

Single sheet, folio (365 by 235mm), folded to make 4 pages, manuscript pen and ink on paper, written on two sides in French, signed “Pierre [Esprit] Radisson” as witness, together with merchants “[Germain] Le Barbier” and “P[ierre] Le Forestier”, and other local officials of Rouen and Quebec; some staining, minor paper loss, not affecting the text.

“GOOD, LOYAL, DRY AND MERCHANTABLE FAT BEAVER”

[Hudson Bay Company – Quebec fur trading contract].

Author
RADISSON, Pierre-Esprit.

Publication date
19th April 1655, and Quebec, 12th October 1655.

Publisher

Publication place
Rouen,

Physical description
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Dimensions

Notes
A contemporaneous statement of the commercial terms of the St Lawrence–Atlantic fur trade

An original fur trade contract, unusually detailed, and crucially witnessed by Pierre-Esprit Radisson: explorer, captive, cultural intermediary, and architect of the Hudson's Bay Company.

An extraordinary survival, this is the only known document in private hands bearing Radisson's signature, illuminating the formative years of one of the most consequential figures in early Canadian history.

The document comprises two parts: an initial contract, prepared in Rouen, France, for a shipment of textiles and haberdashery aboard the vessel 'Les armes de Nimiereques' bound for Quebec; and a further notarial act drawn up after the ship's arrival, cancelling the agreement in the presence of Radisson.

The initial contract is an unusually detailed statement of the commercial terms of the St Lawrence–Atlantic fur trade, down to the allocation of risk, freight, and insurance on both the transatlantic and inland legs. It records Germain Le Barbier's acknowledgement that a barrel of mercery, bales of drapery and cloth, shipped in his name, are in fact for the account and risk of Estienne Le Forestier and Company of Quebec, with payment to be made not in coin but "in good, loyal and merchantable beaver", specifying proportions of "very good, fat beaver" and "very good, dry beaver", and fixing prices per pound, free of export dues and other charges to France.

Having reached Quebec, the parties appear before the royal secretary and notary "estably par le Roy a Quebec", in October 1655, where Le Forestier acknowledges that he never delivered any merchandise to Le Barbier and therefore agrees that the Rouen concordat is null on both sides.

It is in this Quebecois act – drafted less than fifty years after the city's founding – that "Pierre Radisson" signs as a named witness, alongside Pierre François and the contracting merchants, his autograph here identified as the only example currently known in private hands.

Radisson: explorer, captive, fur-trader, and negotiator

Pierre-Esprit Radisson (c.1636/40–1710) occupies a central place at the intersection of Indigenous North America, New France and the emerging English commercial empire, and his work as explorer, cultural intermediary and architect of the Hudson's Bay Company makes him a key figure in Canadian history.

Probably born in Paris, he emigrated as a teenager to New France and settled at Trois-Rivières, where he was captured in an Iroquois raid in the early 1650s, adopted into a Mohawk family and drawn into the ritualised violence, diplomacy and kinship structures of the Longhouse world. After nearly two years he escaped via the Dutch post of Fort Orange and returned to France around 1654, having acquired languages, practical ethnographic knowledge and frontier survival skills that later underpinned his success as trader and negotiator.

Radisson returned to Canada by the later 1650s and formed his celebrated partnership with his brother-in-law Médard Chouart des Groseilliers, pushing westwards toward the upper Great Lakes and into regions now forming Wisconsin and Minnesota, thereby opening new lines into the interior fur trade.

Radisson's disputes with French authorities over licensing and penalties led him and Des Groseilliers to seek English backing; through repeated voyages to London in the 1660s they persuaded Charles II and a group of London and court investors to finance a direct trade into Hudson Bay. A decision which led directly to the royal charter of 2 May 1670, which established the "Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson's Bay", granting them monopoly rights over the lands draining into the Bay and creating the "Hudson's Bay Company" – for centuries a dominant

economic and political force across much of what is now Canada.

Radisson's later career involved shifting service between French and English patrons, further voyages to Hudson Bay, and prolonged litigation. He died in London in 1710; his 'Voyages' have long been mined as literary and historical sources, but securely dated documents from his early life in New France are exceptionally scarce.

Against that background, this 1655 contract placing Radisson in Quebec as a literate young man trusted to witness a significant mercantile act offers an unusually firm documentary anchor within a biography otherwise dominated by later reconstructions and his own retrospective narrative. It shows him already integrated into the world of colonial merchants and royal officials, participating in the legal culture of New France just as the fur trade that would define his career was consolidating around the St Lawrence corridor.

The document: witness to colonial, economic, and social history

A crucial artefact of the mid-seventeenth-century fur trade, this document supplies direct evidence of the institutional life of early Quebec, and a unique autograph witness to Radisson's formative years.

The contract gives a granular view of how European textiles and mercery were converted into graded beaver pelts, stipulating qualities ("tres bon castor gras", "tres bon castor secq"), prices and the exemption of the pelts from export duties and damage en route to France, thereby documenting the economic logic that underpinned colonial settlement and later Hudson's Bay Company expansion.

Drafted first before royal notaries in Rouen and then endorsed and annulled before the King's Officer at Quebec, the document also illustrates the legal and bureaucratic mechanisms tying a young North American colony to metropolitan France. Its survival, having physically travelled across the Atlantic and back, and its explicit reference to Quebec less than fifty years after its foundation, place it among the relatively small corpus of mid-seventeenth-century manuscripts related to New France still outside institutional collections.

The presence of Radisson's signature in Quebec in 1655 significantly enhances its research value for historians of New France, Indigenous–European relations and the origins of the Hudson's Bay Company. The manuscript is a primary source document that simultaneously illuminates early colonial commerce, the material basis of beaver-fur capitalism, and the lived trajectory of one of Canada's foundational figures.

THE CONTRACT

Transcription

"[Je sous] signé recongnois et confesse que les marchandises…..chargés a mon nom, savoir une baricque de mercerie NB……de draperie NC.ND.NE.NF.NG et une balle de thoille NA…..marqué comme cy a costé, dedans le navire…..les armes de Nimiereques cappitaine et maistre……Richard … Frederic Dincuse de pres cy devant Rouen pour faire le voyage… a Quebec pays de la Nouvelle France sont pour compte et risques….de Estienne Le Forestier et Compaignie jusqu´au lieu de Quebec…..auquel lieu ledict Le Forestier et Compaignie on ordre de monstera la livraison dedans le navire parce que ce examptera de tous droits dentree et austres frais qui se pouroiera faire dedans le pays a descharge desdites marchandises et pour le payamen desdites marchandises me submestre et obliger donner soixante pour cent en bénéfice audict Le Forestier….ordre suivant l´arresté que j´en ai fait au bas desdictes factures, lesquels soixante pour cent, avec le montant desdictes

marchandises, avec les frais rendus a bord suivant lesdictes factures, je m´oblige quinze jours apres l´arrivée du navire livre aux Le Forestier et Compaignie ou a son ordre la totalité de la susdite valleur tant pour le principal que bénéfice, en castors bons loyaus et marchands, savoir la moitié et jusqu´a deux tiers sil n´est possible en tres bon castor gras et non en moindre sorte a reson de quatorze livres la livre, et la moitié ou ung tiers en tres bon castor secq diver et marchand a reson de six livres la livre, le tout rendu et dans le navire quitte et franc de tous droits de sortie et generallement de tous austres droits sil y en a, mesme de lexemption des frais et avarie desdicts castors jusqu´en France, comme aussi au susdit concorda et conditions me submestre et obliger recepvoir de Le Forestier et Compaignie ou a son ordre du navire……nommé Le Sacrifice d´Abraham cappitaine……Guillaume Poullet de Dieppe et présent a la Rochelle les marchandises quil a recues de la ceste ville par le messager et austre quil a donné ordre envoye de Paris par le messager qui va directement a la Rochelle suivant l´aresté que jen ai fait au bas des dictes factures, ou sera comprins et adiouté le port tant d icy que de Paris à La Rochelle et tous austres droits et frais jusque a rendre les dictes marchandises a bord, à la reserve du…….et assurance, ne seront comptes ni comprins sur les dictes factures des ceux dicts navires, tesmoingts, en quoy jai signé le present triple, l´un acomply et le austre de mulle valleur a Rouen…"

Translation
"[I, the undersigned] acknowledge and confess that the goods… loaded in my name, namely a barrel of haberdashery NB… of drapery NC.ND.NE.NF.NG and a bale of cloth NA… marked as hereinafter, inside the ship… the arms of Nimiereques, captain and master… Richard (?) Frederic Dincuse of Rouen, to make the voyage…Quebec, in the province of New France, are for the account and risk of Estienne Le Forestier and Company until the place of Quebec…at which place the said Le Forestier and Company have orders to take delivery of the goods in the ship because this will exempt them from all import duties and other costs that may be incurred in the country for the discharge of the said goods and for the payment of the said goods, I hereby submit and undertake to give sixty per cent in profit to the said Le Forestier….in accordance with the order I have made at the bottom of the said bills, which sixty per cent, together with the amount of the said goods, with the costs incurred on board in accordance with the said bills, I undertake to deliver to Le Forestier and Company or to his order, fifteen days after the arrival of the ship, the total amount of the above-mentioned value, both for the principal and for the profit, in good, loyal and merchantable beaver, namely half and up to two thirds, if possible, in very good, fat beaver and not of a lesser kind, at fourteen pounds per pound, and half or one third in very good, dry and merchantable beaver at six pounds per pound, all delivered and in the ship, free of all exit duties and generally of all other duties, if any, including exemption from the costs and damage of the said castors until they reach France, as also in the above agreement and conditions, I undertake and oblige myself to receive from Le Forestier and Company or at their order from the ship… named Le Sacrifice d'Abraham, captain…Guillaume Poullet of Dieppe, present at La Rochelle, shall deliver the goods he has received from this city by the messenger and other person he has given orders to send from Paris by the messenger who is going directly to La Rochelle in accordance with the order I have made at the bottom of the said invoices, which shall include and add the port charges from here to Paris to La Rochelle and all other duties and expenses until the said goods are returned on board, with the exception of the… and insurance, which shall not be counted or included in the said invoices for the said ships, in witness whereof I have signed this triplicate document, one copy to be retained and the other of equal value in Rouen…)"

Signed by both Le Barbier and Le Forestier at the conclusion, each with a paraph manu propria.

The Supplemental Deed

Having made the voyage from Rouen to Quebec, a supplementary deed is appended to the document on 12th October 1655, in part:

Transcription

“Advenant le douziesme jour d´octobre mil six cent cinquante cinq sont compareus par devant moy, secretaire du Conseil estably par le Roy a Quebec, notaire en la Nouvelle France at tesmoing soussigés le sieur Germain Le Barbier et Pierre Le Forestier, lesquels ont consenty et deuclare daccord par ensemble de ce qui suit scavoir ledit…….de Estienne Forestier son frere……par devant Maurice et Borel, tabellions royaux audit Rouen, en datte di dix neufviesme jour avril mil six cent cinquante cinq laquelle il nous a monstrée et exhibée et icelle rendue qui….quil soit spéciffié par le concordat en l´autre part que ledit Pierre Germain Le Barbier seroit obligé de payer audit Forestier les marchandises….quinze jours après l´arrivée en France….Paris moyennant la livraison qui luy en serait faite, ledit sieur Forestier recognoist quil n´a livré aucune marchandise audit sieur Le Barbier et que, partant, il a deuclaré d´accord que le concordat soit nulle tant de sa part que de la part dudit sieur promettant…….fait et passé à Quebecq le jour et an susdit, en pressence de Pierre François tesmoing et Pierre Radisson tesmoing soussignés avec les parties”.

Translation

“On the twelfth day of October, sixteen hundred and fifty-five, appeared before me, secretary of the Council established by the King in Quebec, notary in New France, and witnessed by the undersigned Germain Le Barbier and Pierre Le Forestier, who have agreed and declared in agreement with each other as follows, namely that the said……Estienne Forestier, his brother……before Maurice and Borel, royal notaries in Rouen, on the nineteenth day of April, sixteen hundred and fifty-five, which he showed and presented to us and which was returned to him, which….is specified in the agreement in the other part, that the said Pierre Germain Le Barbier would be obliged to pay the said Forestier for the goods….fifteen days after arrival in France….Paris upon delivery thereof to him, the said Sieur Forestier acknowledges that he has not delivered any merchandise to the said Sieur Le Barbier and that, therefore, he has declared that the agreement is null and void both on his part and on the part of the said Sieur…….Done and executed in Quebec on the day and year above stated, in the presence of Pierre François, witness, and Pierre Radisson, witness, who have signed with the parties)”.

Bibliography

Provenance

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