legitimate but worth half their original value. Analyzing court cases of debt is indicative of how society came to value money when its legitimacy was in question. More generally, the early modern period provides a superb case for reflecting on the relationship between the economy and society.



Injury of Reputation

Due to how important the maintenance of a solid reputation was, any insult that might spread into a rumour was frequently seen as worse than just an economic loss. In a precursor to modern day libel law, people turned to the courts to maintain their reputation against injurious insults. In September 1696, Nicolas Janvrin Dufresne took Jacques Perrault Desrochers to criminal court after insults and punches were thrown due to a heated conversation about a debt. Nicolas Dufresne was a merchant who was involved in several other cases. Luckily seven witnesses were present, who testified in court.



Monnaie de carte

First introduced in 1685 by Jacques de Meulles. He was pressed for ways to pay for soldiers work. Left with no pay, they were forced to find work in the colony. Cards had nothing printed on their reverse, which meant they were commonly used and transported with IOUs written on their backs. They were also widely used by soldiers, which is another reason why they were useful as a new currency. Among other things, it prevented de Meulles from having to borrow more from local merchants, and it also conveniently kept the French from trading with foreigners.



To fully appreciate the extent to which economic language became influential in how members of society understood their relations and obligations to one another, consider the economic language used in Shakespeare's Sonnet 134 [1609]

*So now I have confessed that he is thine,
 And I my self am mortgaged to thy will,
 Myself I'll forfeit, so that other mine
 Thou wilt restore to be my comfort still:
 But thou wilt not, nor he will not be free,
 For thou art covetous, and he is kind;
 He learned but surety-like to write for me,
 Under that bond that him as fast doth bind.
 The statute of thy beauty thou wilt take,
 Thou usurer, that put'st forth all to use,
 And sue a friend came debtor for my sake;
 So him I lose through my unkind abuse.
 Him have I lost; thou hast both him and me:
 He pays the whole, and yet am I not free.*

Profit Not Primary Goal

In France, profit calculations were non-existent at the time. Double-entry booking did exist, but the priority of keeping tabs was to know who owed who what, not "how much am I worth?" Prior to the 19th century, there was no such thing as calculating a return on investment. The purpose of keeping a tab was to keep track of credit.

Dependence on Trust

Several letters in the archives demonstrates the extent to which trust played an integral part in establishing business partners. Louis Tantouin de La Touche was commissary of the Marine in Canada. After 1700, La Touche moved back to France, but he had left a number of unclaimed debts in Montreal. He entrusted Pierre Raimbault to collect unpaid debts for him. La Touche wrote to Raimbault: "[j'ai] toute confiance en vostre amitié et en vostre profite, faite je vous suplie pour moy comme vous fera pour vous mesme." As they would have to wait for the ships to come each season in order to pass messages, it took several years before debts could be fully repaid.

