

Chasing Empire  
across the Sea

Communications and the State  
in the French Atlantic,  
1713-1763

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While we may be reasonably sure that Canadians held their own private celebrations upon the first receipt of the news, the official correspondence is strangely quiet on the issue.

It is highly significant that Quebec's officials did not bemoan the fact that royal ships could make only one voyage per year. Storms, shipwreck, and hazardous coastlines were simply part of the challenges and sorrows of life. What did upset them was the too often tardy arrival of the king's ship late in the navigation season, a situation that they knew could be remedied by more careful attention to outfitting and coordination on the part of the secretary of state and the intendant at Rochefort. Much the same could be said for Louisiana, even at this early date. But Saint Pierre's situation was entirely different. Even in the event that the king's ship missed important freight or news, the Bureau of Colonies could forward these on another vessel within six months. Moreover, a wide variety of merchant vessels sailed throughout the year to the Îles du Vent. The ability to send information and supervise the colonies depended on the regularity and consistency of contact, not upon the distance or length of sailing time between France and its colonies.

The snapshot of communications efficiency provided in this case study indicates important differences in information flows between the home country and its colonies. Exchanges between French and British colonies showed that royal news openly competed with foreign sources, a situation absent in most of France itself. There the court, whether at Versailles, Marly, or elsewhere, supervised and coordinated symbolic displays in most parts of the nation, thanks to a productive and increasingly centralized bureaucracy and by relying on relatively efficient courier and postal systems. This organizational finesse stopped at France's shores. Beyond, bourgeois merchants provided the only consistently reliable method for transporting and distributing news. The crown could only establish an effective presence when its own ships and officials could travel to the colonies and back fast enough to keep the court's attention focused on specific issues for long periods of time. A six-to-eight-month gap between the issuing of orders and receipt of feedback seems to have been the limit for effective counteraction. Only with the Îles du Vent and Saint Domingue would such close contact operate, and it should not surprise us that instructions were followed the most closely in the Îles du Vent. Louisiana and Canada, progressively further away and more difficult to reach, were the only two French colonies in the Americas that could not receive, react to, and have confirmation of orders within a six-to-eight-month period. The state could be only as strong as its most recent dispatches.

### CHAPTER THREE

## *Sea and Land Connections*

A light wind from the northeast stirred the rigging of the king's ship *Le Chameau* on the morning of July 2, 1720. Father Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, respected Jesuit historian and geographer, watched as sailors slowly turned the capstan bars around and around, lifting the ship's heavy black anchors from the green-grey waters off Île d'Aix. Charlevoix had sailed twice before to New France, and he looked forward to this voyage. The first three days were pleasant sailing, but on the fourth day the skies filled with rain and the seas began to rise. Charlevoix lay in his bunk, desperately seasick. For nearly six weeks the ship rode out the waves, tacking against the heavy winds and high seas, until at long last it emerged into a cold, grey world draped in fog. The pilot proclaimed himself certain they were near or on the Grand Banks off Newfoundland – but where exactly? For a week *Le Chameau* wandered, never glimpsing the sun, while a knotted rope was dropped over the side to take soundings. On August 16 the rope reached 400 feet deep and came up grey with sand, confirming that the ship had drifted onto the richest fishing banks in the world. The sailors raised several rounds of hearty cheers. But that night a thunderstorm “louder than a hundred cannons” pounded the ship, and Charlevoix feared they might be driven ashore and ground into “bait for the cod.” *Le Chameau*, again wrapped in misty layers, sailed blindly on. Charlevoix tried to relax by scanning the waves for the fantastic battles between giant swordfish and whales that he had so often heard about. Three days later the dawn watch suddenly cried, “Land! Land!” The crew and passengers rushed on deck. To their great surprise, they found themselves in a quiet inlet ringed by jagged rocks. Incredibly, the ship had entered this natural harbour without the captain or pilot realizing it. Not two cannon shots away, a small English ship rode at anchor, just as surprised to spot them. The pilot learned from the



English that the ship had drifted into a small harbour somewhere between Cape Race and Cape Broyle, on Newfoundland's east coast.

With a better idea of their position and with a sharp reprimand from the captain still stinging his ears, the ship's pilot redrew their course to the south and then southwestward, steering into the Gulf of St Lawrence. Soon after they entered, an iceberg "taller than the towers of Notre-Dame" suddenly loomed out of the fog and nearly collided with the ship. The pilot, ever more cautious, guided *Le Chameau* gingerly between the low islands scarring the gulf's waters and the rocky shoreline to the north. Finally, after another full day and night of sailing, the ship entered the great St Lawrence estuary. For the next three weeks, it sailed slowly upriver, its pilot watching for familiar landmarks but wary of shoals and treacherous currents. On September 22 *Le Chameau* finally skirted Île d'Orléans, an island the habitants still thought to be haunted by sorcerers, and dropped anchor in Quebec's harbour the next morning. Charlevoix praised God and blithely noted the end of a "long and trying voyage" of eighty-three days.<sup>1</sup>

Charlevoix's account fits neatly into current perceptions of eighteenth-century sea travel, since it is filled with dangers, close calls, and fantastic sights. As with many other aspects of transportation in the period, historians have assumed much and imagined more. Yet we know surprisingly little about actual routes, navigational conditions, or anchorage problems faced by the thousands of mariners and their passengers who crossed the Atlantic. This ignorance stems in part from a heavy reliance on diaries and memoirs by occasional travellers, for whom the sea often held terrifying associations, and from rarely consulting the records of mariners, for whom crossing the Atlantic represented, as Dale Miquelon has put it, "business as usual."<sup>2</sup> The same problem of sources might be said to apply to other primary means of transportation – lake and river transport, and roads. How did the nature of these routes construct the reality within which metropolitan and colonial officials could efficiently use information, perceive problems and opportunities, and act upon them? This question cannot be reduced to a tidy formula which supposes that longer and longer distances created less and less state control. Eighteenth-century officials did not share current notions of acceptable speed; instead, each route created its own assumptions about speed, ease of use, and risk, and, in so doing, conditioned expectations of what might be reasonable rhythms of information exchange. We need to examine not simply length of routes, or even difficulty, but also frequency, perceptions of safety (which is related to, but independent of, difficulty), and commercial or strategic considerations. What is more, new geographies

called, at least initially, for an accumulation of knowledge that could only be gained through ongoing experience by people actively using new forms of transportation technology and the routes themselves. How did mariners, canoe paddlers, or couriers adapt to these routes, stamping them with their own traditions? How did the state accommodate to or use this local knowledge?

To explore these questions, this chapter first examines the transatlantic system of oceanic routes used by French ships. These absorbed the most attention and protection from the state. Secondly, it outlines the development of water and land transportation routes within each colony. For a variety of reasons, lake and riverine traffic remained the method of choice within all French colonies until 1763, although a nascent road system had been firmly established in all colonies on the eve of the Seven Years War. Those colonies with an easily accessible riverine/land network, and which required cooperation from colonists to construct and utilize, such as Canada and Louisiana, appear to have forged greater independence from the state. In contrast, seaborne contact lent itself to greater state intervention, as in the Îles du Vent.

#### FRANCE'S ATLANTIC RIM

Until the work of Fernand Braudel on the Mediterranean Sea attracted attention in the 1960s, historians envisioned oceans more as barriers than as bridges, a hindrance to trade and settlement.<sup>3</sup> This view still persists. One noted maritime historian has even remarked, "It cannot be denied that the Atlantic Ocean curbed the development of New France."<sup>4</sup> Historians of *ancien régime* France rarely mention transatlantic contacts and navigation at all; if they do, they emphasize the crowded conditions and hazards of French ports.<sup>5</sup> The belief that oceans have played a divisive or, at best, hindering historical role has been challenged only recently by historians interested in transatlantic ties of kinship, patronage, and spiritual community.<sup>6</sup> The most meticulous work on the actual movement of peoples and information across the ocean in the colonial era remains Ian K. Steele's *The English Atlantic*.<sup>7</sup> Steele dismantled the assumption of the perilous, isolating ocean by showing that contact in the Anglo-American Atlantic became easier, routine, and more frequent between 1670 and 1740. Two of his perceptions are applicable to this study. First, by debunking the myth that early transatlantic communications "were slow, infrequent, and dangerous," he showed that eighteenth-century observers had their own concepts of fast and acceptable levels of contact.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, he divided the Atlantic into four well-defined routes used by all English ships: a "Sugar route" to the English West Indies, a "Tobacco route"



to the Chesapeake, a "Western route" to the northern mainland colonies, and a "Northern route" to the Newfoundland fisheries and Hudson Bay. In turn, a knowledge of the physical limitations of these routes allowed Steele to plot the movement of politically sensitive information for a specific event, the Glorious Revolution of 1688.<sup>9</sup>

A similar set of sea routes reached across the North Atlantic from France to its American colonies. First, a Canadian route, consisting of two segments, between France and the colonies of Île Royale and Canada; second, an Antillean route to the French West Indies from Grenada in the south to Saint Domingue in the northwest, and which ships used to reach Cayenne on the South American mainland; and third, a Gulf route to Louisiana, which, although an extension of the Antillean route, required different navigational knowledge and posed far greater challenges. Scholars have examined only the first, the Canadian route, in any detail, with an eye to understanding early colonial trade, and some details of the Louisiana run have been imperfectly sketched out.<sup>10</sup> The most economically important and greatest route in terms of shipping, the Antillean, has received very little attention. All three routes imposed their own geographic logic not only on modes of travel but also on the very mechanisms of royal authority. There existed a direct relationship between the ease and frequency of oceanic contact and the desire to ensure royal command. As we shall see, however, easy and frequent access for the crown could also apply to those opposed to the crown's interests.

The navigational challenges to extending royal authority began on the coasts of France itself. Despite mile after mile of sheltered bays and artificially protected harbours, French mariners and Marine bureaucrats faced one overwhelming fact: the kingdom had poor access to the Atlantic Ocean (see maps 1 and 2). The prevailing westerlies and the Gulf Stream combined to slow and even batter ships as soon as they sailed beyond sight of land. Brittany's ports of Brest and Lorient (the chief port of the *Compagnie des Indes*) were especially notorious for delays.<sup>11</sup> Off La Rochelle and Rochefort, ships might wait at least a month for the western winds to change, as a very frustrated Lieutenant Rossel of the king's ship *L'Orox* did in the late summer of 1737, when he waited more than four weeks for a breath of wind to power his ship out of La Rochelle.<sup>12</sup> Even entry into the open Atlantic seldom guaranteed smooth sailing, as we saw in chapter 2, when the ship carrying the official proclamation of the Peace of Utrecht to Quebec left La Rochelle in late July of 1713, only to limp back into Brest nearly two months later, de-masted by storms.<sup>13</sup>

Access to the Atlantic from French ports on the Mediterranean coast (the Levantine ports) proved as difficult. Ships sailing from Marseille

and Toulon not only faced extremely light and unpredictable winds, but often had to run the gamut of unfriendly Spain, the Barbary States, and after 1704, the English choke point at the Straits of Gibraltar. Reaching the Atlantic Ocean from these two Mediterranean ports could be wildly unpredictable: Carrière showed that the time needed for the voyage could range between five and nine weeks, although one king's ship accomplished it in four.<sup>14</sup> None of the French ports could boast a decided advantage over any other in the kingdom for launching transatlantic voyages. Even more surprising, French ports had no distinct advantage over the ports of the British Isles or Holland in reaching the open Atlantic through the English Channel. Both England and Holland could utilize the winds of the North Sea to sweep around the British Isles, and ships from western England and Scotland used an even quicker shortcut through the Irish Sea.<sup>15</sup> Ships could reach the Americas, from Canada to Cayenne, as easily from London or Amsterdam as from Brest or Bordeaux. Wind and current combined to level the playing field or rather, the sea room – for navies and merchant fleets for each of the transatlantic routes.

#### THE CANADIAN ROUTE

The route to Canada required two stages.<sup>16</sup> As we saw in Charlevoix's account, vessels leaving France's Ponant ports steered directly westward into the Atlantic Ocean, making long tacks against the headwinds and fighting heavy seas and storms as they went. If the daily positions on such a trajectory were plotted on a map of the North Atlantic Ocean, a ship's progress would show a line of weaving zigzags and drunken loops. After four to six weeks, and about 3,400 kilometres later, ships finally entered the cold and fog-enshrouded world of the Grand Banks. Once arrived on these teeming fishing grounds, veteran sailors treated first-time passengers to a "sea baptism" by the master of the Grand Banks, *Bonhomme Terreneuve*. Few descriptions of such rituals remain, but Peter Moogk has translated one anonymous diarist's impressions from the 1750s. According to the author, the ceremony began by

disguising an old sailor with a large, fur-lined, hooded coat, a pair of high boots, a white wig on the head ... with a helmet and stocking cap, and a large, white false beard. The sailor thus attired descends from the main topmast, where he dressed himself, and, with the aid of ropes and pulleys, he slides down to the foot of the foremast ... near the mainmast the initiate is held in a sitting position on the edge of a tub filled with [fresh sea] water. There *Bonhomme Terreneuve* makes the candidate swear an oath to keep the secret [of



this ritual] from those who have not yet passed this latitude, with a [further] promise to never touch any sailor's wife ... if the initiate has not taken the precaution of giving a coin for a drink, he is at once tipped over into the tub by the two men holding him.<sup>17</sup>

The ritual not only reminds us that navigation was as much a social as a technical feat, but also that contemporary mariners themselves divided the Atlantic into two segments, a familiar "European" sphere and a more supernatural "American" one. Such customs, which turned the world upside down, where sailors might dunk aristocrats, also pre-saged the powerful role of transportation labourers in the New World. The journey back to France from the Grand Banks followed the same route, but the eastward-flowing Gulf Stream and prevailing westerlies aided the return voyage, chopping off about ten days on average (see table 3.1). While rough and posing considerable discomfort to both passengers and sailors alike, this first part of the transatlantic crossing posed very few navigational hazards and did not require sailing near enemy territory.

The second stage of the voyage, into the heart of Canada, proved to be far more dangerous and required considerable knowledge of the Gulf of St Lawrence's hydrography. As Charlevoix's account graphically showed, crossing the gulf of St Lawrence and navigating up its wide estuary was the equivalent of walking blindfolded and barefoot in a room of jagged glass. While the distance travelled measured only about 1,450 kilometres, or about one-third of the North Atlantic portion, it consumed at least the same amount of sailing time. The journey from the Grand Banks to Quebec took a minimum of three weeks and might last up to six. The return journey consumed less time, so long as it did not commence much later than the onset of icy north-easterly winds by mid-to-late October.

Upon entering the Gulf of St Lawrence, ships encountered a dismaying range of navigational obstacles. These included contrary winds, which might send a ship scurrying for the shelter of a wooded inlet, halting progress for days or even weeks; sudden, violent squalls with blinding rain; sharp, often uncharted rocks; a maze of shifting sandbars; and maddening deflections of the compass near the iron-enriched land of the Canadian Shield. But fog proved to be by far a navigator's greatest foe. Up to the 1760s, pilots determined their position either by taking bearings from the sun, usually at midday, or, more commonly when near land, by steering from one recognized landmark to another. Fog obscured both methods. Captains could either drop anchor and wait until visibility returned or proceed slowly, taking soundings every few minutes and presumably praying just as often. Once past the

Table 3.1  
Sailing times between selected Atlantic ports

Departure Port	Arrival Port	Kms	No.	Outward (in weeks)	Return
La Rochelle/Rochefort	Quebec	4,850	10	6-12	4-6
La Rochelle/Rochefort	New Orleans	9,100	14	14-21	9-12
La Rochelle/Rochefort	Saint Pierre	6,600	18	5-9	6-10
La Rochelle/Rochefort	Louisbourg	4,100	-	4-8	2½-4
Louisbourg	Quebec	900	-	2-5	1½-2½
Louisbourg	Saint Pierre	3,350	-	4-7	4-7
Bristol	Barbados	6,500	-	8-9	6-7
Bristol	Kingston (Jamaica)	7,600	-	9-11	12-14
London	Boston	4,550	-	8-9	4-5

SOURCES: Sailing distances based as closely as possible on actual routes; distance calculations from *Distance between Ports*, 1965, H.O. Publication no. 151 (Washington: U.S. Naval Oceanographic Office, 1965). Sailing times drawn from AC, C8A, vol. 46; C11A, vols. 67, 79; and C13A, vols. 15, 16, 20, 28; AM, 4JJ, liasses 15 (logs nos. 18, 19); 18 (logs nos. 53, 57, 66, 81); 29 (logs nos. 39, 42, 44, 47, 50, 55); 34 (logs nos. 4, 4bis, 5, 5bis, 6, 7, 8); and NAC, MG 18, 15, "Journal of L'Héros"; 1712; Charlevoix, *Histoire et description générale de la Nouvelle France*, 3: 47-69, 446-99 passim; Hachard, *Relation du voyage des dames religieuses*, 26, 44-74 passim; PAC Report, 1905, "Journal of the 'Formidable,' 1757"; *ibid.*, "Journal of the 'Inflexible,' 1757." Also used in calculations were Butel, *Négociants bordelais*, 224-6; Cavignac, *Jean Pellet*, 52-5; Clark, *New Orleans, 1718-1812*, 50; Mathieu, *Commerce entre la Nouvelle-France et les Antilles*, 116-20; Maupassant, "Armateurs bordelais," 170-5; Miquelon, *Dugard of Rouen*, 172-89; Pritchard, "Ships, Men, and Commerce," 29; Proulx, *Between France and New France*, 54-7; Surrey, *Commerce of Louisiana*, 76-81. Sailing times for English ports from Steele, *English Atlantic*, 23-7, 31-2, 51, 58-60, and 334n4.

massive island of Anticosti in the northern reach of the gulf, ships followed the rocky northern shore of the St Lawrence estuary, gradually arching southwest, pulled by strong tides and struck by sudden cross-currents, especially at the entrance to the powerful Saguenay River. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Canadian pilots familiar with this tricky stretch were stationed at the nearby post of Tadoussac during the summer to await French vessels. However, the Marine discontinued the practice in the 1730s in conjunction with improved knowledge and practical experience among French pilots.<sup>18</sup> Further upriver, just north of Quebec, another great challenge lay in wait. Here Île d'Orléans forced the river to make two swift-flowing branches. At the island's northern tip, ships needed to cross from the northern shore of the river (where treacherous tidal flats began) to the deeper and more sheltered waters off the southern shore. In between



lay the "Traverse," a notorious sandbar-choked channel that snared even local ships when weather conditions turned ugly. Once ships completed this last, delicate manoeuvre, the spacious and secure anchorage of Quebec welcomed them. Until the advent of steamships in the 1830s, ocean-going vessels could sail easily only a short distance past the town. The direct firepower, and prestige, of the king's ships effectively stopped at Quebec.

Obtaining the necessary navigational knowledge to sail the gulf and river of the St Lawrence required consistent funding, years of experience, and the coordination of nautical skills between colonial and metropolitan mariners. Even then, pilots made grave errors. At least thirty-three major vessels are known to have sunk in the river between 1650 and 1760. The actual number is probably higher, and an unidentified number ran aground temporarily.<sup>19</sup> Shortly after uniting the colony to the crown in 1664, the state took a direct interest in systematically training pilots for ocean voyages and for charting Canada's waters. In 1671 it supplied money to the colony to hire a professor of mathematics and navigation to teach at Quebec's college. In 1685-86 Jean Deshayes undertook an extensive triangulation survey of the St Lawrence and the Gaspé Peninsula, supplying the basic knowledge for the most accurate map of the river, still in use when Charlevoix sailed on *Le Chameau* over thirty years later. The Jesuits assumed responsibility for navigational instruction in 1701, and from 1708 they supplied their own highly trained French professors. However, the state failed to consistently furnish professors with proper texts and instruments, and the teaching of navigation remained hampered until at least 1748.<sup>20</sup>

Proposals to undertake the desperately needed hydrographic surveys of Canadian waters abounded under the Regency; at the same time it offered a prize of 100,000 livres to tackle the problem of accurately determining longitude. However, most of the state's attention in the 1715-23 period focused on charting the water around newly settled and strategic Île Royale. This attention did not prevent a ship's captain from complaining to the Marine that "the [Canadian] pilots know nothing there, and the charts are unreliable."<sup>21</sup> When *Le Chameau* tragically struck a reef in 1725, with the loss of 316 lives and the colony's annual supply of specie, the Marine, under the Comte de Maurepas, acted on several fronts. It doubled the salary of professors teaching navigation from 400 to 800 livres in 1727 in order to attract better qualified teachers, and it insisted that two pilots, one French and one Canadian, accompany all naval vessels.<sup>22</sup> More importantly, the disaster convinced both colonial and metropolitan officials to pursue a major mapping programme of the gulf and river of St Lawrence from

1731, directed by an energetic naval captain, Henri-François Des Herbiers, Marquis de L'Étendue. Royal funds financed this scheme in part (how much is not known), and royal and Canadian sailors took soundings, a long and tedious labour.

The work paid significant results, with the compilation of a highly accurate set of manuscript charts, and supplied information eventually published in the *Hydrographie française* (1756), rushed into publication in time for the outbreak of war.<sup>23</sup> Pilots were still used during the war, since geography constantly altered and because of the dramatic increase in shipping; few merchant captains ferrying supplies had the opportunity to consult expensive sea atlases. The loss of Louisbourg required further modifications in setting courses to avoid contact with British warships. In the immediate aftermath of the defeat on the Plains of Abraham in 1759, Governor General Pierre de Vaudreuil-Cavagnial complained that French pilots were inferior to their British counterparts; we know that leading the corps of the latter was the young and gifted James Cook.<sup>24</sup> However, Vaudreuil-Cavagnial wrote this comment in the context of explaining how the British had caught the defenders off guard. A few months later, the value of these same pilots prompted the last commander of French forces in North America, Chevalier François-Gaston de Lévis, to withdraw them from above Quebec in May 1760 in case they were captured by the advancing British Navy.<sup>25</sup> The ignorant pilots of forty years before had become potential prizes in war, suggesting that the second segment of the transatlantic crossing had started to become completely reliable only at the very end of the French regime in North America. Constructing hydrographic knowledge proved to be costly and posed considerable challenges to coordinating a variety of talents, from initial training in mathematics to sea experience, and ending with publication. Progress could be measured in decades, and it cost lives to achieve.

It is no exaggeration to say that a safe anchorage was the most precious colonial possession by the state in each colony. Quebec's harbour lay between the town and Île d'Orléans, measuring five kilometres in any one direction. When the ice retreated by the end of April, ships anchored in cold, grey-green water up to a hundred metres deep, dropping and rising with tides of nearly five metres, threatened only by the biting northeasterly winds that started usually by mid-October.<sup>26</sup> During the summer shipping season, up to three dozen ships found enough space to manoeuvre easily. It was the very spaciousness of Quebec's harbour that made it so attractive as a military stronghold, as a strategic centre for organizing armies, and as the display case for the most important and majestic symbol of royal power in the colonies, the



king's ships.<sup>27</sup> Ships were regarded as manifestations of the royal person, and since 1681, Marine rules had stipulated the protocol for etiquette and salutes by merchant vessels and colonial forts for entries, departures, and public ceremonies.

The spaciousness of Quebec's harbour could also lead to chaos if the ships were not spaced out properly. As traffic slowly grew, colonial officials created the position of port captain in 1711 to keep order among the anchored vessels.<sup>28</sup> The job was not easy. Port captains carefully recorded the entry and departure of all vessels, watched for and reported smuggling activity (minimal at Quebec), organized crews to clean the town's beach so that cargo might be landed quickly and safely, retrieved lost anchors (weighing at least 300 kilos each), and marked the more dangerous channels with buoys every spring. In addition, they might have to lead emergency salvage operations for distressed ships, a demanding and sometimes dangerous operation. For example, after the sinking of the king's ship *L'Éléphant* in September 1729, port captain Richard Testu de La Richardière made three salvage trips, including one of nineteen days, in miserably cold and very stormy conditions, to recover the ship's cannon, munitions, and iron fittings. According to the report, which singled him out for special recognition (and a bonus), the efforts made by him and his small crew saved the king at least 20,000 livres. Given La Richardière's salary of 500 livres per year at this time (1,000 livres in 1737), it appeared the Marine had a bargain.<sup>29</sup>

In the early 1730s, the Marine placed greater responsibility on the position; it evolved from being a harbourmaster to more of a master pilot and surveyor's post. The Marine assigned La Richardière two major projects. First came the long-term project to map the St Lawrence River in the 1730s, instigated by L'Étendue. The second project, begun at the same time, called for the construction a dry dock near the intendant's residence to service the king's vessels.<sup>30</sup> But while the Marine supported the charting projects, it insisted that Quebec's citizens pay for the dry dock through a land tax, which residents accepted only grudgingly.<sup>31</sup> Most of the quays and shipyards were small, privately operated concerns, and individual merchants resented paying for a dockyard that would not benefit them directly. By the mid-1740s, the post of port captain appears to have evolved into something of a sinecure, although the last port captain in the French regime, French naval lieutenant Gabriel Pellegrin, peppered the Marine with intelligent memorandums on improving navigation during the Seven Years War. His advice did not garner the attention of the Marine in France, perhaps crowded out by the solicitations and projects of higher-ranking French naval officers.<sup>32</sup> The development of the port cap-

tain's role in Canada suggests a negotiated and mutually beneficial relationship between colony and state. As soon as the needs of both were met, and those who began the initiatives died or were transferred, communications improvement projects stagnated, a pattern repeated many times in the French American colonies.

Climate and seasonal variations also proscribed royal control over the timing of sailing. Unlike all other French colonial ports, Quebec was open to ships for only five months of the year, six at best. The harbour became a scene of frenzied activity that culminated with the arrival of the king's ship in September or even October, when it unloaded new recruits, military supplies, and the year's supply of silver and government bills of exchange.<sup>33</sup> Winds and freeze-up made contact by sea impossible thereafter. During the long winter months, news from Europe reached Canada overland from Île Royale, carried mainly by Abenaki warrior parties, or more often from the Anglo-American colonies, either north from New York via Montreal or from Boston, transmitted by either Iroquois or Abenaki trading or hunting parties.<sup>34</sup> In this way, Canada's officials remained for half the year dependent in part on past and potential enemies to piece together political events. The climatic constraints constantly frustrated both the colony's top officials, who needed the Marine to send the king's ship earlier in the shipping season. The advent of war after 1755 prompted one French officer to devise a scheme for two voyages a year to Canada. By departing France in late March, a ship could reach Canada in early May, soon after the breakup of ice; after discharging its cargo and leaving in early June, it could complete another loop between mid-July (when many of the king's ships actually sailed) and the end of October. The memorialist stressed that French fishing boats from the Ponant routinely timed their arrivals to coincide with breakup. Not only could the king's vessels copy their itineraries, but they should hire their captains as pilots.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, most of the memorandum stressed the need for the Marine to prepare ships and coordinate gathering and loading cargoes well in advance of the anticipated departure dates. As we saw in chapter 2, limited funding and the logistics of juggling repairs, supplies, and personnel on several major routes left little manoeuvring room to revise sailing schedules.

Given the difficulties of the St Lawrence passage, the value of ice-free and cod-rich Louisbourg as a port of call for French ships is readily apparent. The voyage from the Grand Banks to Louisbourg took a week at most; thus sailing time from France was roughly two-thirds that of the Canadian run, and navigating far easier. While figures on the number of vessels are scanty, it is estimated that between 130 and



150 trade vessels from France, the French Antilles, Canada, and (often surreptitiously) New England docked each year at Louisbourg during the 1730s. During the same decade, the port also sheltered up to 400 fishing boats.<sup>36</sup> All these ships were potential carriers and exchangers of news. Not only were valuable cargoes of cod and sometimes colonial produce available, but French masters and shipowners could dispense with the time, wages, and skills needed for the longer voyage to Quebec.<sup>37</sup> Benefiting from a lifetime of experience in Canadian waters as much as from disinterest by French merchants, Canadian masters dominated the Quebec-Louisbourg run from the mid-1720s. Jacques Mathieu has estimated that at least 200 small vessels plied between Quebec and Louisbourg in the first half of the eighteenth century. Some 52 were known to have operated during the busy season of war-related activity in 1755.<sup>38</sup> It was these smaller vessels that kept Canada well informed of events in Europe, the Anglo-American colonies, and the Caribbean on a weekly and even daily basis during the summer navigation season. But even during winter, Louisbourg served as a crucial news bureau for Canada. For example, in early 1758, during the height of the Seven Years War, its governor warned Governor General Vaudreuil-Cavagnial in Quebec of a probable attack on Louisbourg in the spring, sending the news with French merchants who first took a boat to Île Saint Jean (Prince Edward Island) and then struggled by sled up the frozen Saint Jean River to reach the hamlet of Kamouraska on the St Lawrence's southern shore. This tough voyage, in one of the coldest winters recorded in the eighteenth century, took nearly two months.<sup>39</sup> As New France's window on the Atlantic world, Louisbourg, through its merchants, filtered exchanges so that Canada often learned what Île Royale had already known at least three weeks beforehand. While Quebec never quite lost its prominent role as an Atlantic port, the state discovered that maintaining seaborne communications required large amounts of capital, supervision, and knowledge acquired after years of surveying, a tall order for a colony providing minimal economic dividends. In no other French American colony did the desire to control the hazards of the sea play as great a role in integrating colonial and metropolitan interests.

#### THE ANTILLES ROUTE

In complete contrast to Canada's circumstances were those of Martinique and the Îles du Vent. To begin with, the Antilles route was much simpler. As with the North Atlantic route, ships dodged storms across the Bay of Biscay and then headed south to Cape Saint Vincent,

off southern Portugal. But the weather quickly improved thereafter, and by the time vessels passed Madeira or the Canary Islands, the winds were brisk, astern, and constant. Pilots simply steered a southwesterly course until reaching Martinique's line of latitude at about 14° 30' north, at which point they switched to due west until they sighted one of the Lesser Antilles islands.<sup>40</sup> Ships sailed the 6,600-kilometre route in five to seven weeks on the outbound journey. It felt much longer to seventeenth-century chroniclers, who estimated the distance closer to 9,000 kilometres<sup>41</sup> (see table 3.1). If bound for Saint Domingue, vessels followed the same Antillean route but simply turned due west upon reaching between 19 45' and 19 15' north latitude; this brought them directly to Le Cap. The Saint Domingue run averaged about one week to two weeks longer than that to Martinique.

Sailors initiated first-time passengers and sailors with a "baptism" when ships crossed the Tropic of Cancer at 23° 26' north latitude. Although similar to the one for Canada, it featured some differences. Veteran sailors would soot their faces with ash and adorn themselves with tridents, harpoons, sea pikes, and other marine tools, surround the initiate, and tie him (it is not clear if women were subjected to this ceremony) with sailing cord, blacken his face and upper body, and dunk him in a tub of cold, fresh sea water, long enough for him to start hyperventilating. Sailors then dragged the initiate out and held him kneeling before the chief pilot, who had also blackened his face and put on Neptune's crown, and who held charts, compasses, sextants, and other instruments of navigation in his hands. In this guise, the pilot demanded that the initiate swear on a chart to observe the rules of the sea and not divulge them to anyone else not having undergone the baptism. The demons of the sea released him only after he paid, or vowed to pay, a sum for brandy, after which he was let go, and resuscitated and cleaned up by the other passengers.<sup>42</sup> This homage to Neptune, with its symbolic rebirth from blackness into the light and warmth of the Tropics, also demarcated the boundaries between the Old World and the New. Unlike the Canadian ritual, with its Santa Claus-like figure, the emphasis on an ancient Greek god, played by the master of sea knowledge with his sceptre of sea charts, carnivalesque demons, and emergence from primordial blackness, suggests a desire to more completely "transform" the individual than its North Atlantic counterpart. It is tempting to speculate that for mariners, Canada appeared to be a colder version of France, while the Antilles were another level of existence altogether.

The return voyage back to France carried ships north, to arrive within twenty-four hours between the British islands of Montserrat and



Antigua (with its naval base), then past low-lying, virtually unpopulated, but dangerous Barbuda, and finally out into the safety of the Atlantic swells. Ships picked up the Gulf Stream several hundred kilometres to the southeast of Bermuda, and at between 26° to 30° north latitude they began to follow an arc-shaped course east-northeast back toward France.<sup>43</sup> This return journey averaged a week longer than the outbound one, about six to eight weeks in total. Favourable winds, which were not uncommon, could easily clip ten days from the voyage. To put the ease of the Antilles route into perspective, consider that ships sailing from France to Canada took the same amount of time to travel only half as far, or that if Antilles speed could be applied to the Brest-Bordeaux run (a mere 550 kilometres apart), the voyage would take only three days instead of ten to fourteen days. While the Caribbean islands of course afforded far richer cargoes, it may well be that French historians have underestimated the impact of easy oceanic access on economic and strategic issues.

The other major source of seaborne traffic for the Antilles comprised slave ships from West and Central Africa. These ships in effect navigated the mirror image of the European-Antilles route. If arriving from the Gold Coast, the Bight of Benin, or points further south, ships picked up the southeast trades along the southern rim of the West African coasts and sailed west and then northwestward, following the bulge of land and battling the Guinea current as they went, slowly arching to the north to clutch at the northeast tradewinds, and following them until they reached Martinique's latitude before turning due west. Depending on where the slave ship left the coast, the distance could range from approximately 7,100 kilometres off the Ivory Coast to over 10,500 kilometres from Luanda in Angola. These voyages ranged from seven to twelve weeks, but great variations were possible. Robert Stein found that one French slave vessel, departing from the Gold Coast, took an agonizing twenty-six and a half weeks (six months) to make the crossing. Ships loading slaves at the port of Gorée on the Senegambian coast simply sailed west directly, since it and Martinique lay virtually on the same line of latitude. This much shorter route stretched only 4,800 kilometres across the mid-Atlantic and enabled crossings of four to six weeks, although great variations were again possible.<sup>44</sup> For example, *Le Maréchal d'Estrée*, with 227 slaves on board, left Gorée on July 13, 1723, and arrived at Saint Pierre on Martinique only on October 23, after a passage of fourteen and a half weeks. The pilot recorded that the voyage took so long in part because the vessel kept moving between 14° 26' and 9° latitude, desperately searching for wind.<sup>45</sup> Aside from the problems of negotiating the often hazardous West African coastlines, straying into the

dreaded Doldrums also posed major potential navigational problems to slave ships. This expansive sea region of little or no wind could becalm a ship for weeks on end in stifling equatorial heat. Unfamiliarity with the Atlantic's wind circulation in the seventeenth century entrapped many slave ships in the Doldrums, leading to the slow and ghastly death of many enslaved Africans and sometimes their European captors.

Whether sailing from Europe or from West Africa, once on the American side of the Atlantic and having sighted land, navigators had a choice. If they were headed for Saint Pierre, Martinique, or Guadeloupe, either the looming volcano of Mount Pelée or jagged Macouba Point (both on northern Martinique) served as a landmark. Pilots heading for Fort Royal searched for Mount Vauclin on Martinique's southern side (see map 3). Pilots simply followed the coastline, passing the thatched wooden houses and white parish churches that peeked out from the dark green shore. Saint Pierre Bay lay in a slight indentation on the island's northwestern side, adequately sheltered from the trade winds and powerful swells of the Atlantic Ocean, forming an open roadstead with no natural or artificial protective barriers.<sup>46</sup> However, the waters were gentle, and in contrast to the Ponant ports, winds blew continually from the east-northeast, allowing ships to sail in or out of port at any time of the day or night. The stronger shore breezes (*brises du large*) rose with the sun and died in late afternoon, only to be replaced by the lighter land breezes (*brises de terre*), which began in the evening and blew through most of the night.<sup>47</sup> The ease of entering and leaving the bay rendered it difficult to defend but ideal for smuggling, and few Caribbean anchorages were as accommodating for loading and unloading by lighters. The sandy bottom dropped away quickly, allowing the largest of merchant vessels to anchor within thirty-five metres of the surf, with tidal action so minimal as to be non-existent.<sup>48</sup>

Despite the inviting conditions, Saint Pierre's harbour remained virtually unsupervised. As the officially designated capital of the colony, Fort Royal boasted a port captain, but Saint Pierre did so only once. During the plague of 1720, the colony's intendant assigned a merchant captain from Le Havre named Filliol to inspect ships as they entered. He apparently succeeded at his task, as officials did not report any spread of the plague. During the Regency, several local sea captains had solicited to have the post created, but to no avail.<sup>49</sup> In 1728 Intendant Blondel wrote enthusiastically about Saint Pierre's excellent roadstead, but noted that it had become cluttered with discarded anchors. Fines had been instituted in 1681, but the regulations went unheeded, presumably because the no officials existed to enforce



Table 3.2  
Ship arrivals at Saint Pierre compared with Fort Royal, 1733–1757

Year	Saint Pierre		Fort Royal		Total
	No.	Per cent	No.	Per cent	
1733	160	80.8	38	19.2	198
1735	166	83.4	31	15.6	199
1737	167	86.1	24	12.4	194
1745	82	56.9	56	38.9	144
1747 <sup>1</sup>	70	100.0	0	0	70
1752 <sup>2</sup>	126	76.4	39	23.6	165
1757 <sup>3</sup>	139	97.2	4	2.8	143

SOURCES: 1733: AC, C8B 17, Record of ship arrivals, nos. 12–28, May 15, 1734; 1735: *ibid.*, Record of ship arrivals, 1735, nos. 27–36, July 10, 1736. 1737: *ibid.*, Record of ships for 1737, nos. 45–51, June 20, 1738. 1745: *ibid.*, 21, Record of Commerce for 1745, nos. 17–34, August 12, 1746 [another 7 came from Holland, 1 from Ireland (Cork), and 1 from Bermuda, all to exchange prisoners]; 1747: *ibid.*, Record of foreign ships anchoring in Martinique in 1747, no. 41, March 10, 1748. 1752: *ibid.*, Record of commerce for 1752, nos. 61–72, October 25, 1753. 1757: *ibid.*, 22, Record of foreign ships anchoring in Martinique in 1757, August 15, 1759, nos. 4–10.

<sup>1</sup> Foreign ships only.

<sup>2</sup> French ships only; port of arrival for non-French ships not indicated. Total number of recorded ship arrivals in both ports from all destinations in 1752 was 278.

<sup>3</sup> Foreign ships only.

them.<sup>50</sup> Saint Pierre thus stood in complete contrast to Quebec: it needed no infrastructure or any careful surveying to operate efficiently and safely. The ease of using Saint Pierre's harbour contributed greatly to its role as the commercial hub of the Îles du Vent, and explains why it drew a dramatically larger number of ships than did nearby Fort Royal (see table 3.2).

The king's harbour of Fort Royal, Saint Pierre's alter ego, lay only 43.5 kilometres away. Although *ancien régime* officials tended to see the two towns as opposites – the rowdy, dirty, money-grubbing port and the neatly designed governor's town with its great stone fort – Louis-Philippe May has pointed out that their ports, at least, were in fact highly complementary to each other and comprised a single economic and maritime unit. Fort Royal offered one distinct advantage over Saint Pierre's open roadstead. Surrounded by hilly land on all sides except for an opening to the west, Fort Royal Bay featured a hurricane-proof inlet. The fear of hurricanes dated from a particularly vicious storm in 1670, when all twenty-eight ships then in Saint Pierre's

harbour were sunk or run aground and irreparably damaged. Upon receiving word of the disaster, Louis XIV's chief minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, decided to transfer the site of the capital to the safer anchorage at Fort Royal, already highly esteemed by mariners since the 1640s. Between 1713 and 1763, at least fifteen hurricanes and major storms thrashed the Îles du Vent, sending ships scurrying each time from Saint Pierre to Fort Royal's sheltered waters; a hurricane on September 19, 1751, levelled about half of Saint Pierre, but visited only slight damage on Fort Royal.<sup>51</sup> However, the concept of how much damage hurricanes could do apparently took many years to become common knowledge at the Marine. In 1701, after more than sixty years of experience, a royal pilot still had to describe what they were and why they had to be avoided, in a memorandum to the Marine's clerks back in France.<sup>52</sup>

Fort Royal offered other advantages. Along with the security of a stout stone fort overlooking the bay and a patch of ground suitable for careening and repairing vessels, enclosed by an iron chain, the harbour also provided a near-ideal stage to showcase the arrivals and departures of the king's ships.<sup>53</sup> However, it proved to be no less polluted with debris than Saint Pierre Bay. In 1727 one of the king's vessels ran aground on a sandbar while taking Intendant Blondel on an inspection tour of the harbour. It required the better part of two weeks to refloat the vessel, an event, he noted with some chagrin, which caused great mirth among merchant captains watching the operation.<sup>54</sup> Missing from Blondel's report was any mention of a port captain. The Marine had paid for a port captain at Fort Royal since the 1690s, but such officials clearly played a minor role in the commercial and political life of French Caribbean ports. Scattered references indicate that they held the rank of lieutenant on the king's vessels and were in charge primarily of collecting entry and exit duties on ships in the harbour. In 1727 these duties brought in a paltry 3,000 livres.<sup>55</sup> Port captains also worked closely with the king's *Domaine* (customs) to deter smugglers, but most smuggling occurred everywhere on the island except (conveniently?) at Fort Royal.<sup>56</sup> Very few documents attest to their presence; they are not included on the yearly salary appointments, and none were used for any survey work. The last captain, one *Sieur* Bart (a great-nephew of the famous French corsair Jean Bart) was a former ship lieutenant who had settled on the island and obtained the post in 1758, with its annual salary of 1,000 livres.<sup>57</sup> His position seems to have been a mere sinecure. The striking difference between Canada's and Martinique's captains is indicative of the state's vastly different needs in each colony. The Îles du Vent posed no serious navigational challenges; colonists and metropolitan merchants did not require state help, whether it was



in the form of pilots, port captains, or nautical instruction; further expense would have been superfluous.

Ports situated to the west of Martinique and Guadeloupe, from Saint Domingue to Vera Cruz and as far north as New Orleans, could be easily reached, but ships had to fight contrary winds and currents on the return to Îles du Vent. French naval and merchant vessels frequently used Martinique as a stopover before continuing on to the increasingly more dynamic markets of Saint Domingue. Pilots used a variety of routes to gain Saint Domingue; most commonly, they steered north-west via British Nevis, then turned west to skirt south of Sainte Croix and the southern coast of Puerto Rico, before either heading north through the Mona Passage if aiming for Le Cap, or continuing along Hispaniola's southern coast if making for Saint Louis-du-Sud, Léo-gane, or the smaller outports in the southern province (see map 3.3).<sup>58</sup> Ships completed the voyage to Le Cap in about ten days with good weather, and to Saint Louis-du-Sud, on Saint Domingue's southern coast, in eight to fourteen days.<sup>59</sup> Only smaller ships based mainly in Saint Pierre found a niche shuttling between the two colonies. The manoeuvres of the British Royal Navy during war could reverse the usual flow, so that Saint Domingue's ships often sailed east to avoid capture, putting into Martinique or Guadeloupe before heading across the Atlantic, and thereby informing the eastern islands of events near Jamaica.<sup>60</sup>

Unlike Quebec's port, all harbours in the Îles du Vent remained open all year. In Saint Pierre, casks of semi-refined sugar or sacks of coffee piled up in warehouses as early as January, often overflowing onto the beach by late March. Activity built until early July and the onset of the *mauvais temps*. Although authorities prohibited ships from anchoring during hurricane season from mid-July to mid-October, even official records show a reduction, not a complete halt<sup>61</sup> (see table 3.3). After October, French merchants and clandestine traders from New England again slowly invaded the islands. At all times of the year, ships could reach not only Saint Pierre and Fort Royal but the many smaller outports of the Îles du Vent as well, all quickly, safely, with a minimum of navigational expertise, and, best of all, with little or no supervision by colonial authorities. These other harbours tended to be either a Saint Pierre-like open roadstead or an enclosed harbour such as Fort Royal's. Roadsteads included Basse-terre and Saint François on Guadeloupe, while enclosed harbours included La Trinité (facing the open Atlantic) and Cul-de-Sac Marin on Martinique and the two "Carénages," one on Saint Lucia (today's Castries) and the other on Grenada (today's St George's). Despite containing small garrisons, all these ports were also active centres of this contraband trade.

Table 3.3  
Monthly ship arrivals from France at Saint Pierre

Year	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D	Total
1733	12	4	12	12	15	14	5	2	0	14	9	17	116
1745	0	2	3	5	3	1	0	0	0	0	5	2	21
1752	5	13	19	9	11	8	8	0	2	2	29	20	126

SOURCES: 1733: AC, C8B 17, Record of ships arrived, nos. 12-28, May 15 1734; 1745: *ibid.*, 21, Records of commerce for 1745, nos. 17-34, August 12, 1746 [another 7 came from Holland, 1 from Ireland (Cork), and 1 from Bermuda, all to exchange prisoners]; 1752: *ibid.*, Records of commerce for 1752, nos. 61-72, October 25, 1753.

Martinique and Guadeloupe possessed one further natural advantage in terms of navigation. In addition to its central position on a major east-west transatlantic route, the island lay astride a busy north-west-southeast intercolonial one. If we drew an imaginary line bisecting Martinique along this axis, we would see that the steady northeast trade winds blew perpendicular to this line. Because of the dynamics of sailing, ships could travel up or down this northwest-southeast axis with relative ease throughout the entire year.<sup>62</sup> All of Martinique's dependencies in the Îles du Vent lay on this line. These included the islands of Guadeloupe, Marie-Galante, Saint Martin, and Saint Barthélemy, together with the "neutral" (officially neither British nor French) island of Dominica to the north and "neutral" Saint Lucia and French Grenada to the south. Guadeloupe could be reached by an easy overnight voyage, while all the rest were within four days' sailing. The furthest, Grenada, took four to five days, although twice that long on the return trip.<sup>63</sup>

More importantly, all of Martinique's potential enemies and trading allies also lay along this northwest-southeast axis. To the north lay British Antigua, with its naval base at English Harbour, and the busy entrepôts of Dutch Saint Eustatius and Danish Saint Thomas. This sailing route extended even farther north to New York, Rhode Island, Boston, and of course Louisbourg.<sup>64</sup> South of Martinique, but still along this line, and to the east lay British Barbados, the first Caribbean port of call for many British warships; to the west of the line, but still within easy sailing range, was the other Dutch entrepôt of Curaçao and the larger cities of the Spanish Main, such as Puerto Cabello and Cumaná.<sup>65</sup> The line could be extended even farther south to French Cayenne, on the South American mainland.<sup>66</sup> Sailing along this axis proved so easy that, for example, an English captain bound from New



York to Louisbourg with a cargo of flour decided that it was safer and at least as profitable to escape a violent Christmas storm off Cape Sable and sail all the way south to Martinique to sell his cargo, an easy voyage of less than three weeks. Such rethinking in the teeth of storms was not unusual.<sup>67</sup> In this way, geography favoured Guadeloupe and Martinique as natural terminal points for New England's merchants. Like English Barbados, Martinique, with an advance position in the Lesser Antilles, served mainly as a transmission point of European news and products for ports to its lee, and it benefited from the inter-colonial axis in trade, particularly with New England. However, the interaction worked two ways: the ease of the Antilles route invited greater metropolitan control, while the intercolonial route defeated the state's ability to enforce that control. This conflict lay at the very heart of the issue of illicit trade and, ultimately, of Creole autonomy in the islands, a point considered in chapter 7.

#### THE GULF ROUTE

Compared to both Canada and the Îles du Vent, New Orleans sat at the extreme end of the French American maritime world. In terms of navigation, the entire voyage from France was by far the most gruelling and unpredictable of the three routes, and it required four distinct stages (see table 3.1). The first two paralleled those for the Îles du Vent or Saint Domingue. Sometimes the king's vessels or French slavers found it just as expedient to enter the Caribbean Sea at the south between Grenada and Trinidad, follow the prevailing coastal currents and winds along the Spanish Main and Central America, and then turn due north at the Yucatan Peninsula to enter the Gulf of Mexico. From Grenada to Louisiana's ports took only three to four weeks at most.<sup>68</sup> On one occasion, a transatlantic crossing from Bordeaux to the mouth of the Mississippi via Grenada took only fifty-nine days with no stops, an astonishingly short trip.<sup>69</sup> More usually, ships ran down the wind upon reaching 19° 30' north latitude (the same latitude as Le Cap) and continued until they encountered the northern coast of Hispaniola. As we have seen, this portion of the voyage lasted seven to nine weeks outbound from France.

The third stage began after the ships left Saint Domingue's ports.<sup>70</sup> They pushed a thousand kilometres west, sometimes along Spanish Cuba's north coast but more commonly along its rocky southern shore and its dependable westward currents. Either route brought ships to within a few days' sail of Havana. Rounding Cape Saint Antoine at the island's westernmost point, pilots then steered northwestward and tacked a further one thousand kilometres miles against contrary winds

and currents until they reached the sandy, flat, pine-covered shores lying between the Mississippi River and Pensacola Bay. This portion of the trip took between two and four weeks. Initially, ships anchored in a small harbour at one end of desolate Île Dauphin, at the entrance to Mobile Bay. From 1716 until 1722, most dropped anchor off Île aux Vaisseaux (Ship Island, Mississippi), when it appeared that Biloxi might become the colony's capital.<sup>71</sup> During this time, an assortment of officials, priests, and boatmen contributed their knowledge and memorandums toward understanding the region's geography in order to determine the safest and most accessible harbour.<sup>72</sup> Royal officials finally accepted Governor Bienville's unequivocal recommendation in 1722 that the site at the future New Orleans be made the colony's capital. Immediately, royal engineers and work gangs of slaves and some soldiers commenced building a small stone fort, La Balize (The Buoy), on two precarious dots of land at the only viable entrance to the Mississippi River, the Southeast Pass.<sup>73</sup>

Finally came the long and arduous 160-kilometre ascent up the Mississippi to New Orleans itself.<sup>74</sup> At La Balize colonial officials stationed a pilot (two after 1732) to guide ships up the river's continually reshaping course. The Mississippi's lower delta formed a vast, watery world, a region of thick air and tangled reeds, slimy ground, and shifting islets, which could disappear beneath two metres of water in the spring. But an even greater obstacle lay just upriver from the fort. A permanent sandbar (known simply as "Le Barre") limited passage via the Southeast Pass to ships drawing less than 3.5 metres. Since the keel of a heavily-laden warship or large merchant vessel often lay submerged 5 to 7 metres below the water-line captains were often forced to unload some or even all of their cargoes onto lighters or *bateaux*; the latter were flat-bottomed boats fitted with sails. This monotonous process added between one and two weeks to the voyage, and on one occasion about three.<sup>75</sup>

Once past the bar, ships struggled upriver, dodging half-submerged logs and thick clouds of mosquitoes along the way. It was not uncommon for adverse winds to strand ships for up to two weeks at a time at the 180-degree bend in the river known as the "Detour aux Anglais" (now English Turn), some forty kilometres below New Orleans. Here, in mid-1699, Bienville had bluffed an English captain and his men into believing that his small band of Frenchmen was the advance guard of a much larger army. The English turned back and, according to the story, lost Louisiana.<sup>76</sup> Only at this point did passengers and crews glimpse the first signs of the French settlement: two small and incomplete sets of earthworks on either side of the river and the first smattering of thatched slave huts and rough log cabins along



the riverbanks. Important and weary passengers, as well as critical dispatches, could be put ashore at this point as well and proceed by horse or on foot to New Orleans. Although some historians have calculated that it was theoretically possible to sail to New Orleans from France in about twelve weeks, contemporary ships' logs show that the average crossing approached seventeen weeks, at least a month longer.<sup>77</sup>

Upon reaching New Orleans, ocean-going vessels dropped anchor just downriver of the *place d'armes*, or public square. Large dugout canoes with seating for four to six people (*pirogues*) or the *bateaux* from Illinois tied up farther upriver, opposite a muddy patch of ground that served as the town's market. According to an early observer, Antoine Le Page du Pratz, if the river was high enough, ships could be floated right up alongside the levee and unloaded by rolling barrels off long gangplanks.<sup>78</sup> The pilots stationed at La Balize supervised this anchorage from 1723.<sup>79</sup> The most important among them, Sieur Livaudais, served the Compagnie des Indes initially in the capacity of port captain but without the title and the royal pay of 1,200 livres, before becoming firmly attached as one of Governor Bienville's clients in 1731.<sup>80</sup> As with his counterpart at Quebec, his work included piloting ships upriver, taking regular soundings of the river to determine the safest channels, exploring stretches of the Gulf coast, and guiding ships downriver. The return voyage took ships back down the Mississippi with the aid of its powerful current, out into the Gulf, and with the winds to Havana. From there they picked up the Gulf Stream, entered the Bahamas Channel toward Bermuda, and then arched back to France across the North Atlantic. The return was far more predictable and required, on average, about four weeks less time.

Climate also complicated navigation to New Orleans. At least six major storms lashed the port between 1708 and 1750, dismasting ships and ramming them onto shoals or the shore each time.<sup>81</sup> The Mississippi's annual flooding regularly rearranged the coastline, rendering maps obsolete within five years, and made the use of pilots mandatory. Even the fort at La Balize moved. Within thirty years after its construction, it lay seven kilometres from its initial position relative to the Southeast Pass, permanently flooded by about a metre of water and slowly sinking into the delta. By 1760 an old hulk served as the "fort."<sup>82</sup> But the most difficult obstacle to navigation had nothing to do with navigating per se. Finding return cargoes to fill all of a ship's hold continually plagued the colony's officials and merchants for most years during the French regime. All ships, including royal warships, had empty holds to fill. Louisiana grew the same tropical items as other colonies and produced little that they needed.<sup>83</sup> As Saint Domingue

began its rise to become the richest sugar-producing island in the Caribbean in the 1740s, merchants bound for Louisiana realized fatter profits at Le Cap or other ports in the colony. Contacts with Saint Domingue thus proved to be a mixed blessing. While New Orleans received valuable news from France or from other colonies and could sell construction supplies to Saint Domingue's planters, the latter colony devoured many of the goods and supplies destined for Louisiana.<sup>84</sup>

As a result, and because of the attraction of Spanish silver, French officials regarded Havana as a potentially valuable trading neighbour, although Spanish colonial officials remained cool to their overtures. While Havana served as a valuable source of news during wartime, its proximity to Jamaica exposed French ships to English privateers. A single capture could have serious consequences. For example, when Jamaican privateers captured the king's corvette *La Fée*, outbound from Saint Domingue in the early fall of 1740 (four years before any declaration of war), Louisiana's colonists were kept in the dark about British movements against the Spanish colonies, and possible French declarations of war, until the following March, when a merchant vessel from Saint Domingue finally anchored at New Orleans and brought updated news.<sup>85</sup> Le Cap thus acted as a kind of window for Louisiana to peer on activity in the greater Atlantic world in much the same way as Louisbourg did for Canada or Saint Pierre for the smaller ports in the Îles du Vent. Since reaching Louisiana required a long, tedious, and largely unprofitable voyage, both metropolitan officials in France and colonial leaders in Louisiana actively encouraged closer contacts with their Spanish allies in order to compensate.

#### LAKE, RIVER, AND ROAD IN NORTH AMERICA

From the Marine's point of view, seaborne routes were the most important and easily controlled links between France and each colonial port. Once it arrived, official information filtered down a hierarchy of agents under state command. But the ports also marked a critical transition point from metropolitan to colonial influence. Once royal orders and personnel reached the ports, colonial traditions, economics, technology, African slave labour, Native allies, and even the cooperation of colonists themselves increasingly dictated how, when and under what circumstances they circulated. Local or regional transport comprised two basic forms: water-borne transport by rivers and lakes, and roads. Water transport dominated, although roads played an increasingly larger role on the eve of the Seven Years War.



The construction of land transportation infrastructure in the colonies is best understood as an extension of a dynamic series of initiatives originating in France. Under Louis xv, an increasing number of administrators, and the king himself, demanded not merely to understand the extent of the kingdom but to grasp its potential and fully impose royal order in every corner. Although Colbert had initiated a number of large-scale communications infrastructure projects, notably the Canal des Deux-Mers,<sup>86</sup> it was in the eighteenth century that, as Daniel Nordman and Jacques Revel put it, "knowledge of territory became inseparable from the exercise of sovereignty."<sup>87</sup> Roads were an essential component of enhancing the state's knowledge. Despite the reliance on a feudal levy, the *corvée*, to provide labour for construction (from 1720), French roads and river routes improved dramatically. Under Philibert Orry, a former provincial intendant who became controller general in 1730, French engineers reorganized and built a new road system, creating a demand for more accurate mapping and surveys to accomplish the task. As a corollary to the extensive surveys undertaken for roadwork, the Cassini family, royal map-makers since the early reign of Louis xiv, published the first of their highly detailed and accurate maps of France by 1756. This infrastructure augmented more than mere transportation: as Daniel Roche has commented, roads and bridges "were like monuments [for t]hey etched the power of the monarchy into the landscape itself."<sup>88</sup> Not surprisingly, metropolitan intendants assigned to the colonies introduced transportation initiatives shortly after taking up their posts.

Constructing a similar network of roads in the wilderness of North America or the Antilles proved to be far more difficult, and less necessary, than in France (see map 4). In North America, the vast drainage area of the Great Lakes–St Lawrence and the Mississippi–Ohio river systems offered a dense network of reasonably safe, well-connected waterways easily accessed by birchbark canoes. One historian has estimated that the Mississippi–Missouri and Alabama river systems combined afforded 26,000 kilometres of navigable waterways.<sup>89</sup> From the earliest years of settlement in North America, French men and some women learned about and adopted a variety of Native technologies and developed skills to explore and trade in the *pays d'en haut*. In the French Antilles, local shippers, often freedmen, carried information and people from cove to cove. Recent research by Jeffrey Bolster has suggested that at least some African labourers brought maritime and boat-building skills and their own seafaring traditions from West African coastal regions, which they put to use, or were forced to use, in the Greater Caribbean.<sup>90</sup> In all three colonies, local knowledge by

colonists, including slaves, and lower echelon officers was instrumental in propelling the king's word.

In Canada the riverine network centred on Montreal. To the south and west, river routes divided into three main branches: a northern route to Lake Huron, and on to the western end of Lake Superior, via the Ottawa River and Lake Nipissing; a second and more widely used Great Lakes route that led southwest via Lake Ontario and a portage at Niagara Falls to Lake Erie and then to Detroit; and a third route due south to Albany in the colony of New York, via the Richelieu River and Lake Champlain. In an effort to secure France's claim to the heart of North America, military officers carved out a fourth major route in 1749, which branched off from the Great Lakes route at Presque Isle (near Erie, Pennsylvania) to reach the upper reaches of the Ohio River. Along this route French soldiers and Native allies built a series of small posts to guard against British intrusion.<sup>91</sup>

From the earliest era of settlement, the birchbark canoe served as the workhorse of riverine transportation. According to Charlevoix, the largest held twelve people (two abreast) and 4,000 pounds of merchandise, yet drew only about twenty centimetres of water. Other sources record that many canoes averaged ten to fifteen metres in length, about the size of an ocean-going sloop. Strong paddlers averaged sixty kilometres a day if gliding with river currents or on calm lake waters, or about 100 kilometres with sails (all canoes carried them). Although the French quickly learned how to handle and then build canoes, Huron craftsmen, especially at the Catholic native settlements at Lorette outside Quebec and at Trois-Rivières, constructed the majority in the eighteenth century.<sup>92</sup> Builders used white cedar for the ribbing and covered it with a patchwork of birchbark pieces, sewn together with spruce roots and sealed with heated tree resin. So long as they were not continually punctured, canoes could last ten to twelve years. As Swedish botanist Peter Kalm pointed out, canoes were easy to fix anywhere, since all the necessary materials could be found not far from any riverbank.<sup>93</sup> Everyone travelled in them: officers, traders, missionaries, voyageurs, and emigrants of both sexes, although men predominated. The cost of using them as transportation is very difficult to determine; since expeditions were outfitted for trade or for ferrying missionaries, soldiers, and post supplies (or both), the costs of trade and military supplies, as well as food, are inextricable from transportation costs. To send information alone would be prohibitively expensive. For example, in 1757 French officer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville noted that the dispatch of a canoe with the specific purpose of carrying important military correspondence from Fort Frontenac (five days upriver from Montreal) to Detroit cost 2,260 livres one



way for supplies and the salaries for the six to eight paddlers.<sup>94</sup> By 1700, mastery of native canoe technology and geographic knowledge helped establish Canadians as the preponderant European presence in the *pays d'en haut*.

In contrast to water transport, land transportation, using horses and wagons over roads and bridges, appeared only gradually in Canada and became a major factor only by the Seven Years War. Efforts to impede common habitants from usurping the privilege of noblemen by owning and riding horses were the basis of several local laws in the eighteenth century. But a system of regular land contact between Quebec and Montreal emerged only later. By 1757 Bougainville reported that posts to rent horses operated in the two towns, at a cost of 20 *sols* per league.<sup>95</sup> Constructing a road network required a high level of coordination to gather materials and labourers, placed tremendous strain on local resources, and required widespread cooperation from colonists to maintain. Colonial regulations closely followed French models in classifying roads into three basic types. King's roads (*chemins royales*) were the major highways of the era, constructed principally in France to speed troops, the baggage of court, and messengers across the kingdom, and were designed and paid for by the state; they served essentially the same purpose in the colonies. Connecting roads between towns or villages and the king's roads were called *chemins de communications* and were maintained by each parish, with labour supplied by the local militia company. Privately owned and used roads, or *chemins particuliers*, linked *chemins de communications*. In Canada, official correspondence also mentioned a fourth type, the *chemins de moulin*, which were really dirt pathways cleared and maintained by seigneurs to allow their farmers easy access to grain mills. More culturally distinct types of land transportation also developed in Canada, such as "ice bridges," cleared paths of snow marked with buoys for sleds and carriages.<sup>96</sup> Roads were expensive. Until the early eighteenth century most roads were restricted to the immediate region around Quebec, with a slight development on Montreal Island. In the early 1740s, soldiers and some requisitioned habitants were paid the low wage of 30 *sols* per day to clear a road from Chambly on the Richelieu River to Montreal, a project that took three months to complete and cost the crown, according to a recent estimate, 35,000 livres.<sup>97</sup> The responsibility for plotting the roads rested on the shoulders of the *grand voyer*, or royal surveyor, and roadwork progressed only when energetic or ambitious men held the post. The responsibility for supplying the labour to build and maintain them rested, however, on the collective shoulders of local parishes, which fulfilled a *corvée*, or tax of labour.<sup>98</sup> In return, these roads were open to

all. The development of land routes was closely tied to the willingness of habitants to cooperate with the state and the negotiating abilities of the Royal Surveyor.

The construction of Canada's Quebec-Montreal road is a case in point.<sup>99</sup> Colonial officials had requested such a highway since the late seventeenth century, although it is not clear whether or not local parishes initiated the requests. Only with the appointment of a new royal surveyor, Jean-Eustache Lanoullier de Boisclerc, who worked under the direction of the new intendant, Gilles Hocquart, did work begin in earnest. The largest French colonial road-building project of its era, the road ran along the north shore of the St Lawrence River and required ten bridges from 14 to 20 metres long. Habitants completed work on it during the summer months of four successive years between 1732 and 1735.<sup>100</sup> Lanoullier and his assistant rode to the church or seigneur's house in the thirty-seven parishes involved to announce the project and requisition men for the task. While he marked out the section of the road within each parish, the men would either cut trees and pull out the stumps or cut cedar trees into timber for bridge boards. Farming, rain, and the summer's heat dictated the rhythm of work.<sup>101</sup> In August of 1735 Lanoullier tested the new road, making the 300-kilometre journey between the two towns in a horse-drawn carriage in only four and half days.<sup>102</sup> The road made little difference to travel, for canoes took the same amount of time (even upriver), and most people, goods, and messages still travelled by river. However, the habitants received other benefits in return, for the road opened up new areas for farming. As each section neared completion, settlers began taking up land concessions along or near it. In fact, Hocquart enthused over this aspect to such an extent that one suspects agricultural development was his prime motivation for supporting the project.<sup>103</sup>

In the 1740s Lanoullier continued to build or improve roads and bridges around the island of Montreal and in the Richelieu River valley, but road-building activity halted during the War of the Austrian Succession. The last major project, the "Justinian Way," running through the Beauce valley southeast of Quebec toward Abenaki lands, was completed at the height of the Seven Years War, during the summer of 1758. The active participation by local habitants, combined with massive state expenditures to build other roads, is in striking contrast with both France and the Antilles, where *corvées* generated vociferous opposition. Given that many farmers also belonged to a militia company, and thus understood the reality of attacks from the Anglo-American colonies and their Native allies, this cooperation is one of the best proofs of William Eccles's thesis that Canada was a colony with a peculiarly "military ethos" penetrating all levels of society.



In Louisiana, rivers also served as major highways. Early colonists, many of whom were Canadians, tapped into a long-standing tradition of river transport, from both neighbouring Native peoples and the *coureurs de bois*. They began bringing furs to d'Iberville's initial settlement at Fort Condé (near Mobile) as soon as workmen erected its palisade in 1701.<sup>104</sup> Convoys of up to twenty *pirogues* and flat-bottomed river boats supplied New Orleans with badly needed grain from the Illinois posts of Cahokia, Kaskaskia, and later, Sainte Geneviève (all near Saint Louis, Missouri, on either side of the Mississippi). These convoys usually left New Orleans between August and November, pushing slowly upriver at about six or seven kilometres per day, on a voyage that required three to four months to reach Fort de Chartres. The return trip could be considerably shortened; one missionary heard that the trip could be made in fifteen days by river pilots who knew the currents and safer channels. Starting in February or late March, boatmen could also use small sails, averaging thirty to thirty-five kilometres per day.<sup>105</sup> The important trading post and Native diplomacy centre of Mobile could also be reached by canoes from New Orleans, either by Lake Pontchartrain or by small sailing craft via the Mississippi and along the coast; either route took four or five days. Slave sailors manned ships for most regional traffic, along with a few soldiers and the occasional white sailor, and authorities also employed skilled workers to construct local craft.<sup>106</sup> According to Daniel H. Usner, the *Compagnie des Indes* favoured the use of slaves in order to reduce expenses.<sup>107</sup> However, officials regarded their dependability as suspect.

In comparison to water-borne transport, roads are barely mentioned in official correspondence relating to Louisiana. In 1735 shortly after the crown reclaimed the colony, the Marine issued regulations to ensure the surveying, building, and upkeep of roads, but these were ignored.<sup>108</sup> The Marine then approved the appointment of Olivier de Vezin as Royal Surveyor from 1747, four years after Governor Vaudreuil-Cavagnial and *commissaire-ordonnateur* Salmon had unofficially assigned him the task. However, eleven years later, in 1758, Vezin complained that he had not yet received any surveying tools, two desperately needed assistant surveyors (for land disputes), or his salary of 1,200 livres per year. He had spent the intervening period clearing a road parallel to the levee from about thirty kilometres below New Orleans to nearly seventy kilometres to the Côte d'Allemands (German Coast) above the town. But it remained virtually impassable because of regular flooding and the neglect by local planters in allocating their slaves to repair the road.<sup>109</sup> We also know that in 1741 a dispute arose between the king's lieutenant and a Pointe Coupée planter over repairs

to a bridge on a public road,<sup>110</sup> but it is not clear from this account if the road was an extension from New Orleans. Another contemporary account suggested that elementary roads, or pathways, linked the villages clustered around Fort de Chartres in the Illinois country by the 1750s, the presence of which has been confirmed by recent archaeological work in the region.<sup>111</sup> These snippets of information reinforce the impression that, despite efforts by the state to institute secure land routes, riverine travel remained the transportation of choice for goods and people throughout lower Louisiana.

Most of our information on travelling in the North American interior is derived from explorers and missionaries in the seventeenth century. These accounts capture the dramatically new biological and cultural world for Europeans entering it for the first time. By the era of the Seven Years War, the regular movement of soldiers had helped regularize the route between Montreal and the entry to the *pays d'en haut* at Fort Frontenac (now Kingston, Ontario), a hard journey by canoe of eight to nine days<sup>112</sup> (see map 5). What did this world look like in the mid-eighteenth century, when travel routes and cultural interaction between Natives and Europeans had become more thoroughly integrated, even routine? How fully did the state control these routes? We have only two complete glimpses into interior travel in this period. Father Charlevoix, in his famous account of New France, describes his journey from Quebec to the Great Lakes and from there to New Orleans. He entered the area at the very beginning of the French post-building era beyond Detroit and south to the Ohio. His itinerary followed what gradually had become the major route linking Canada and Louisiana.<sup>113</sup> From Quebec to Montreal took an unusually long 10 days by horse and riverboat; Montreal to Fort Frontenac at the edge of Lake Ontario, 13 days by canoe; from there to Fort Detroit, across windy Lakes Ontario and Erie, 22 days; from Detroit to Kaskaskia, near the Mississippi, via the Illinois River and including several long layovers, 104 days; and finally from Kaskaskia to New Orleans, then still under construction, a long 38 days. If we keep in mind the necessity of resting, the desire to visit and record, and patient waiting out inclement weather or for comrades to catch up, Charlevoix completed the voyage from Montreal to New Orleans in just under ten months, of which six were spent actually travelling. His account, really the first to attempt an accurate assessment of fauna and flora and especially the Native tribes inhabiting this vast region, marks a transition between the earlier exploratory voyages by La Salle in the seventeenth century and post-revolutionary accounts by Americans, who took the basic transportation, cultural practices of Native nations, and geographic knowledge of the Great Lakes–Mississippi



valley for granted. But how did travel occur at the height of French influence in the area?

A better glimpse is afforded by Jacques-François Forget Duverger, a French priest who journeyed from France to his new post among the Tamaroas people at Cahokia (near Fort de Chartres) in the Illinois country in 1753–54<sup>114</sup> (see map 4). His account is important because not only is it precise but it captures a metropolitan perception, albeit an idyllic one, of travel in the Great Lakes region in a time of transition. Leaving La Rochelle on June 25, 1753, Duverger arrived at Quebec on September 9 and wintered in the city. Here he enjoyed the small but lively cosmopolitan world of the pre-war capital, impressed with its churches and the high standard of conversation, and detailing exotic ailments such as frostbite. On April 22, he left Quebec for Montreal, taking the normal five days by a small sailing boat to reach the fur trade's capital. From here his interior travels began in earnest. Leaving Montreal proper, he took a carriage overland to the village of Lachine, a rendez-vous for many fur traders since the 1670s, where he encountered his first birchbark canoe. Lieutenant Péan, commanding a small company taking supplies to the French posts in the suddenly contested Ohio valley, brought news of Jumonville's ambush and invited Duverger to join his group for safety.

Leaving Lachine (eight kilometres southwest of Montreal) on May 10, Duverger with his compass and sighting tools in hand, the company paddled up the St Lawrence toward Fort Frontenac, reaching a camp near there May 16; they immediately turned south, passing near the English fort at Oswego (Chouegouen to the French) on May 20, before reaching French Fort Niagara on May 23. As a priest, Duverger at this time did little or no paddling; this left him time and energy to appreciate the "charming skies" and lake water "clearer than the fairest fountains," and to exclaim that "the agreeable nature of the country tempts one to voyage [by canoe] all one's life." At Niagara he witnessed his first Franco-Native conference, which he described as a "great feast." Leaving Fort Niagara on June 11, his party visited the Great Falls while making the obligatory portage around them, and then entered Lake Erie, where they heard more of Jumonville's death from a detachment of French soldiers returning from the Ohio posts. Duverger lingered here for a month, where the company were joined by a new brigade of twenty-three trading canoes and an estimated three hundred men (overloaded with thirteen men in each canoe) before finally reaching Presque Isle (Erie, Pennsylvania) on July 17, Sandusky on August 4, and, after a short cut through the small rivers of northern Ohio, Detroit on August 6. This portion of the journey took so long because harsh lake winds threatened to capsize the

canoes nearly every day. Once arrived, Duverger found the post and region around Detroit enchanting, gushing that "truly Nature has refused nothing to make of this country the most charming in the world."

At Detroit he arranged to place his baggage on *pirogues* headed for Fort Ouiatanon; he set off with seven traders and officers on rented horses on September 3 and reached Fort Saint Joseph a week later. Along the way he slept under a bearskin blanket, marvelling that "one would think on this voyage we were lodging every night in the finest *auberges* as they have on the great roads in France." From nearby Fort Ouiatanon, Duverger exchanged his horse for a *pirogue* on October 3, although his account does not clarify whether this was the one that also carried his baggage. Storms of mosquitoes hounded the travellers whenever they camped on shore and pursued them until Fort Vincennes, which they reached on October 10. Here Duverger rested and enjoyed the enlightened company of the fort's commander and the local Jesuits for three weeks. On October 31 he joined a French officer and twenty-four soldiers in *pirogues* to make the final descent down to the Illinois country. For the first time on his travels, he noted their precautions to mount a guard against enemy Natives (whom he did not identify). On November 8 the detachment entered the Mississippi (Duverger found its water excellent to drink) and finally camped at Kaskaskia. From this hamlet, Duverger walked on foot to Fort de Chartres, where the post commander, a French officer with Irish roots, Mactigue de Macarty, received him in the evening and supplied him with a horse the next morning to take him to his new home at Cahokia.

Duverger's account provides valuable insights on several fronts. The trip took the better part of seven months, with major stops at key points to make further arrangements. Weather, as on the oceanic routes, played a crucial role in determining speed, safety, and comfort. The variety of transportation is significant. After leaving Montreal, Duverger travelled on carriages, canoes of different sizes, horses, Mississippi *pirogues*, and on foot. The fact that he could rent horses, as a modern traveller might rent cars, or send his baggage on riverboats, in the middle of the *pays d'en haut*, suggests a fairly sophisticated level of regularized transportation in the region by the 1750s.<sup>115</sup> Duverger demonstrates above all that the Great Lakes–Illinois country proved to be not only largely safe for travel but regularly criss-crossed by French troops, underscoring the impressive reach of the French state's authority into the heart of the North American interior. Native voyagers and villages, so paramount in earlier narratives of exploration, have receded into the background; Duverger encounters them in large groups



only three times, all within or in sight of French forts. The very fact that his account is so sentimentalized and idyllic, ten years before Rousseau's *Émile*, attests to a subtle transformation from "traveller" to a pseudo-tourist.

Finally, Duverger's account stresses the opportunities for contact and even polite conversation in the *pays d'en haut*. Information, while subject to chance encounters, bounced in many directions and perhaps more quickly in this region than historians have tended to appreciate. His account also emphasizes the distinction between European and American modes of transportation and contact, hinged at Quebec or, alternatively, at New Orleans. Up to and within the capitals of Canada or Louisiana, European technology and transatlantic correspondence dominated; beyond the town, a non-European and culturally distinct type of contact, based on technology borrowed from North American Natives or on West African skills and labour, quickly rose to prominence, determined largely by the fur or hide trades and, from the 1740s, the logistics of military supply. At the same time, American interior transportation developed rapidly under French and Native alliances, but was increasingly reliant on European forms of exchange, well in advance of the Anglo-American emigration after the American Revolution.

#### COAST AND TRACK IN MARTINIQUE

In the Caribbean, French settlers had destroyed indigenous Carib transportation technology and skills by the mid-seventeenth century, leaving vestiges in the construction of boats and interior paths on many islands. Small and fast-flowing rivers hindered land transport, since they sliced islands into isolated coastal strips, particularly on mountainous Martinique, Basse-Terre island in Guadeloupe, Grenada, and the South Province of Saint Domingue. The sea provided the fastest and most economical means of transporting people, heavy loads of tobacco or sugar, and of course, correspondence; from the beginning of settlement, small coasting vessels dominated local and inter-island travel. Black freedmen and slaves provided most of the labour, skills, and even entrepreneurial management. They occasionally carried merchants and their letters,<sup>116</sup> and summaries of colonial expenses usually included some mention of "black proprietors of canoes" to carry officers and dispatches between the two main ports or, more rarely, to outlying ports on Martinique or to Basse-Terre on Guadeloupe. That freedmen actively participated in this carrying trade is borne out by official records, which often listed payments to "*patrons noirs*" for carrying officials, supplies, and dispatches in their boats, principally

between Saint Pierre and Fort Royal.<sup>117</sup> In 1739, a typical year, the state spent 3,714 livres (1.5 per cent of the year's expenses).<sup>118</sup>

However, detailed accounts of operations are very rare. According to Father Jean-Baptiste Labat, a freedman man named Louis Galère operated the best service between Saint Pierre and Fort Royal in the 1690s and early 1700s. Galère charged white passengers 1 *ecu* for the thirty-kilometre, half-day voyage, a rate Labat considered quite reasonable. Within three years he had built up an operation of three or four boats, manned by a total of twenty of his own slaves (about five to each boat). His boats used a square sail and oars, and carried five passengers or the equivalent weight in goods. Each vessel left Saint Pierre no later than 4 a.m., arrived at Fort Royal by 8 a.m., and then departed there at 4 p.m., arriving back at Saint Pierre between 7 and 8 p.m.<sup>119</sup> By 1713, up to twenty-five such vessels plied between the two towns, although a hurricane that year demolished many of them.<sup>120</sup> In the 1750s Thibault de Chanvalon noted that only slaves served as sailors on the large number of small inter-island sailing craft. He carefully distinguished between passenger 'canoes' with two masts and six to eight oars and the lighter and more manoeuvrable *pirogues*, based on older Carib designs, with a keel and pointed at both ends.<sup>121</sup> As in Louisiana, slaves appear to have comprised the backbone of local seaborne transportation in the Îles du Vent, probably because their services were cheap, and the work attracted skilled slaves who benefited from relatively greater freedom. Colonial officials certainly considered them reliable, in contrast to official perceptions in Louisiana. While the use of slaves in such relatively free circumstances would appear to contradict the severity of the French labour regime, it may also well be that slave sailors formed an elite group within the slave community.<sup>122</sup>

As important as sea travel remained throughout the eighteenth century, roads assumed an increasingly important role much more than in North America. Most of our information is limited to Martinique. The island's roads began as a defensive system to ensure internal movements of the militia during the Nine Years' War (1689–97)<sup>123</sup> (see map 3). By 1695 an elementary network linked Saint Pierre and Fort Royal along the coast, Saint Pierre to Basse-Pointe on the Atlantic Ocean via the "Jesuit Trace," and the major towns of Le Français, La Trinité, and Le Marin, on the island's eastern side, to Fort Royal. In 1700 Trinité could be reached from Fort Royal in six hours by horse, a distance of about thirty kilometres over rugged terrain.<sup>124</sup> After 1700, however, the island's roads gradually fell into disrepair, even as officials shifted their emphasis from a defence network to a means of land development.<sup>125</sup> Wealthy plantation owners dispensed with roads, since they often had easy access to coves and inlets for shipping their precious



cargoes of sugar. Poorer whites bought the much cheaper hillside properties to start banana, cacao, and, later, coffee plantations. They needed the roads, but could not underwrite their cost or supply enough slaves for the needs of the *corvée*.

As in Canada, the arrival of an ambitious new intendant energized the communications infrastructure. In 1724 Blondel created a set of regulations for road surveying and repair, projected ample labour from slave *corvées*, and used the talents of a new royal surveyor, Jean-Eustache du Joncheray, the son of the former surveyor who had created the original road system in the 1690s.<sup>126</sup> Although Joncheray quickly set out to revamp the road system on Martinique, his work never progressed much past the initial survey made between January 27 and April 3, 1727.<sup>127</sup> Outraged planters soon swamped the local courts with lawsuits over who should pay for the system. Blondel appointed a special commission in 1728, the *chambre d'arpentage*, to hear complaints over road payments (which were closely tied to land titles). The commissioners' work progressed very slowly; reports on the various cases appeared periodically in the official correspondence over the next thirty years.<sup>128</sup> Aside from its financing, the survey drew the ire of the planters because it impinged on their autonomy. Blondel blamed the inertia on the militia captains, reporting that traditionally they alone had the right to order road repairs. The result was that transgressors were not notified and fines remained uncollected. Of an estimated 5,976 livres of repair work to be done, Joncheray had been able to obtain a meagre 360 livres.<sup>129</sup> Within a decade, years of seasonal rains had washed out roads in southern Martinique, hindering the movements of the militias.<sup>130</sup> The use of slave *corvées* increasingly emerged as the most contentious issue over road repairs. On the eve of the Seven Years War, planters continued to balk at allowing slaves to be used, in part because of decreasing profits from sugar and coffee and in part from fear of allowing slaves from across the island to mingle and make contact with one another.<sup>131</sup>

The incomplete roads of Martinique were typical of the stillborn transportation infrastructure evident in all French colonies prior to 1763. It took time and the accumulation of knowledge to establish the best routes, and money and still more time to coordinate and build roads or clear harbours. Colonial authorities were still exploring and adjusting to new environments and social structures in the first half of the eighteenth century. In the meantime, colonists had developed their own routes by rivers or along coasts. While often more inconvenient, these had the distinct advantage of being unregulated by authorities. The royal road system had long served as an important arm of the

French state, helping royal and Ferme officials to exchange correspondence and easing the movement of royal armies and officials throughout the kingdom. Opposition by peasants to the *corvées* proved annoying, but could ultimately be controlled. In the colonies, roads were expensive and needed the cooperation of colonists to built and repaired.

All forms of transport, whether by road, lake, or ocean, evolved as an ongoing process of trial and error, discovery and refinement. Both Canada and Louisiana proved hard to get to by the ocean, but once port was reached, the strategic entry into two vast river-lake systems allowed an extensive, but in many ways superficial, influence by French missionaries, traders, settlers, and military officers. Only by the 1750s did interior traffic become fully linked and allow consistent communications between the Atlantic or Gulf ports and the interior posts and settlements. Distance did not curtail or mitigate state influence nearly as much as did adverse climate and commercial opportunities, both of which limited the regularity of contact. In this sense, the growth of Louisbourg shifted direct state attention away from Canada, as a result in great measure of its strategic position at the easily accessible tip of North America and the Grand Banks fishing grounds, and the subsequent ease of sailing to it. The Canadian heartland became, geographically speaking, Louisbourg's backyard until the 1750s. Is it mere coincidence that the Marine re-evaluated and re-emphasized Canada's strategic role at exactly the same moment as navigation both to and within Canada reached a level of routine safety, even though its economic production remained virtually unchanged? In contrast, the Îles du Vent, and Martinique in particular, offered far better opportunities for regular contact and for state influence than Canada and especially Louisiana. European captains and pilots, and through them French merchants and the state, seized upon and developed the easiest, safest, and most profitable navigational routes and anchorages first. Despite their obvious strategic advantage from the metropolitan perspective, the islands of the Îles du Vent offered many year-round opportunities for close and continual intercolonial contact, such as smuggling, and these in turn challenged state control.

In all three colonies, the state found that to control a colony efficiently, including sending troops, personnel, credit and money, and supplies, required that it expand its grasp of the colony's geography and enlist, or even co-opt, colonial leaders and elites, skills, and very often, colonial initiatives in order to do so. The state did not boldly determine colonial transportation infrastructure, but instead tended to pick and choose from a variety of options proffered by local officials



and leaders. The projects with obvious advantage for colonists or colonial leaders were acted upon; those not meeting these requirements faded in the countless memorandums urging action. At the same time, knowledge of local geography opened doors to state service for talented men, such as La Richardière in Canada and Livaudais in Louisiana, or established and sustained free black entrepreneurs such as Galère in Martinique.

... the 'discovery of the famous Christian Anacostia' in the province of New-York (in what is now north central New-York State) and indicated on the basis of Indian tales that 'having crossed the Atlantic Mountains, the Chacaras came to a great lake, which I believe must be the site of the lake they tell of in Florida where they built their settlements and have multiplied greatly.' ... Together and separately, the story of finding Anacostia and the legend of El Dorado led El Dorado to search for a better explanation. A relative of Francisco Pizarro, Diego Pizarro de Caceres, reportedly asked permission to lead an expedition to seek the great Chacaras chief Francisco de Orizuela's treasure 1541-1542 because of the Amazon occurred as a by-product of Gonzalo Pizarro's search not only for cinnamon trees in 'the province of La Canada' but also of the quest for 'the region around [Lake El Dorado] ... a very populous and very rich land, full of gold.' ... Like the last cities of the Inca empire and found by sixteenth-century Spanish and seventeenth-century Jesuit men, these cities of Inca people, local princes and golden lakes rested on a factual foundation. Though Spanish never met him, Anacostia existed, and sixteenth-century Spaniards discovered the parlayed skins of members of the Chacaras nation he led. A kind of cinnamon tree grew east of the Andes, and though wealthy tall tales of legend, scholars have noted that there does seem to have been in the fifteenth century an Inca emperor on Lake Gocuzca (modern Colombia) involving a chief's being credited in gold dust. Nearby Lake Itzapa has yielded a golden structure of what appears to have been the Inca ruler, Henry of the Book, from the Inca Empire (now in Mexico, N.Y., 1571) and the Inca ruler, Huayna Capac, from the Inca Empire (now in N. Carolina). ... Diego Pizarro de Caceres was the first to mention Anacostia (1542), but not until 1591 did the first map of the region (Caceres's map) show the lake and the mountains. ... The first map of the region (Caceres's map) shows the lake and the mountains. ... The first map of the region (Caceres's map) shows the lake and the mountains. ... The first map of the region (Caceres's map) shows the lake and the mountains. ...