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**Québec City's Ship Carpenters, 1840 to 1893:
Working Class Self-Organization on the Waterfront**

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Québec City's Ship Carpenters, 1840 to 1893:
Working Class Self-Organization on the Waterfront

by

Jean-Philip Mathieu

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. degree in History

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Abstract, *Québec City's Ship Carpenters, 1840 to 1893: Working Class Self-Organization on the Waterfront*, Jean-Philip Mathieu, 2009.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the construction of wooden sailing vessels became the single most important employer in Québec City. Thousands of people worked as shipwrights in the shipbuilding industry, but ship carpenters were the backbone of the trade. These workers displayed an extraordinary capacity for mobilization, being responsible for some of Canada's earliest labour organizations, starting in 1840 with the *Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*. This study demonstrates that ship carpenters' impressive capacity for organization was the result of the trade's remarkable ethnic homogeneity, as no less than 90% of ship carpenters were French Canadian, and most lived together in the working class suburb of Saint Roch. This homogeneity allowed ship carpenters to avoid the bitter internecine conflict that plagued the early labour movement, and allowed them to become part of the vanguard of the Canadian working class.

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List of Abbreviations

AVQ	Archives de la Ville de Québec
BANQ	Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec
DCB	Dictionary of Canadian Biography
IUSCC	International Union of Ship Carpenters and Caulkers
JLAPC	Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada
JLCPC	Journals of the Legislative Council of the Province of Canada
JHCC	Journals of the House of Commons of Canada
LAC	Library and Archives Canada
NYWU	New York Workingmen's Union
PHSVQ	Programme de recherche “Population et histoire sociale de la ville de Québec” of the Centre interuniversitaire d'études québécoises (CIEQ-Université Laval)
QSLBS	Quebec Ship Laborers Benevolent Society
QWBS	Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society
SABCVQ	Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec
UPCCNQ	Union de protection des charpentiers et calfats de navires de Québec

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I owe a great debt to Richard Marcoux and Marc Hillard for allowing me to use their database of Québec City census data, without which this study would have been impossible. I also stand to thank the wonderful staffs at Library and Archives Canada, Bibliothèques et Archives Nationales du Québec, and Archives de la Ville de Québec, who were a constant help to me. Equally important was the financial assistance of the University of Ottawa, especially in the form of teaching assistantships, that made it possible for me to undertake this study.

My profound gratitude also goes out to my parents Jean-Guy and Nancy, who have been the source of endless support, and Debbie-Ann Bergeron, whose constant encouragement has helped me to overcome the many challenges of this study. Finally, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my good friend Michel Ouimet (1982-2008).

Introduction

On 13 February 1890, a retired shipbuilder named Narcisse Rosa published a letter in the *Quebec Morning Chronicle* in which he made the case for the viability of naval construction in Québec City.¹ “It is universally admitted”, argued Rosa, “that if shipbuilding were restored in Quebec it would immensely help our good city and we would once more revive *le bon vieux temps*, and witness prosperity on all sides [...]”² The grizzled old builder's optimistic appraisal of the industry was not based purely on nostalgia – for almost a century the construction of sailing vessels was by far the most important industry in the *Vieille Capitale*. Between 1797 and 1896, 1633 ships with a total displacement of more than one million tonnes were built in the construction yards of Québec.³ The shipyards were also the city's most important single employer, and in good years, up to 5000 workers toiled on the densely packed waterfront.⁴ For shipbuilders like Narcisse Rosa, it was truly *le bon vieux temps*.

The Shipbuilding Industry

Shipbuilding began under the French Régime. Samuel de Champlain, the founder of Québec, was one of the first to point out the incredible potential of the area for naval construction. The forests were rich in quality lumber and could supply the by-products essential for the industry such as tar, coal, and iron. Furthermore, the region could

-
- 1 Henceforth, we will always use the term “Québec” to refer to the city. When talking about the province established after 1867, we will refer to the “Province of Québec”.
 - 2 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 15 February 1890, 3.
 - 3 Eileen Reid Marcil, *On chantait “Charley-Man.” La construction de grands voiliers à Québec de 1763 à 1893* (Sainte-Foy: Éditions GID, 2000), 362.
 - 4 André Tremblay, “La construction navale à Québec au XIXe siècle: un point de vue organisationnel,” *Recherches sociographiques* 37 (1996): 70-71.

support hemp and flax, thus supplying the need for sails and rope and the city's location was perfect for maritime industries. The construction of small boats began in 1696, and output slowly rose until the late-1720s. Later, under the guidance of the *commissaire de la marine* Gilles Hocquart, Québec's naval infrastructure was significantly expanded and several large warships were launched.⁵ However, high production costs, a recession, and the start of the Seven Years' War all contributed to the decline of New France's naval construction in the 1750s.⁶

Though France ceded Québec to Britain in 1763, the infrastructure built by Hocquart in the 1730s remained. At first, the city's new colonial masters were uninterested in restarting the industry, but by the end of the eighteenth century a few Scottish shipbuilders like Patrick Beatson began to settle along Québec's waterfront. The key moment came in 1805 when Napoléon I imposed a continental blockade on the British Isles. Its traditional Baltic lumber supply now cut off, London turned to its North American colonies to make up the shortfall. The lumber and shipbuilding industries were complementary activities, and the vast increase of the first led to the expansion of the second.⁷ By the second decade of the nineteenth century, the construction of sailing vessels had become the most important employer of labour in the city. As with all industries, some years were good, others bad, and at its peak in 1863-1864, 55 ships a year were being launched from the naval yards of Québec.⁸

However, by the time Narcisse Rosa wrote his letter in 1890, the industry had completely collapsed. The last sailing vessel built in Québec was launched in 1893, a

5 Jacques Mathieu, *La construction navale royale à Québec 1739-1759* (Québec: Société historique de Québec, 1971), 2-4.

6 *Ibid.*, 65.

7 Richard Rice, *Shipbuilding in British America, 1787-1890: An Introductory Study* (PhD. Thesis, University of Liverpool, 1977), 55-56.

8 Marcil, 320.

few years after Rosa's proposal.⁹ Every now and then, someone would suggest a scheme to relaunch the industry, once so important, but all these attempts would fail. The once bustling construction yards were abandoned, the workers relocated, and the city moved on to other things. The shipbuilding industry was an important chapter in the development of Québec, as were the thousands of workers who toiled during the cold winter months to build the last great generation of sailing vessels before the transition to iron and steam.

The Ship Carpenter

Several groups of workers depended on the shipbuilding industry, including pit sawers, caulkers, and sailmakers, but no trade better characterizes the world of wooden sailing vessels than ship carpenters. These skilled workers were the backbone of the industry. It was they who, with little more than hand tools, turned a rough assortment of planks and ropes into majestic schooners in the last days of the age of sail. They began the nineteenth century as proud artisans, and although like most such groups they gradually became proletarianized, their story is unique in the history of the Canadian working class.

The nineteenth century was tumultuous for the labouring population in the Atlantic world, as new industrial régimes were imposed in the workplace. The ship carpenters of Québec were not spared from this reality, and they resisted with every means at their disposal. These ranged from the creation of mutual aid societies and unions (see Chapter 2), to more direct action like the riots and strikes which culminated in the state of siege in which the city found itself in 1867 (see Chapter 3). From 1840 to 1893, ship

⁹ *Ibid.*, 320.

carpenters fought against the degradation of their craft and to keep themselves out of the intense poverty and destitution that sometimes seemed to be the destiny of their class.

But things were not always so precarious for the ship carpenters of Québec. They were for the most part in a privileged position vis-à-vis their brothers in allied trades. Compared to most similar groups of workers, their social mobility was impressive. No less than 30% of shipbuilders came from the ranks of ship carpentry, and this does not include those carpenters who ran the day-to-day operations of a naval yard for an absentee owner (see Chapter 1). Needless to say, this had a profound effect on the relations between labour and capital, as the boss was often a former colleague. Ship carpenters thus occupied a privileged strata in the working-class hierarchy of Québec. They were, for example, capable of monopolizing public works during the hungry winter of 1857-58, even in the face of Irish labourers who were often in even more dire straits than they (see Chapter 2). The ship carpenters were also a political force, exerting an influence far greater than their numbers. This was evident in 1867, when John LeMesurier won the mayoral election thanks in part to support from the striking *Union de protection des charpentiers et calfats de navires de la ville de Québec* (see Chapter 3).

What explains this? We will argue that it was their capacity for self-organization that allowed ship carpenters to exert such a powerful influence on the waterfront and beyond. By “self-organization” we mean the ability of a group to unite and work together without being organized by an outside force. There were no Knights of Labour to show up and rally them to work together. Likewise, there was no militant core of a few people that showed up every few years to whip up unrest. Rather, ship carpenters themselves, the rank and file, are the ones that created mutual aid societies in 1841 and

1850, led a working-class movement demanding public works in 1857, set up a union in 1867 and struck that same year.

Four factors contributed to this extraordinary ability for united action. The first factor was simple necessity. As we shall see, instability was the primary characteristic of the shipbuilding industry. Downturns in the world market could instantly throw thousands of men out of work, and carpenters organized themselves to protect their jobs. The nature of their struggles were firmly rooted in the context of the shipbuilding industry as a whole.

Second, their craft was incredibly homogeneous. The proportion of ship carpenters who were French Canadian rarely dipped below 90%, even during the period of famine immigration when the Irish penetrated most other trades (see Chapter 1). This allowed ship carpenters to avoid the bitter ethnic divisions that plagued the period, and made it easier to form mutual aid societies and unions that were truly representative of their membership.¹⁰

The third factor that facilitated the organization of ship carpenters was family and community. The sons of carpenters frequently followed in their fathers' footsteps, and large extended families – such as the Labbés and the Wisemans – worked together in the shipyards. Furthermore, the vast majority of ship carpenters lived in the working-class ward of St. Roch, along the St. Charles. Most of them knew each other personally, and when it became time to mobilize, the word could spread very quickly (see Chapter 1).

The final factor was that shipbuilding never truly industrialized. Until its very last

10 For more on ethnic conflict in the mid-nineteenth century, see: Michael S. Cross, "The Shiners' War: Social Violence in the Ottawa Valley in the 1830s," *Canadian Historical Review* LIV (1973): 1-26; and Ruth Bleasdale, "Class Conflict on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840's," in *Pre-Industrial Canada 1760-1849*, ed. Michael S. Cross and Gregory S. Kealey (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1989).

day, the construction of wooden sailing vessels was done in a traditional way, with tools that would have been familiar to the artisans of the French Régime. Of course, the traditional labour organization had for the most part broken down by the nineteenth century; control of the workplace had passed to the boss, and wage labour had set in. But while some areas of the ship carpenters' craft had definitely been proletarianized, other areas remained remarkably unchanged. They were trained through apprenticeship, for example, and more often than not they worked under the direction of a master carpenter rather than the shipbuilder or his foreman. The builder was sometimes a carpenter himself – because the skills to construct a sailing vessel were learnt on the job, all that was needed was a little capital (see Chapter 1). Ship carpentry was by definition a highly skilled trade, one that could not be easily replaced by the destitute “reserve army of labour” that populated the slums of Québec. Ship carpenters knew their place in the working class hierarchy and were proud of it, often taking a leading rôle in the labour movements of the period (for example in the demand for public works in 1857-58 – see Chapter 2).

Sources and Methodology

Naval carpentry was an important chapter in the development of both the city of Québec and the Canadian working class as a whole. It is therefore rather surprising that so little has been written about it. Only two studies have been published dealing specifically with this group of workers: Réal Brisson's monograph about ship carpenters under the French Régime, and Robert Tremblay's article dealing with the 1840 strike.¹¹

¹¹ Réal N. Brisson, *Les 100 premières années de la charpenterie navale à Québec: 1663-1763* (Québec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1983); Robert Tremblay, “La grève des ouvriers de la construction navale à Québec (1840),” *Revue d'histoire de l'amérique française*. 37:2 (September 1983), 229-232.

The former is an interesting study, but its temporal constraints (1663-1763), and the fact that the trade was so transformed by 1800, limits its usefulness for our purposes. As for Tremblay's article, it suffers from a teleological inclination that misinterprets the significance of the 1840 strike (a subject we will explore in depth in Chapter 2).

Thankfully, the historiography on naval construction in Québec is significantly stronger.

The most frequently cited work on shipbuilding in Québec is a small book published in 1897 by the shipbuilder Narcisse Rosa.¹² The book is principally a reflexion on the important place the industry once held, and includes a list of all the ships constructed and wrecked in the port's environs. Scholars have used it extensively, but it contains some significant problems besides its age. First of all, as Pierre Dufour points out, Rosa's list of vessels constructed is inaccurate.¹³ Second, he provides an overly sentimental view of workers engaged in shipbuilding. Typical of Rosa is a phrase like: “j'aime encore me rappeler de ce bon vieux temps où l'ouvrier tout ruisselant de sueurs travaillait à monter un navire avec le même entrain et la même gaieté de coeur qu'il en aurait mis à bâtir son propre foyer.”¹⁴ We do not dispute this – there is no doubt that ship carpenters took great pride in their work. However, hunger and distress was at least as much of a factor in their daily lives as their “gaieté de coeur”. For Rosa, if there was poverty amongst the labour force it was because “[l]e vice est venu corrompre le coeur de l'honnête travailleur [...]”¹⁵ He mentions the major strikes that hit the industry (in 1840, 1867, and 1878), but for Rosa these were invariably the fault of greedy workers

12 Narcisse Rosa, *La construction des navires à Québec et ses environs – grèves et naufrages* (Québec, Imprimerie Léger Brousseau, 1897).

13 Pierre Dufour, “La construction navale à Québec, 1760-1825: Sources inexplorées et nouvelles perspectives de recherches,” *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 35:2 (September 1981), 234-235.

14 Rosa, 7.

15 *Ibid.*, 10.

who were taken by “[l]appât du gain.”¹⁶ His opinions were of course typical of the late-nineteenth century bourgeoisie, but they do not constitute a sound basis for a serious study of the shipbuilding industry and its labour force.

This romanticized portrait of naval carpenters finds its way into many of the studies that have followed Rosa, including the most recent and complete study of the shipbuilding industry, Eileen Reid Marcil's *On chantait 'Charley-Man'*. This well researched and beautifully illustrated monograph forms an important basis for our work, thanks especially to its lengthy appendices which have proved invaluable. The only significant problem with Reid Marcil's book is that it puts too much emphasis on structural details like construction techniques and industrial geography. This is especially unfortunate as her stated goal in writing the book was: “Dans l'ensemble, les neuf chapitres résument les attentes et les réalisations d'une confrérie de travailleurs qualifiés, qui mettaient tout leur coeur dans leur travail.”¹⁷ Reid Marcil does provide a detailed examination of the different trades involved in naval construction, but she does not sufficiently delve into working conditions, labour relations, or poverty.¹⁸ We cannot fault her for this, as this was not the primary purpose of her monograph. Quoting extensively from Rosa, her main argument about workers is that “il semble que les travailleurs anglophones et francophones des chantiers navals aient eu des relations harmonieuses, tant entre eux qu'avec les constructeurs, et que les grèves étaient exceptionnelles.”¹⁹ As we shall see, however, labour relations were not always

16 *Ibid.*, 11. To compound his litany of errors, he also mistakenly places the major strike of 1867 in 1857. (*Ibid.*, 14-15.)

17 Marcil, 28.

18 The only mention of strikes in her entire book is “À partir de 1840, les charpentiers, les calfats et autres ouvriers de chantier naval se firent souvent entendre en réclamant des hausses de salaire ou une réduction des heures de travail. Souvent, ils appuyèrent leurs revendications par des grèves.” (*Ibid.*, 65).

19 *Ibid.*, 363.

harmonious, and strikes, although rare, were of a particular ferocity indicative of the poisoned atmosphere in which ship carpenters frequently found themselves.

A few other studies exist which either focus on certain aspects of the shipbuilding industry in Québec, or briefly discuss it in the context of larger projects. Of the first variety, we can point to an article by sociologist André Tremblay which analyzes the composing elements of the shipbuilding industry as well as the organization of the workforce. Its main argument seems to be that institutional racism held French Canadians back in the industry. However, as we shall see, this is simply false. French Canadians were the largest ethnic group amongst shipbuilders, and some, like Jean-Élie Gingras, are counted among the most successful to ply the trade. Albert Faucher for his part has published a fascinating study on the collapse of shipbuilding in Québec, which we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 4.²⁰ Those that have included shipbuilding and its workers in the context of larger studies include Fernand Ouellet who firmly places it in the context of a growing Canadian economy.²¹

One of the most important resources for anyone studying Canadian shipbuilding in the nineteenth century is Richard Rice's PhD dissertation *Shipbuilding in British America, 1787-1890: An Introductory Study*. This provided one of the key starting points for our analysis of ship carpentry. Rice identifies the main stages of shipbuilding in British North America, analyzes the rise, apex, and collapse of the industry, and looks at the social history of both shipbuilder and worker.²² Our study would have been impossible without the framework developed by Rice.

20 André Tremblay, "La construction navale à Québec au XIXe siècle: un point de vue organisationnel," *Recherches sociographiques* 37 (1996): 69-96; Albert Faucher, *Histoire économique et unité canadienne* (Montréal: Fides, 1970).

21 Fernand Ouellet, *Histoire économique et sociale du Québec 1760-1850* (Montréal: Fides, 1966).

22 Rice, *op cit*.

As for the other workers who laboured on Québec's waterfront, a recent book by Peter Bischoff has shed a great deal of light on the stevedores and longshoremen that had the responsibility of unloading the thousands of vessels which annually docked at the port. This monograph has been especially useful to us, for as we shall see, ship carpenters and longshoremen had a complex and sometimes adversarial relationship.²³ Our study will therefore fill an important gap in the history of the shipbuilding industry as well as of the Canadian working class as a whole.

The key problem that Canadian labour historians have faced over the years is the dearth of primary materials that could give us a better understanding of the nineteenth century working class. Outside of sources like the wonderful 1888 *Royal Commission on the Relations Between Labour and Capital*, workers have left very few traces in our archives. Unlike in the United States, France, or Britain, Canadian unions rarely published journals or newsletters, and there is little that has survived from the few that did. This is compounded by the fact that by the 1870s most Canadian unions had become locals of American internationals. The historian is therefore required to be creative in order to recover details about the lives of the first generations of Canadian workers.

The most important single source for our study are Québec's newspapers, some of which are now available online. We have extensively consulted the city's main papers, which have revealed such treasures as wage rates, results from union elections, and even a few letters written by carpenters. The main limitation of this source is that Québec's four major papers – the *Québec Mercury*, *Québec Morning Chronicle*, *Le Canadien*, and *Journal de Québec* – all represent the interests of the city's political and commercial

²³ Peter Bischoff. *Les débardeurs au port de Québec : tableau des luttes syndicales, 1831-1902*. (Montréal: Éditions Hurtubise HMH, 2009).

élite. Those few newspapers that sympathized with working people, such as *L'Écho du Peuple* and *L'Union Nationale*, were published infrequently and rarely lasted more than a few years.

For our statistical analysis, we have made great use of census data and directories compiled under the direction of Richard Marcoux and Marc Hillard for the “Population et histoire sociale de la ville de Québec” (PHSVQ) project of the *Centre interuniversitaire d'études québécoises*, and the online 1818 Québec parish census available from *Bibliothèques et archives nationales du Québec*. Within these databases, we have access to a plethora of information about these workers including name, age, and residence.²⁴

Another major source of documentation are the constitutions of the organizations created by ship carpenters, such as the *Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec* (1841), the *Société bienveillante des ouvriers de Québec* (1852), and the *Union de protection des charpentiers et calfats de navires de la ville de Québec* (1867). These and other documents were accessed through CIHM microfilms. When possible, we have supplemented this data with petitions published in support of them, as well as those demanding public works during the difficult winters of 1857-59. These are available at Québec's municipal archives, as are police reports that complete our analysis of the riots and strikes that punctuate the period. Armed with these resources, we will draw a portrait of a proud workforce that lived and worked under uncertain conditions during the golden age of capitalism.

Before delving into the story of the organization and mobilization of ship carpenters, we must survey the shipbuilding industry itself. Chapter 1 will look at the development

²⁴ These databases include data from the 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, and 1901 censuses.

of naval construction in Québec from the French Régime to the glory years of the 1850s. We will then discuss the shipbuilders themselves, while keeping in mind the key characteristic of the industry: its instability. Finally, we will look at workplace organization in the construction yards, and the place of ship carpenters within the wider labour process.

Chapter 2 will look at the first period of labour organization for ship carpenters. This will take us from the 1840 strike and the organization of Québec's first mutual aid society (*Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*), to the creation of the wider *Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society* (1852). We will also discuss the working class mobilization demanding public works during the hungry winters of 1857-58.

After the first wave of mobilization came the development of true unionism during the 1860s. This will be the subject of chapter 3. Ship carpenters, seeing the degradation of their craft in a difficult economic climate, organized unions such as the *Union de protection des charpentiers et calfats de navires de la ville de Québec* to fight back. This culminated in the extremely vicious strike which erupted in September 1867 and degenerated into three months of conflict, two major riots, and one suspicious death.

Our fourth and final chapter will examine the twilight of shipbuilding in Québec after the 1860s. We will analyze the different interpretations of the industry's failure, and the effect the collapse of wooden shipbuilding had on the ship carpenters that depended upon it. As we will see, there were multiple avenues that opened for this now destitute group, but most of them led out of the *Vieille Capitale*. In all, these four chapters will show the rise, apex, and fall of a class of workers who, though dealing with poverty and the instability inherent in the savage capitalism of the nineteenth

century, fought on and never lost their pride.

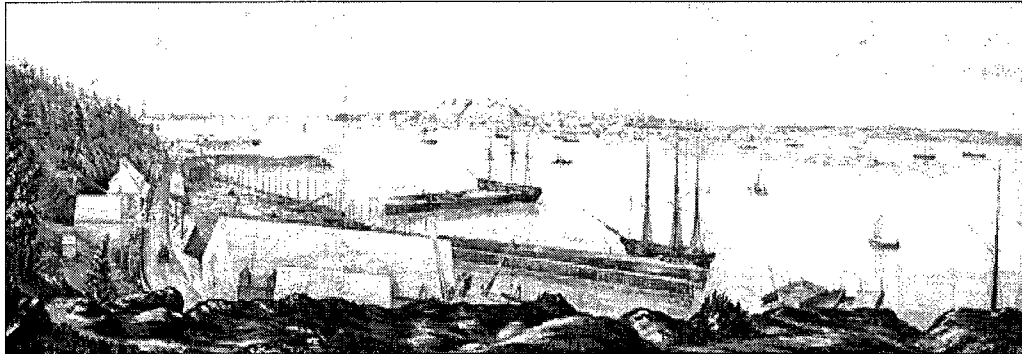
Chapter 1: The Shipbuilding Industry in Québec

The projecting promontory of rock which overlooks Wolfe's Cove, at the foot of which the hero made his first landing, presents a view of Cape Diamond, Point Levi, and the crowned harbour of Quebec, between them, which is not to be surpassed perhaps by any marine picture on the globe; while the sight of the shores on each side, with thousands of large logs of timber ready for shipment, the numerous vessels engaged in completing their landing from these, the new rafts every day arriving from the upper province and the Ottawa, the number of new vessels building on the stocks, and the mingled sounds of the shipwrights' hammers, the lumbermen's axes, and the chorus-songs of the raftsmen and stevedores [sic] working alongside, and on board the landing ships, make up altogether a scene of grandeur, beauty and animation [...]

-J.S. Buckingham²⁵

Any traveller to mid-nineteenth century Québec would have been astounded by the scale of the vast maritime enterprise that took over the port every spring. In only a few decades, the city went from a small military garrison to the most important timber port in North America, supplying most of the wood used to construct the merchant armada on which Britain depended to maintain its status as workshop of the world. As the huge rafts of timber arrived in Québec, some of it found its way to the shipyards along the Saint Lawrence and Saint Charles River, helping to turn shipbuilding into one of the most important industrial enterprises in Lower Canada. The ship carpenters who laboured each year to construct the square-riggers for which the city became famous did not exist in a vacuum. Rather, every action they took must be seen in the context of the complex industry in which they were an integral part. This chapter will survey the nature of shipbuilding in Québec, from its roots under the French Régime to its glory

²⁵ J.S. Buckingham, *Canada, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and the other British Provinces in North America, with a Plan of National Colonization* (London, 1843), 274-75.

Illustration 1.1: A Panoramic View of Québec from Point Levi, 1847

Source: LAC, George Seton, Aquarelle, c. 1847, no. MIKAN 2834246.

years in the 1840s-60s. We will approach the subject using a top-down approach, beginning with the creation of the industry under the French and British Crowns, then moving on to the market for Québec ships, the nature of the shipbuilders, the organization of shipyards, and finally the place of the ship carpenter in this schema.

First Steps Under the Bourbon Crown

Since it was established, Québec was intricately tied to the wider Atlantic maritime world. Its location was chosen because it was the natural choke point along the strategic Saint Lawrence estuary, guarding the entryway into France's North American possessions. The colonists who made their home in Champlain's city were seafarers, their fortunes tied to the royal warships and merchant fleet that annually crossed the Atlantic to render concrete France's first overseas empire. As was the logic of the zero-sum game of mercantilism, export to the metropole was the central pivot of the colony's economy. Subservience to an external market was thus from the beginning the determining factor in the colony's economic life.²⁶

Toward the end of Louis XIV's reign, England surpassed France as the preeminent

²⁶ Mathieu, 1-2.

European naval power. This decline threatened France's increasingly important overseas possessions, leading the Sun King to order a naval buildup. It was hoped that the colonies would contribute to the expansion of the *Marine Royale*, and the governor of New France, Philippe de Rigaud Vaudeuil, immediately wrote a report detailing the advantages that Québec had for such an enterprise.²⁷ In 1730, Gilles Hocquart, *commissaire de la marine* in the colony, began to build the infrastructure that would eventually make Québec an important shipbuilding centre. He encouraged the production of secondary industries – such as the growing of hemp and tar – and reserved the best lumber for naval construction. In 1733, after several abortive attempts, *Intendant* Gilles Hocquart erected a dock along the St. Charles River, allowing large-scale shipbuilding. Five years later a specialist – René-Nicolas Levasseur – was sent from France to direct the project.²⁸ Levasseur shaped the port's major industrial geography such as the shipyards of St. Roch, and by 1739 the city began to vibrate from the sounds of axe and saw as a generation of ship carpenters launched the first Canadian-made vessels to ply the Atlantic.²⁹

Although at the time it seemed to have bright prospects, shipbuilding under the French Régime proved to be a failure. The most obvious reason for this was the Seven Years' War which led to Louis XV ceding New France to the British Crown. But there were also significant structural weaknesses which probably doomed the project from the start. According to Jacques Mathieu, the key problem was that the *Marine's* expectations were unrealistic. The Crown needed large warships to compete with the British Royal Navy, but in the eighteenth century, the wood available in the region around Québec

27 *Ibid.*, 76.

28 *Ibid.*, 9-13.

29 *Ibid.*, 18.

was unsuitable for the construction of vessels exceeding 700 tonnes. The needs of the metropole were thus out of line with the reality in the colony, the end result being the failure of the industry under the French Régime.³⁰

Two things stand out from this first failed attempt to set up shipbuilding in Québec. First, the beginning of the port's industrial geography – principally the naval yards of Saint Roch and on the Saint Charles River – was established during the French Régime. During the next century, the vast shipyards that would cover the waterfront expanded from the core set up by visionaries like Gilles Hocquart. Second, it was clear, even from this very early effort, that the determining factor for all of shipbuilding in the *Vielle Capitale* was its subservience to foreign export markets. At no time was a domestic market to develop that could absorb vessels produced in Québec, and thus the whole industry was at the mercy of fluctuations in demand, as when France realized that the colony was unsuitable for the production of large warships.

The Lumber Trade and the Expansion of Shipbuilding Under the British Régime

In 1763, after a long and exhausting war, France ceded its North American colonies to the British. At first, Québec's new colonial masters were uninterested in exploiting the shipyards that laid dormant along the St. Charles River. Production in England was more than enough to maintain British naval supremacy, so in the decades following the transfer of authority Québec shipyards remained idle. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Canada's chief staple remained furs, which amounted to some 76% of all exports in 1770. The importance of the fur trade to the economy of the Canadas

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 49-54.

did not begin to decline until at least 1808, and although wheat began to take its place amongst the major staple exports, it was another commodity that, according to John Keyes, “single-handedly determined the complexion and importance of economic relations between the colony and the metropolis during the entire century.”³¹ That commodity was timber.

The timber trade was entirely dependent on exports to Great Britain. The Royal Navy had long realized that it had a significant construction lumber supply problem. As early as the Dutch Wars (1652-1674), the Admiralty understood that because of a combination of “exhaustion and poor administration”, domestic sources of timber were incapable of meeting the needs of the growing fleet. Three times the size of the Royal Navy, the merchant marine was also a major consumer of lumber. This, combined with the growing need for construction materials by England's expanding cities, multiplied the importance of imported lumber. Timber carriers were launched, ferrying the all-too important squared lumber (“balks”) Baltic ports, which by the late seventeenth century became Britain's main suppliers of lumber and remained so throughout the eighteenth century.³²

The British North American colonies also caught the interest of the Admiralty. New England had vast tracks of forests that could be exploited for naval construction. In 1705, the British established important bounties for shipbuilding materials such as tar, pitch, resin, turpentine, hemp, and especially masts, yards, and bowsprits. According to John McCusker and Russell Menard, “[t]he bounties were designed to subsidize the colonists' exploitation of their immense supplies of standing timber, to offset the high

31 John Keyes, *The Dunn family business, 1850–1914 : the trade in square timber at Quebec* (PhD. Thesis, Université Laval, 1987), 3, 43-45.

32 *Ibid.*, 64-67.

wages and freight charges the colonists had to pay, to reduce English dependence on foreign sources of critical military products, and to promote colonial importation of English manufactures.” This policy was short lived, however, as a combination of high wages and inexperience led colonial producers to use “crude laborsaving techniques that sacrificed quality for quantity.” The Royal Navy complained and began to eschew colonial lumber, leading to quality standards being imposed on colonial products like timber in 1724, and a substantial reduction in bounties five years later.³³ Although they could not displace the Baltic in supplying timber to Great Britain, colonial merchants found a ready market in the West Indies. Throughout the eighteenth century, the vast majority of colonial lumber was sold to the West Indies, creating a pattern that would continue well after the American Revolution.³⁴

War would change the dynamic of the British timber market. In 1806 Napoléon I set up a continental blockade to starve Britain into submission. No longer able to rely on the Baltic, Great Britain sought timber from her remaining North American colonies to make up the shortfall.³⁵ Initially, the exponential rise in timber prices due to the continental blockade were enough to make the long transatlantic journey profitable, but those prices being obviously temporary, the shipowners' lobby pushed Parliament to adopt permanent preferential duties on colonial lumber. By 1809, the tariffs were 27 s. 4 d. per load for Baltic and only 2 s. for colonial timber.³⁶ Exports increased dramatically, and Québec, along with New Brunswick, was one of the main pivots of the trade (see

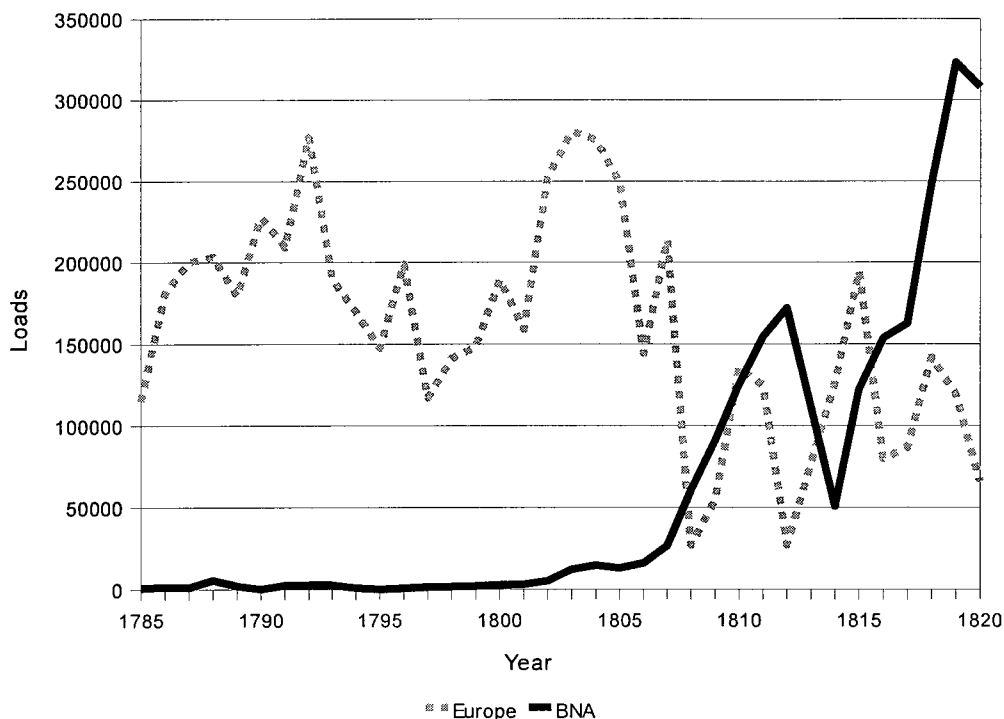
33 John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 179-180.

34 *Ibid.*, 108, 130, 170-174, 199.

35 Keyes, 69-77.

36 Graeme Wynn, *Timber Colony: A Historical Geography of Early Nineteenth Century New Brunswick* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 30-31. A load is equal to 50 cubic feet of lumber.

Figure 1.1: Timber Imported into the United Kingdom from Europe and British North America, 1785-1820



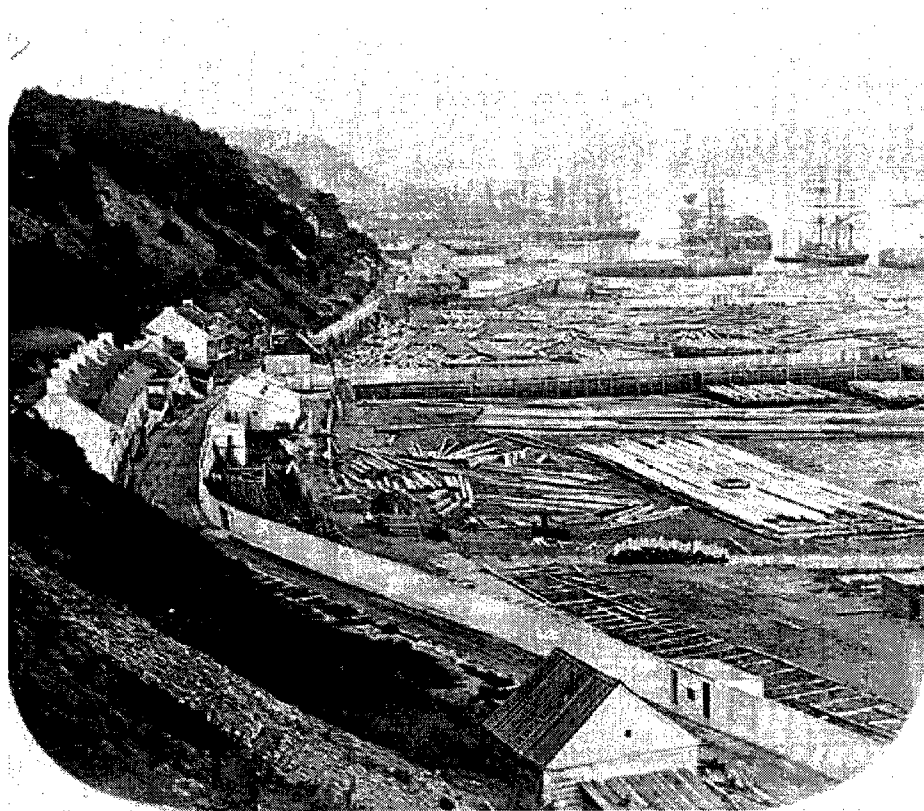
Source: John Keyes, *The Dunn Family Business, 1850-1914*, table 11, p. 520.

Figure 1.1). Between 1805 and 1810, the number of ships leaving the port of Québec tripled, and the tonnage of goods exported increased five-fold. The trade quickly outpaced Lower Canada's other staples, and a new commercial class of timber merchants appeared.³⁷ The end of war in Europe led to a protracted debate in Britain about the tariff, pitting Baltic merchants and free traders against colonial producers and shipowners. In the end, it was the supporters of the preferential duties that won the day, and in 1816 the temporary wartime tariffs became permanent. In May 1821, a committee of the Lords and Commons recommended lowering the tariff, settling on a still advantageous duty of 55 s. a load for Baltic, and 10 s. a load for colonial lumber.³⁸

³⁷ Keyes, 77-96.

³⁸ Wynn, 30-21.

Illustration 1.2: View of Wolfe's Cove, looking down at Allan Gilmour and Co. booms for loading timber, 1860



Source: LAC, William Notman, ca. 1860, MIKAN no. 3192136.

The timber trade had a profound effect on British American shipbuilding.³⁹

According to Richard Rice, this played out in four principal areas:

the spawning of an enormous trade between British and colonial parts, a trade which gave incentives to the entry of new ships on the homeward bound and freight-earning leg of the voyage; the creation of differentials in shipbuilding costs, through the price of timber, which worked to the advantage of the colonial builder; the establishment of particular

³⁹ Although the exportation of lumber was the most important factor in the expansion of shipbuilding under the British régime, Richard Rice argues that both the timber trade and ship construction were both “the effects of more basic socio-economic factors”. He identifies two important “abrupt changes in the imperial economy”. First, the West India trade began to accelerate due to the American embargo in 1807 and the subsequent War of 1812. The British wanted to replace the Americans as suppliers to the West Indies. Until the Free Ports Act (1822) and the Reciprocity Treaty (1830), American ships were excluded from the British West Indies, and exports to the region expanded considerably, creating a need for more ships to carry on the trade. Second, there was a boom period around 1808-10 which caused rampant inflation in Britain. The general economic and political climate in and around 1809 was highly favourable to the acceleration of shipbuilding. See Rice, 48-54.

locational patterns in British America of the timber trade conducive to shipbuilding; and the organization of businesses which integrated two or more aspects: getting out the timber, importing it to Britain, shipowning, and shipbuilding.⁴⁰

Shipbuilding and the timber trade were thus complementary activities. Lumber merchants were in a strategic position for supplying shipbuilders with raw materials, markets, and credit, and frequently the merchant and the builder were the same people (the Allan Gilmour firm is a good example of this). Furthermore, vessels constructed in North America had several advantages over those built in English. Ships in the lumber trade making a round-trip out of Britain had to use ballast on the way to Québec, but colonial builds avoided the cost of the ballasted trip on their way to sale. Also, because of the ready supply of lumber, colonial ships were significantly cheaper than their English counterparts. This made Québec vessels especially attractive to investors.⁴¹

The expansion of the timber trade after 1809 thus spurred the first major period of growth of the shipbuilding industry, and Québec was particularly well placed to benefit from it. As North America's premiere timber port, the *Vieille Capitale* saw immense growth in the first half of the nineteenth century, easily outpacing Montréal and even many English cities.⁴² Shipbuilding expanded rapidly: in 1821, 4 vessels displacing 840 tonnes were launched, but by 1825 the total had increased to 42 ships and 18,357 tonnes.⁴³ The city became one of the continent's key ports, and by the 1820s some 600 vessels were leaving Québec each year, their holds filled with timber bound for British ports such as Liverpool, Portsmouth, and London.⁴⁴ But those shipbuilders that sought to make their fortunes in the rapidly expanding shipbuilding industry had to deal with

40 Rice, 55-56.

41 *Ibid.*, 59-69.

42 *Ibid.*, 158.

43 Reid Marcil, *Charley Man*, 63.

44 *Ibid.*, 39.

the extreme instability that was its primary characteristic.

An Unstable Market

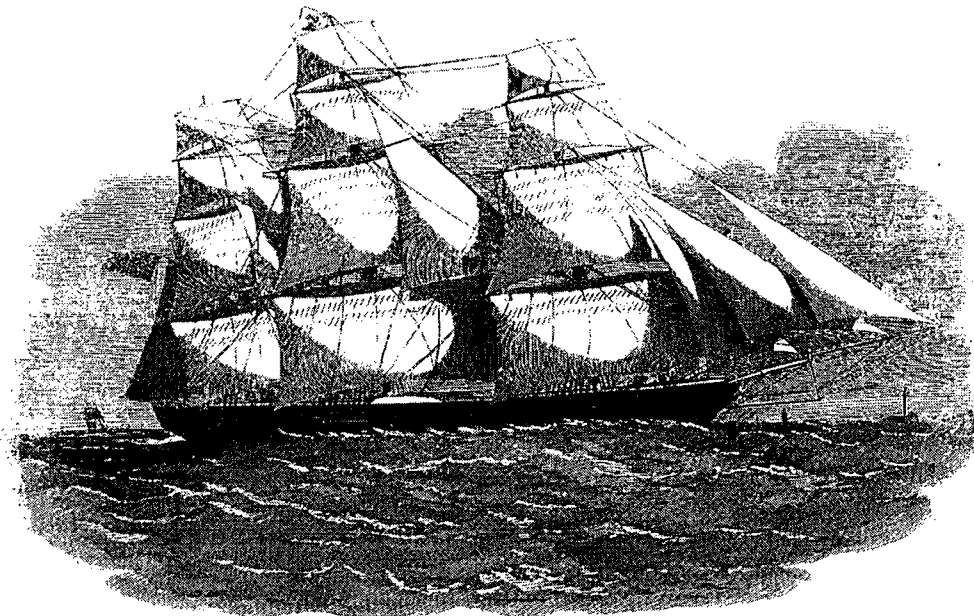
Henry Dinning was born around 1830 in Ireland. In 1832, he and his family emigrated to Canada, and like thousands of their fellow countrymen found a home in Québec. In his early twenties he went into business by incorporated a shipbuilding company with his stepbrother William H. Baldwin. Baldwin had shipbuilding in his blood: his paternal grandfather, Patrick Beatson, had emigrated from Scotland in 1793 to be the foreman of Québec's first private shipyard, and his maternal grandfather had been a ship carpenter. At age 14, Baldwin had apprenticed to be a block and pump maker, but he soon decided that his career lay in the increasingly lucrative shipbuilding business. On 27 March 1851, Dinning and Baldwin entered into a partnership “to carry on in the business of shipbuilders, the repairing of ships or vessels and generally all business conducted and to be conducted hereafter at a place known as Cap Cove.”⁴⁵

The stepbrothers divided their tasks: Dinning was responsible for bookkeeping and other office work, while Baldwin took charge of the day-to-day operations of the shipyard itself.⁴⁶ The new firm of “Baldwin & Dinning” had immediate success, launching a series of large sailing vessels, the most notable being the *Ocean Monarch* (Illustration 1.3) which was sold in 1854 for \$100,000 and netted the firm a tidy profit of \$20,000.⁴⁷ But that same year, Dinning got into some financial difficulties “in Relation to Some Ships he Sent to England.” Although the sources are not clear as to

45 DCB Online, Kenneth S. MacKenzie, “Henry Dinning”; DCB Online, Eileen Marcil, “William Henry Baldwin”.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Reid Marcil, “Charley-Man”, 215.

Illustration 1.3: The Ocean Monarch in 1855

"THE OCEAN MONARCH," OF LIVERPOOL, BUILT AT QUÉBEC.—(SEE PREY PAGE)

Source: *The Illustrated London News* (vol. 27, 1855), 442.

what transpired in England, it appears that Dinning lost a substantial amount of money which affected his credit for years to come.⁴⁸

In 1856 the firm of Baldwin & Dinning was dissolved. Dinning kept the shipyard at Cape Cove, while Baldwin leased the yard owned by the now bankrupt shipbuilder John James Nesbitt.⁴⁹ Dinning picked a poor time to go into business by himself, as the summer of 1857 saw the economy collapse and demand for Québec-made ships dry up. By March 1858, having lost more than £16,000, he went bankrupt. No sooner had his business failed, however, that Dinning found a way to get his affairs back in order. He formed a partnership with his father, James Dinning, who possessed some £4,000 or

48 Canada Vol. 8, p.43, 259, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.

49 DCB Online, Kenneth S. MacKenzie, "Henry Dinning"; DCB Online, Eileen Marcil, "William Henry Baldwin".

£5,000 in real estate which he could use to back his son's venture, but as the recession continued to ravage the industry, relief had to wait a few years.⁵⁰

In 1861 the sun began to shine a little brighter for Henry Dinning. The market finally recovered and he was able to construct – and more importantly sell – an average of two vessels per year. He also made money by buying and refurbishing ships that were wrecked in the St. Lawrence, and his credit had sufficiently recovered that he could find investors and expand his operations. However, things fell apart again in 1865, and Dinning was forced to close his shipyard. The following year, he was once again bankrupt.⁵¹

But Dinning was nothing if not persistent. In 1868, he mortgaged his wife's properties and once again went into business. He re-opened his shipyard and quickly began constructing vessels, while at the same time expanding the refurbishing of wrecks, some of which were recovered as far as St. Pierre et Miquelon.⁵² He worked prudently, trying to avoid the pitfalls that befell him twice before, such that by 1873 the R.G. Dun & Company reported that he was worth some \$100,000, and his credit remained good even when one of his vessels sank in 1874, a disaster that cost him \$10,000. But as was so often the case in Québec's shipbuilding industry, success was fleeting and by 1877 things had turned for the worse. Dinning became insolvent and was sued by his creditors.⁵³ By 1881, his debts were paid, but he decided not to try his luck another time.⁵⁴ Like most of his contemporaries, Dinning got out of the

50 Canada Vol. 8, p.43, 259, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.

51 *Ibid.*

52 DCB Online, Kenneth S. MacKenzie, "Henry Dinning".

53 Canada Vol. 8, p.43, 259, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.

54 DCB Online, Kenneth S. MacKenzie, "Henry Dinning".

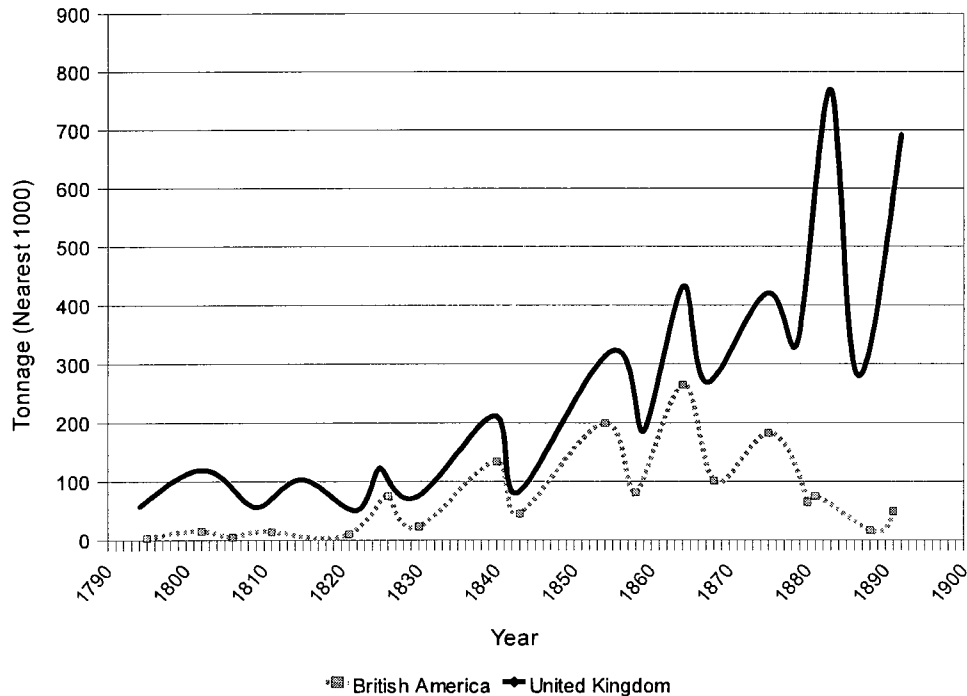
shipbuilding business as the entire industry waned around him, selling his remaining property in April 1888.⁵⁵

Henry Dinning's experience, although unusually well detailed, was fairly typical of nineteenth century shipbuilders. From its foundation under the Bourbon crown to its final demise in the last third of the nineteenth century, two factors determined the context of shipbuilding in Québec: instability and dependence on foreign markets. Economic crises in the metropole would quickly be felt by shipbuilders, and even small drops in demand for Québec-made vessels could significantly contract the entire industry, sometimes for the whole year. It was under these conditions the industry operated. In good years, full employment reigned and the waterfront bustled with the sound of thousands of ship carpenters constructing the great sailing vessels of the age. But when demand for these ships declined, so did available work and the empty construction yards instead groaned with the desperate cries of a starving multitude.

The market for sailing vessels suffered from extreme market fluctuations. Between 1821 and 1880, growth rates were on average 380%, and rates of decline 64%. The trade cycle tended to be from 8 to 15 years, measured from trough to trough (see Figure 1.2). The industry in Québec followed more general patterns in the Atlantic and particularly the British economy. Rice argues that this was because the construction of sailing vessels in the Canadas was “essentially a British phenomenon in the senses of capital, outfits and materials other than wood, technology, legal relations, etc.; in short British American shipbuilding operated within the framework of the British political economy” and “was a secondary source of tonnage for Britain.” Even with these ups and downs, it is possible to break things down into five general stages: the beginning

⁵⁵ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 27 April 1888, 3.

Figure 1.2: Cycles in British American and British Shipbuilding (Crests and Troughs)



Note: This graph illustrates the extreme fluctuations between crests and troughs in the production cycle.
Source: Rice, 37.

period 1787-1809; two stages of growth, 1809-1854 and 1854-67; and two stages of decline, 1867-75 and 1875-1890.⁵⁶ Of course, these extreme market fluctuations made things very difficult for shipbuilders. Not only did they periodically find their operations shut down for lack of buyers, but it was very difficult for them to reinvest their profits into fixed assets. Although the market, with its instability, provided great opportunities, it also constrained the shipbuilders that depended upon it.

The Shipbuilders

The construction of warships was for the most part a state-run enterprise, and as this

⁵⁶ Rice, 37-41. See Chapter 4.

was the primary orientation of French shipbuilding in Québec, the construction yards established by Hocquart and Lavasseur were primarily under Royal control. However, when the industry was reestablished decades later, the vessels produced were for use by the merchant marine, and therefore rather than Royal officials and experts, the main actors of Québec's shipbuilding industry were independent businessmen. The colonial shipbuilders who operated along the Saint Charles and Saint Lawrence were a diverse group, both ethnically and financially. Our purpose here is not to provide a detailed biography of the men who practised their trade from through our period, but rather to survey the general lines of the shipbuilding business, as the relationship between these people and the ship carpenters that provided the labour power of the industry was of crucial importance.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of shipbuilders who operated out of Québec between 1765 and 1893. Marcil argues that there were about 150, although she does not go into detail about how she came up with that number.⁵⁷ Our own estimate runs at 184. This was established by combining the records from the Québec censuses (1851, 1861, 1871, and 1881), listings from the Quebec Directories (1847 to 1879), the R.G. Dun Company credit records (1841-1878), and the Shipping Registers of the Port of Quebec.⁵⁸ The number is problematic, however. Most of these men left only the faintest traces in the records, often only a last name. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to uncover any significant details about them. Furthermore, there are a few discrepancies. For example, it is probable that the listing for “John Lemelin” in the Quebec Directory of 1854 is in fact Jean-Baptiste Lemelin, but it is impossible to be sure. Regardless, an approximation of 180 or so shipbuilders seems reasonable. The vast

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁸ The use of Shipping Registers was facilitated by the list provided by Reid Marcil (appendix B).

Table 1.1: Ethnicity of Québec Shipbuilders.

Ethnicity	pre-1851*	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891	Total**
French Canadian	4	9	21	17	7	1	37
Irish	6	8	6	3	2	0	12
Scottish	9	4	2	1	0	0	11
English	4	7	3	1	0	0	9
American	3	2	2	3	0	0	6
English Canadian	2	3	2	1	0	0	4
Indeterminate							3
Total	28	33	36	26	9	1	82

* Early census data is very patchy, and so we have therefore lumped together shipbuilders operating before the 1851 Québec census.

** Builders operating in more than one census period were of course counted each time. The total is the actual number of people out of the 82 that form our sample.

Source: PHSVQ, databases for the 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1891 censuses. This information was supplemented with data from Reid Marcil, *Charley-Man*, p. 80.

majority of this group were small time builders, many only ever constructing a single ship. Only 46 were successful enough to launch ten or more vessels in the span of their careers, and it is not surprising that we have a great deal more information about these men than the vast majority who did not fare as well. In all, we have found a total of 82 that have left some traces in the records beyond a name, and it is this sample that forms the basis of our analysis.⁵⁹

Ethnically, the shipbuilders were very diverse. They mainly came from six groups: Scots, Irishmen, Englishmen, Americans, French Canadians, and English Canadians. Table 1.1 illustrates the ethnic composition of our sample of 82 shipbuilders. This table allows us to see how the ethnic composition shifted over time. The three most important groups were by far Scots, Irishmen, and French Canadians. The Scots were the first to arrive in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Amongst these was Patrick Beatson, who settled at Anse des Mères in 1793. Beatson carries the distinction of

⁵⁹ There is no doubt a great deal more that can be learnt about the 184 shipbuilders we have identified. Sources such as parish records and notary acts could shed much more light on the subject. Unfortunately, time and space constraints make it impossible to address these in this study, and we must therefore content ourselves with a good, albeit not perfect, sample of 82 builders.

having established the first major shipyard in Québec, and although he died in 1800, he was a successful builder who launched at least 15 vessels displacing a total of 4000 tonnes.⁶⁰

Following Beatson, many Scots came to the city to work in the shipbuilding industry, often bringing with them shipwrights that added to the pool of skilled labour left over from the French Régime. Men like John Munn and George Black were instrumental in the quick expansion of the trade in the first decades of the nineteenth century.⁶¹ The Scots dominated the industry until the War of 1812, when some Englishmen began to enter their ranks. However, of far greater consequence were the Irish that began to arrive even before the famine immigration that would swell their ranks in the 1840s. Amongst these was the protestant Henry Baldwin, whose two sons Peter and William Henry were amongst the most successful shipbuilders in the life of Québec.⁶²

The third important group to enter the shipbuilding industry were French Canadians. The huge expansion of the market in the 1830s-40s allowed a significant number of ship carpenters to move into the trade.⁶³ In the above table, French Canadians are very well represented, constituting some 45% of the total. This is likely because French Canadian shipbuilders were more likely to be residents of Québec than other groups (with the possible exception of the Irish). As André Tremblay points out, most Englishmen and Scots tended to emigrate back to Great Britain or move on to Montréal rather than stay in Québec.⁶⁴ Furthermore, as we shall see below, many builders were actually financiers and merchants who never set foot on their shipyards. More importantly, however, is the

60 DCB online, Eileen Marcil, "Patrick Beatson."

61 Marcil, 75-76.

62 *Ibid.*, 76-78.

63 *Ibid.*, 78-79.

64 André Tremblay, 79-80.

Table 1.2: Ethnicity of Large-Scale Québec Shipbuilders

Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
French Canadian	15	32,6
Scottish	10	21,7
Irish	7	15,2
American	6	13
English	4	8,7
English Canadian	2	4,3
Indeterminate	2	4,3
Total	46	100

Source: PHSVQ, databases for the 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1891 censuses. This information was supplemented with data from Reid Marcil, *Charley-Man*, p. 80.

fact that French Canadian builders *were* actually very numerous. In a total of 184 shipbuilders, 70 have French names, not including gallicized families like the Wisemans. This rough estimate comes down to 38% of the total, which is not that far removed from the 45% of our sample. Although not exact, these numbers give us a good idea of the weight that French Canadians had in the profession. More importantly for our purposes is the fact that 62% of French Canadian shipbuilders in our sample were at one time ship carpenters, whereas the overall percentage lay at around 30%.

It is possible to imagine the large number of French Canadians in the shipbuilding trade were “small time” operators, building only a few ships and then returning to the working class. However, this does not appear to be the case. Table 1.2 above shows the ethnic composition of the 46 large-scale builders, which, following Reid Marcil, we consider to be those that launched ten or more vessels in their careers. As we can see, French Canadians remained the dominant ethnic group in even the upper echelons of the trade. In fact, some of the most successful shipbuilders in the entire life of the industry were French, men such as Hypolite Dubord and Jean-Élie Gingras, the latter being the second most productive builder after Thomas H. Oliver, having launched 56,821 tonnes

of shipping.⁶⁵

There were four principal paths that one could take to enter the shipbuilding trade: apprenticeship, merchant shipping, absentee ownership, and ship carpentry.

Apprenticeship was the traditional entry into shipbuilding, and it was common for someone to agree to a seven or eight year contract, at the end of which he would gain the necessary skills to construct vessels. Unfortunately, not very many apprenticeship contacts have survived, so it is difficult to make generalizations. Ship captains and owners, having a great deal of experience with sailing vessels, also frequently became shipbuilders. The third path is what we would consider “absentee” owners, or what Marcil characterizes as “shipbuilders” in quotation marks. These were men who often had little or no knowledge about constructing vessels, but instead just invested capital and hired builders or master carpenters to run their construction yards. Often it was timber merchants like Allan Gilmour who simply took the next logical step in expanding their enterprise by financing shipyards to facilitate the export of their wares.⁶⁶

The final path leading into the shipbuilding trade is of most interest to us: the surprising number of ship carpenters who began to build their own vessels. Let us come back to our original sample of 82 shipbuilders who are identified in the records (see Table 1.3). Of these, 26 had at one time been ship carpenters, which comes out to over 30% of the total. Of the 46 large-scale builders, the proportion comes to a smaller but still impressive 17%, or almost one in five. Very few industries – particularly in the nineteenth century – had such an impressive proportion of workers who rose to become owners. What explains this extraordinary upward social mobility?

The construction of sailing vessels was of course a highly skilled trade, but

⁶⁵ Marcil, 81.

⁶⁶ Rice, 78.

Table 1.3: Ship Carpenters in the Shipbuilding Trade (by Census Year)

Ethnicity	pre-1851*	1851	1861	1871	1881	1891
French Canadian	5	6	12	10	3	1
Irish	1					
American				1		
English Canadian						
English						
Scottish						
Indeterminate	1					
Total	7	6	12	11	3	1

* Early census data is very patchy, and so we have therefore lumped together shipbuilders operating before the 1851 Québec census.

Source: PHSVQ, databases for the 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1891 censuses. This information was supplemented with data from Reid Marcil, *Charley-Man*, p. 80.

shipbuilders had very little theoretical knowledge, relying instead on “time-tested craft methods, their aesthetic judgment, [*sic*] and contemporary examples of the best sailing ships as models for their own work.”⁶⁷ The type of construction undertaken in the period preceding the transition to steam and iron is best described as “practical shipbuilding.” Builders used craft methods handed down over centuries, and technical innovations were introduced very slowly as the capital investment needed for shipbuilding was such that only the largest builders could risk an experimental design. Only very rarely did builders draw up plans to design their vessels, usually they simply used templates like the frames and structural timbers of disassembled ships.⁶⁸ The level of formal education needed to begin shipbuilding was thus fairly low, and theoretical ship design skills were quite rare. This meant that most of the things one needed to know to become a successful builder could and were learnt on the job. Thus, craft knowledge was the key factor of these early capitalists. As Peter Bischoff put it in his study of unionist

⁶⁷ William H. Thiesen, *Industrializing American Shipbuilding* (Florida: University of Florida Press, 2006), 1.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 1-3. It has been noted that Patrick Beatson was one of the few builders that had the skills to draw designs in 1790s Québec (see DBC Online, Reid Marcil, “Patrick Beatson”)

traditions amongst Canadian moulders, “[l]es ouvriers de métier possèdent en effet une ressource fondamentale pour devenir patron: c'est le savoir technique.”⁶⁹

But if shipbuilding skills were easily obtainable by carpenters, what about the capital necessary for operating a shipyard? As we can see from Table 1.3, the majority of ship carpenters who became builders did so in the most productive years, around the late 1850s to the early 1870s. During boom periods, it was possible for builders to rapidly increase their fixed capital. Former carpenter Narcisse Rosa, for example, went from having only \$600 in 1861, to \$4000 in fixed and \$873,550 in floating capital in 1871 (the latter probably being composed of unsold ships).⁷⁰ One thing that is less clear is how carpenters managed to find money for an initial investment. The likeliest answer is the easy capital that was available during crests in the business cycle. Of the twelve shipbuilders that left traces in the R.G. Dun Company credit records (ten individuals and two firms), eight went bankrupt at least once. For example Lauchlan McKay, a ship carpenter originally from Boston, was in serious difficulties in 1864 losing thousands of dollars, but had completely recovered and was considered to have good credit only two years later.⁷¹ The case of Henry Dinning, as we have seen, was an extreme example of the easy credit that could be obtained by a shipbuilder.

It is also unclear whom exactly was lending this capital. There could be many sources; Dinning for example borrowed heavily from his father.⁷² A more likely source, however, were the timber merchants that absolutely depended on Québec-built vessels

69 Peter Bischoff, *Tensions et solidarité: la formation des traditions syndicales chez les mouleurs de Montréal, Hamilton et Toronto, 1851 à 1893* (PhD Thesis, Université de Montréal, 1992), 31-32.

70 Province of Canada, Census of 1861, manuscript; Census of 1871, manuscript.

71 Canada Vol. 1 et 8, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.

72 Canada Vol. 8, p.43, 259, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.

to send their commodities across the Atlantic. As Richard Rice notes, the British timber merchant provided the finance “on which the trade rested.”⁷³ It was without a doubt in their interest to keep the flow of liquidity into the industry constant because it would in the long run reduce costs by increasing the total tonnage of merchant ships on the water.

Organization of the Shipbuilding Yard

Builders and carpenters plied their trades in the dozens of shipyards that dotted the waterfront along the St. Charles and St. Lawrence. These installations remained remarkably unchanged during the century where shipbuilding dominated Québec's industrial landscape. The most essential feature was the dock, which needed to be long enough and gently angled down to launch the finished vessel into sufficiently deep water. For those builders who also specialized in repairs, a more complex form of dock was required. Dry docks, expensive to build but far more efficient, were uncommon in Québec. The city's builders generally used the far cheaper floating dock. Floating docks functioned with the tides: the dock would be partially sunk at high tide, with a large opening for a ship to enter. At low tide, the opening would be shut to evacuate the water, and the vessel was secured. When the water rose again, work could commence.⁷⁴

Other features of the shipyard varied depending on the capital of the shipbuilder and the scale of the work, but there were some common traits. When in 1856 J. J. Nesbitt decided to lease his yard, he wrote an advertisement which gives us a good idea of the scale of these installations:

These premises are well adapted for carrying on a very extensive business in that line, being situate[d] in the centre of the laboring population, and

⁷³ Rice, 66.

⁷⁴ Marcil, 161-167.

provided with every requisite incident to that business, has a first rate Moulding Loft, Rigging Loft, Forge, Cordage and Paint Stores, Oakum Room, and Trenail department, Joiners Loft, Spar House, Office, &c., &c.⁷⁵

Sawmills were also fairly common, although throughout the life of the industry pit sawers could still find work in smaller yards.⁷⁶ For those builders that could not afford their own rigging lofts or forges, it was common to subcontract these jobs, and even caulking was frequently subcontracted.⁷⁷

Even without sawmills or rigging lofts, shipyards were very expensive to own and operate, although as Marcil notes, it is very difficult to assess exactly how much the installations were worth. Most yards were sold at auction when a builder had financial difficulties, and so they were usually heavily discounted. But smaller builders often leased shipyards, and these contracts give us a better idea of the value. According to Marcil, the cost to lease a yard averaged out to £100 to £150 per annum, with some better equipped installations like George Black's going as high as £800. Shipbuilders often used their yards as collateral, John Munn for example used his as security against a £21,000 debt. The costs of the yard were however negligible compared to the outlay in materials and labour.⁷⁸

The labour process in the early to mid-nineteenth century shipyard was somewhat more complex than in the factories that began to take up more and more room in the industrial landscape of cities like Montréal. Historians have noted that Québec shipbuilding does not fit neatly into the normal schema of industrial development.

Richard Rice argues that it was “a modern mode of fabrication – an intermediate stage, as it were, between handicraft and industrial production.” He calls this mode

⁷⁵ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 4 April 1856, 2.

⁷⁶ Marcil, 169-171.

⁷⁷ André Tremblay, 81.

⁷⁸ Marcil, 182-183.

“manufacturing”, which he defines as “a system of hand-tool production, but one where the units were large – the craftsmen being collected into factories, or ‘manufactories’.”⁷⁹

André Tremblay also sees shipbuilding as an intermediate stage, where

On aménage les métiers dans un autre contexte socioculturel et politique, on déqualifie les métiers les plus simples en accroissant le nombre d'apprentis par maître et on se trouve avec une surface de commandement de l'encadrement de premier niveau qui ressemble à l'industrie de masse contemporaine. C'est ce que j'ai appelé les *métiers de masse*.⁸⁰

According to this schema, the relationship between employer and employee also occupied an intermediate place between artisan and proletarian stages. In most cases, contracts were negotiated on an individual basis, something that did not change significantly even with the advent of formal unions in the 1860s. When subcontracting was involved, things became even more complicated, as the firm hired to do (for example) the rigging of a ship would then hire its own workers to accomplish the task. In this way, individual actors would freely multiply the contracts necessary to complete the build.⁸¹

Rice and Tremblay may however have overstated the differences between this “intermediate” labour process and industrial production. Although it is true that the shipbuilding industry in Québec never truly industrialized, there can be little doubt that those hired to do the work constructing wooden sailing vessels were, at least after the 1830s, workers in every sense. Pay scales, for example, were fairly uniform throughout the industry,⁸² and although contracts may have been discussed individually, we have seen no evidence that carpenters or other workers

⁷⁹ Rice, 7, 169.

⁸⁰ André Tremblay, 91.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸² In 1840, for example, the industry was shut down by striking ship carpenters demanding a uniform 4 shilling work day, one shilling above what was previously paid. (*Le Canadien*, 4 December 1840, 2). Also see Chapter 2.

ever negotiated their wages as would an artisan, nor does it appear that it was in any way a discussion among equals. Furthermore, as Tremblay notes, when subcontracting occurred, the larger shipyards tended to hire these men like employees and not as independent businesses.⁸³ As for apprenticeship, that hallmark of artisans, this had mostly broken down by 1815, and it was usually just used as an excuse by shipbuilders to pay lower wages to young workers.⁸⁴ Although it could be said that at the beginning of the nineteenth century artisans were firmly in control of the industry, a few decades later this was simply no longer the case.

The number of men employed by the shipyards varied enormously, depending on factors like the scale of the project and the time of year. Generally speaking, between 1500 and 2500 worked as shipwrights in Québec at any given time, although crests in the business cycle could dramatically increase these numbers. This meant that roughly one third of the city's men aged 14 to 61 worked in the shipyards.⁸⁵ Depending on the size of the vessel being constructed, from 35 to 175 workers could be hired on the same project. Reid Marcil demonstrates that in February 1840, the average was 72 men per vessel, which corresponds well to Rice's estimate of 73 per vessel in 1852. These estimates give us an average 198 men per shipyard in 1840, 188 in 1852, to which we can add our own estimate of 123 for the year 1871.⁸⁶

Ships were usually laid down in the late autumn, ideally for launch in the

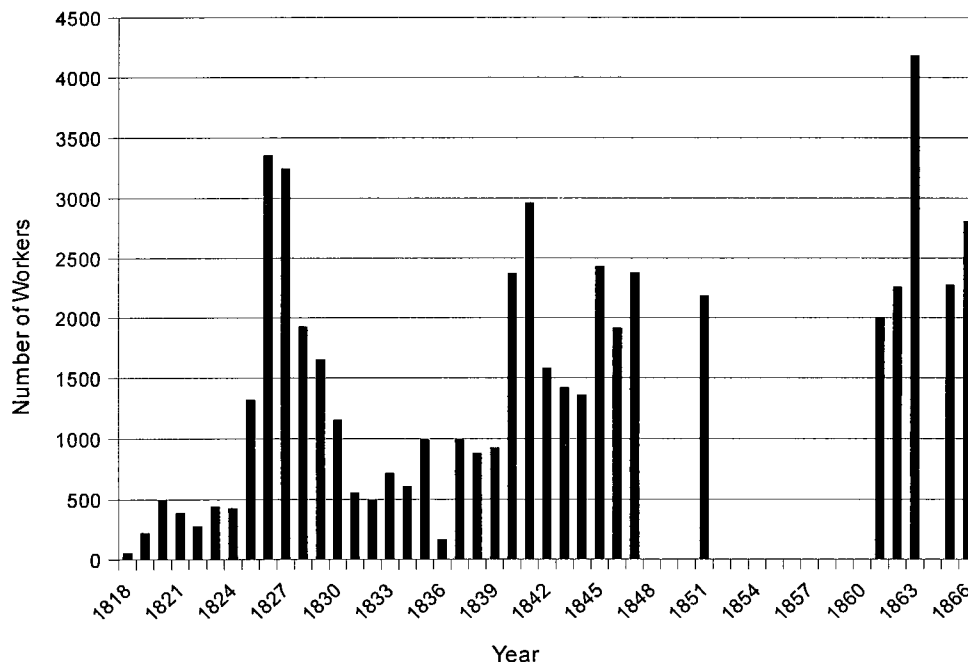
83 Tremblay, 86.

84 *Ibid.*, 91.

85 Rice, 162.

86 Marcil, 203-205; Our estimate is calculated from the unusually well detailed industrial census of 1871. (Canada, *Census of 1871*, manuscript).

Table 1.4: Number of Workers at the St. Lawrence, St. Charles, and Pointe-aux-Trembles Shipyards, 1818-1866



Note: There is no data for the years 1848-1850, and 1852-1860.

Source: *Quebec Mercury*, 11 February 1840, 2; Reid Marcil, *Charley Man*, 204.

spring. However, it would be a generalization to say that shipbuilding was exclusively a winter activity. A typical square-rigged vessel would take 5 to 6 months to complete, but larger builds could easily take a year or more.⁸⁷ When spring arrived, not all ships were ready to slide into the water, and work frequently continued through the summer.⁸⁸ There was, of course, a seasonal slump in the late summer and early autumn which translated into difficult times for shipwrights, but there were several ways ship carpenters dealt with these downturns, which we will explore below.

⁸⁷ Marcil, 204-206.

⁸⁸ In the *Quebec Mercury* of 4 April 1842, for example, it was noted that only 8 out of 21 vessels were ready to be launched at the opening of navigation.

Ship Carpenters and their Trade

The shipbuilding industry's workforce can be divided into fourteen trades: pit sawyer, boarder, joiner, caulker, sculptor, ship blacksmith, painter and glazier, pulley, pump, rope, and sail maker, ship chandler, and ship carpenter. The last group, however, were by far the most important. Pit sawyers and blacksmiths were mainly required at the very beginning of the construction process, sail makers and chandlers at the end. But ship carpenters were there from the design stage until the finished vessel was put to water. They were the backbone of the workforce, the most numerous and most representative group of workers in the shipbuilding industry.

Maritime carpentry was an ancient trade, having been passed down the centuries with very little change in technique and organization. They were highly trained artisans, having completed a long apprenticeship with a master carpenter, and they were well regarded experts among shipwrights. By the nineteenth century, however, the traditional craft began to transform considerably. Even before the advent of iron hulls and steam propulsion, the labour process was shifting into something more akin to a factory than an artisan workshop. This section will examine the nature of ship carpentry in nineteenth century Québec.

We have noted above that shipbuilders were an ethnically diverse group. Ship carpenters, however, were anything but. The proportion of French Canadians rarely dipped below 90%, making the trade remarkably homogeneous. Of particular interest is the low rate of Irish penetration after the 1840s. The longshoreman trade, for example, became bitterly divided between French

Table 1.5: Ethnicity of Québec Ship Carpenters, 1851-1881

Ethnicity	1851	1861	1871	1881
French Canadian Catholic	908	1132	933	1155
English Canadian Catholic	1	1	12	9
Irish Catholic	21	28	27	25
English Catholic	1	2	3	1
Scottish Catholic	3	3	12	6
Other Catholic	1	2	9	12
TOTAL Catholic	935	1168	1000	1208
English Canadian Protestant	0	24	5	1
Irish Protestant	13	6	8	2
English Protestant	15	7	9	1
Scottish Protestant	6	2	8	1
Other Protestant	2	0	4	3
TOTAL Protestant	36	39	30	
Indeterminate	13	13	0	1
GRAND Total	984	1220	1030	1217

Source: PHSVQ, databases for the 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1891 censuses. The format of this table was borrowed from Bischoff, *Les débardeurs...*, 66.

Canadians and Irish, the latter constituting half the workforce by 1851.⁸⁹ Ship carpentry suffered no comparable ethnic cleavage, as French Canadians jealously guarded entry into the profession. This has led some historians to argue that carpenters organized themselves specifically to keep Irish labourers out.⁹⁰ Although there is no doubt some truth to this, organizations like the *Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec* were, as we shall see, too limited and existed too sporadically to totally suppress Irish penetration. A more important clue to this ethnic homogeneity is the way the trade “reproduced” through the generations.

⁸⁹ Bischoff, *Les débardeurs...*, 69.

⁹⁰ See for example Rice, 166.

Many carpenters entered the trade by following in their fathers' footsteps. The Labbé family is a good example of the rôle of the family in the reproduction of the trade. This family had a long history as ship carpenters, and two of its members, Louis and Pierre-Gabriel, became significant shipbuilders in the 1850s-60s. Jacques Labbé was born in 1779 and by 1818 was one of only 148 carpenters who worked in the slowly expanding shipbuilding industry. He had eight children including Charles, born in 1814, who worked with him in the shipyards. Charles eventually married and had four children, the oldest of which he named after himself. By 1851, Charles Jr. was only 14 but was carrying on the family tradition working with his father at Jean-Élie Gingras' shipyard on the Saint-Charles.⁹¹

The Labbés are only one example out of many. André Morissette's two sons Joseph and Jean both followed their father into ship carpentry. As did Jean-Baptiste Boutète's son Honoré. If we look at extended families this phenomenon becomes even clearer. In the 1851 census, there are twelve carpenters of the Bédard family, five Wisemans, seven Turgeons, six Savards, seven Robitailles, ten Noël's, amongst so many others.⁹² It is quite clear that family networks were one of the primary ways that the ship carpentry trade would reproduce itself. But why was it so easy for French Canadians to keep the profession "in the family," so to speak? The answer perhaps lies in the nature of the apprenticeship system.

As we have oft repeated, ship carpentry was a highly skilled trade, requiring years of training. By the early 1800s, the classical apprenticeship system was beginning to break down. More and more apprentices were being paid wages, and

⁹¹ BANQ, *Recensement paroissial de Notre-Dame-de-Québec*, 1818; PHSVQ, databases for the 1851 Census.

⁹² PHSVQ, databases for the 1851 Census.

the obligations of the master toward the apprentice (like housing, sustenance, clothing, and tools) were disappearing.⁹³ The process was particularly advanced for ship carpenters, some 80% of which were being paid wages by the period 1793-1815. This was principally because shipyards were expanding too rapidly and therefore hiring too many apprentices at a time – sometimes as many as 20 per master.⁹⁴ There was also a wave of desertions in the early years of the century, reflecting the degradation of the paternal rôle of masters toward their apprentices. By 1815, the classical apprenticeship system had been transformed into something of an “on-the-job” training regimen.⁹⁵

Although apprentices were by our period little more than young workers, some important vestiges of the system remained. The basic structure of the training ship carpenters had to go through actually changed little. They still had to complete a 3 to 4 year apprenticeship with a master ship carpenter, and were typically paid between £20 and £40 annually.⁹⁶ They worked from six in the morning to six at night, with an hour for breakfast at nine, and an hour for lunch at one. This meant that they only worked ten hours a day, which is two hours less than the average for apprentices in most other trades.⁹⁷ Even after completing their apprenticeship, carpenters frequently had to go through a qualifying period before they would be paid their full wages.⁹⁸ It was thus a long and difficult process for a young man to become a ship carpenter. It also meant that they were too well trained for unskilled

93 Jean-Pierre Hardy and David-Thierry Ruddel, *Les apprentis artisans à Québec, 1660-1815* (Montréal: Presse de l'Université du Québec, 1977), 88-89.

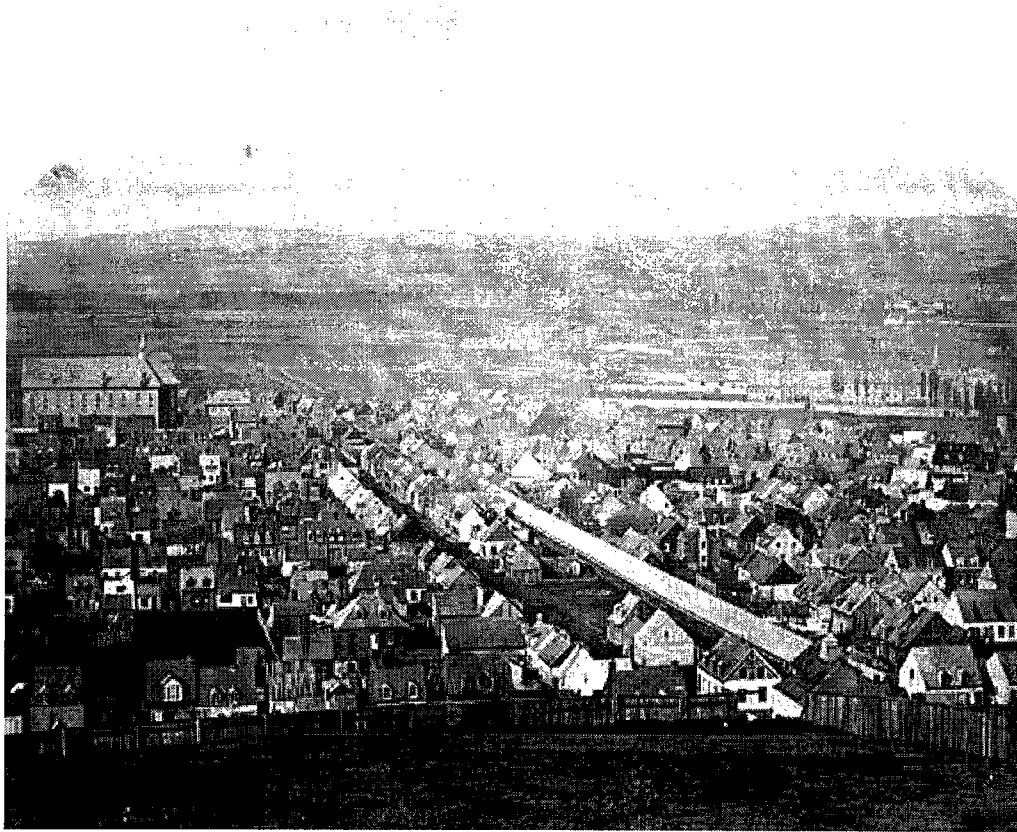
94 *Ibid.*, 135-145.

95 *Ibid.*, 181-193.

96 Marcil, 207.

97 Hardy and Ruddel, 113-115.

98 Marcil, 207.

Illustration 1.4: St. Roch and the St. Charles Valley, 1864

Source: LAC, Jules-Benoit Livernois, ca. 1864, MIKAN no. 3191697.

labourers to displace them. For their parents, it was necessary to find a master carpenter willing to take their son on. As most master carpenters were French Canadian, it was no doubt easier for French Canadians to enter apprenticeship by virtue of a common language and ethnicity. This helps explain why the trade remained so homogeneous throughout the century. However inelegant it may be, we conclude that the main reason French Canadians dominated the trade was because the trade was dominated by French Canadians.

This ethnic homogeneity had an important consequence: it was comparatively

Table 1.6: Geographic Disposition of Ship Carpenters, 1851-1881

Zone	1851	1861	1871	1881
Saint-Pierre Ward	9	15	31	12
Champlain Ward	85	92	54	124
Notre-Dame Parish	39	41		
Suburbs (South)			12	2
Total Basse-ville	133	148	97	138
Saint-Jean Ward	182	86	74	70
Saint-Louis Ward	13	7	3	1
Du Palais Ward	4	3	2	8
Du Palais / Saint-Louis Ward	3			
Montcalm Ward		87	87	56
Suburbs (North/Centre)			24	11
Total Haute-ville	202	183	190	146
Saint-Vallier Ward	85			
Saint-Roch Ward	564	681	613	765
Jacques Cartier Ward		208	130	168
Total Saint-Charles	649	889	743	933
Total	984	1220	1030	1217

Source: PHSVQ, databases for the 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, and 1891 censuses. The format of this table was borrowed from Bischoff, *Les débardeurs...*, 257.

easy for ship carpenters to organize themselves, particularly compared to some groups of workers which had to deal with internecine conflict. But another important factor contributing to this solidarity was their geographic distribution. Quebec was “compartmentalized by occupation”. Merchants and the élite lived in the Haute-ville, Irish labourers in the Basse-ville principally along Champlain street, and French Canadian shipyard workers dominated the Saint Roch area around the Saint Charles (see Table 1.6). The social and geographical separations were extreme. Public expenditures were low in the working class areas, and Saint

Illustration 1.5: Aftermath of a Fire in Saint Roch

Source: LAC, Jules-Ernest Livernois, n.d., MIKAN no. 3193220.

Roch did not even get a market until 1856. Housing was also stratified: the *élite* areas had homes which contained fewer inhabitants, had stone walls, metal roofs, and iron shutters and doors. The working class areas had small, low, and crowded houses built of wood, making them especially vulnerable to fire (Illustration 1.5). Flames consumed half of Saint Roch in May 1845, for example, while a second struck Saint Jean a month later.⁹⁹ The cramped and miserable conditions that ship carpenters shared was another important factor explaining their impressive capacity for mobilization.

Reid Marcil estimates that ship carpenters generally made between 50 cents and \$1.40 per day. Wages varied enormously depending on time of year, type of

⁹⁹ Rice, 160-162.

construction, and experience.¹⁰⁰ Season was perhaps the most important consideration. As we have already seen, although shipbuilding was a year-round industry, there was a slowdown during the summer and early autumn before new builds were ordered. Ship carpenters who found themselves seasonally laid off had three options. These, we should note, do not seem to include much sojourner migration, although there is some evidence that by the 1870s they began to move into New England and the Great Lakes shipbuilding industries (see Chapter 4). The first option for those laid off was to find work in one of the many yards that specialized in repairing vessels. Second, ship carpenters could still work on land in the construction industry, something many smaller shipbuilders also did.¹⁰¹ This is reflected in the Québec census', where workers rarely wrote their occupation as "ship carpenter", but usually just "carpenter". The final option was to find work as a longshoreman, loading the squared timber that was so important to the port's fortunes. This, of course, brought carpenters into competition with the Irish and French Canadian labourers who also depended on that trade.¹⁰²

Karl Marx once remarked that "[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."¹⁰³ This chapter has explored the context within which ship carpenters lived their lives. As we have seen, it was wrought with instability, but carpenters had an impressive

100 Marcil, 207.

101 *Ibid.*, 88-89.

102 Bischoff, xi, 122, 243.

103 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 1.

capacity for mobilization, and they fought tooth and nail against the degradation of their craft. The next three chapters will look at how this was done.

Chapter 2: The First Wave of Mobilization, 1840-1858

[...] *j'ai vu nos charpentiers et nos commis secouer le joug de maîtres tant soit peu barbares ; et je les ai vus déclarer qu'ils n'étaient point des serfs, mais des hommes, créés par Dieu pour jouir de l'air et ne travailler que pour de justes rétributions de salaires et de liberté [...]*¹⁰⁴

*Labour is like merchandize [sic] ; the seller and the buyer must be free, and the price is fixed according to the wants of the parties. The law, as well as natural justice, is averse to all restraints in such matters.*¹⁰⁵

In early December 1840, Québec's shipyards were shut down as 6000 workers unleashed the first general strike in the city's history. The shipbuilding industry had been approaching a cyclical slowdown, and the builders, led by John Munn, decided that they had little choice but to lower wages. They agreed to bring down the daily pay of ship carpenters from four shillings to three.¹⁰⁶ The builders spoke in terms of free trade. Napoléon Aubin, the voice behind *Le Fantasque*, instead called it a “pacte de famine.”¹⁰⁷ This strike would be one of the determining factors for the future mobilization of ship carpenters, for by its end, they were able to equip themselves with Québec's first working class organization, the *Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*.

The 1840 Ship Carpenters' Strike

On the morning of 3 December, Québec's ship carpenters walked off the job. That night, an assembly was held at the school house in Saint Roch, where they decided to

¹⁰⁴ *Le Fantasque*, 8 February 1841, 122.

¹⁰⁵ *Quebec Gazette*, 4 December 1840, 2.

¹⁰⁶ DCB online, Eileen Marcil, “John Munn”.

¹⁰⁷ *Le Fantasque*, 10 December 1840, 32.

demand four shillings a day from the builders, while declaring that they would not return to work until wage rates were restored to their original level. Québec had never seen a strike of that magnitude, and there was no end to the indignation that this aroused in the city's major newspapers. *Le Canadien* argued that “la démarche qu’ils ont prise n’a produit qu’une plus grande misère [...]”¹⁰⁸ The *Mercury*, for its part, was confident that “it is probable that the workmen will soon be obliged to relinquish their demand; for which, in truth, there appeared no reasonable ground.”¹⁰⁹ Their greatest fear was, of course, that this would inspire workers to form some sort of trade union; the *laissez-faire* ideology that was becoming so dominant in the years leading to final victory in 1846 informing shipbuilders that competition “alone can permanently and beneficially regulate wages.”¹¹⁰ In this the shipbuilders showed a fair bit of incoherence, as when it came to their reliance on preferential duties to sell their ships on the British market, they were terrified at the steady approach of free trade. But, when it came to their workers, they suddenly exulted the virtues of a liberalized market and preached like little Cobdens.¹¹¹

They were right to be concerned. It is quite clear that by the first week of the strike, the ship carpenters were already starting to think of establishing some form of organization to act as a common front. This was mainly a defensive measure, the shipbuilders having already come together to lower wages throughout the industry.¹¹² Things came to a head on Saturday 12 December, when the strikers held a second

108 *Le Canadien*, 4 December 1840, 2.

109 *Quebec Mercury*, 5 December 1840, 2.

110 *Quebec Gazette*, 9 December 1840, 2.

111 Jean-Pierre Hirsch famously described this attitude as “laissez nous faire et protégez nous beaucoup” (see the chapter by the same name in *La France n'est-elle pas douée pour l'industrie ?* Bergeron L. et Bourdelais P. eds (Belin. 1998), 135-158).

112 *Le Fantasque*, 10 December 1840, 32-35.

general assembly. It was decided to form an organization, to be known as *La Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec* (SABCVQ). François Giffard was asked to serve as interim president, and his first responsibility was to get a constitution written up. The assembly voted to give that job to the 30 year old *notaire* Louis Prévost, a duty that would be overseen by a committee of twenty members. Finally two merchant-grocers, Pierre and Prisque Huot, were asked to function as temporary treasurers for the organization.¹¹³

The assembly came at a good time, as out in the streets things had started to get out of control. On 8 December, a riot broke out near Munn's shipyard, and the next day saw vandalism and theft strike Thomas Oliver's properties.¹¹⁴ It is unclear whether the assembly had any part in calming things down, but there were no further disturbances. However, a more serious problem arose the next week, necessitating an emergency meeting of the *ad hoc* strike committee on Friday the 18th. Louis Prévost, the notary hired to write the statutes for the infant SABCVQ, had suddenly quit, citing “opposition directe à ses intérêts les plus chers.” This probably turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as Prévost was quickly replaced with a young *notaire* named Joseph Laurin.¹¹⁵

Born in 1811, Laurin (Illustration 2.1) received a classical education at the Petit Séminaire de Québec, but in 1834 he decided not to become a priest and became apprentice to the *notaire* Fabien Ouellet. He opened his office on 20 August 1839, and a little more than a year later, the ship carpenters' strike began. Laurin had originally been approached by Giffard to become secretary, but had declined in deference to the more experienced Prévost. When the latter withdrew his services, Laurin jumped at the

113 *Le Canadien*, 16 December 1840, 2. PHSVQ, databases for the 1851 census, Saint Roch Ward folio 956.

114 Robert Tremblay, 233.

115 *Le Canadien*, 22 December 1840, 2.

Illustration 2.1: Joseph Laurin, *Notaire* and Friend of the Working Class

Source: Joseph Laurin (1811-1888). Antoine Plamondon, oil on canvas, 1841, Musée du Québec (64.50).

chance to take part in creating the new organization. Upon his nomination at the Saint Roch schoolhouse, he gave a rousing defense of the carpenters' cause, arguing that he would devote

tous ses efforts pour soutenir les Charpentiers dans leur noble résolution de faire une opposition vive et constante au monopole odieux des maitres [*sic*] constructeurs de vaisseaux qui, non contents d'avoir profité du travail et des sueurs des pauvres Charpentiers pour amasser des richesses, veulent encore dans cette saison rigoureuse les priver tout-à-coup eux et leurs familles de tous les moyens de subsistance en leur offrant un vil prix, tandis qu'ils vendent leurs vaisseaux à haut prix, au-delà de l'Atlantique où ils font circuler le bruit qu'ils paient constamment sept chelins et demi par jour aux Charpentiers à Québec.

He concluded by denouncing the shipbuilders' combination, saying “[h]onte éternelle à cet ÊTRE INGRAT qui assis dans les bras de la fortune par vos travaux, a suscité le

premier contre vous cette oeuvre machiavélique.”¹¹⁶

The next day saw the scheduled general assembly of the striking ship carpenters. As the first order of business, Laurin's nomination as secretary was unanimously confirmed. After that was taken care of, the SABCVQ began to flex its muscles. It was resolved that any ship carpenter that broke ranks and returned to work without authorization would be permanently banned from the *Société*. This was significant, as it amounted to the threat of ostracization from what we have already established was a tightly knit community. Permission was however granted for some carpenters to work for any builder that payed the requisite four shillings a day.¹¹⁷

Strikes tend to be a question of endurance: whoever succeeds in maintaining solidarity will likely emerge victorious. In the case of the 1840 ship carpenters' strike, the first to break ranks were the shipbuilders. By 18 December, George Black had agreed to pay the wages demanded by the carpenters. A procession was organized to publicly thank Black, and 800 carpenters marched through the streets on the way to his shipyard, where he was presented with their gratitude.¹¹⁸ Some questioned Black's motivation, however. “FAIR PLAY”, in a letter to the *Quebec Gazette*, pointed out that the builder only had six carpenters in his employ, and that therefore his sympathy was not in any way “disinterested.”¹¹⁹ There is, however, another possible explanation. Black had been, until 1819, a ship carpenter like those he now employed. It is likely that he had once worked with some of those that were then on strike, and his sympathy could have been a result of the vestiges of a shared identity. Regardless of his motivations, Black's defection quickly led to other shipbuilders abandoning the common front. By 20

116 *Le Canadien*, 21 December 1840, 2.

117 *Ibid.*

118 DCB, “George Black”; *Le Canadien*, 21 December 1840, 2.

119 *Quebec Gazette*, 30 December 1840, 3.

December, the large-scale builders William Lampson and Allan Gilmour had both agreed to pay the wages demanded by the carpenters, and shortly afterwards the rest followed suit, effectively ending the strike.¹²⁰ The shipwrights were back at work on 23 December.¹²¹

The 1840 ship carpenters' strike was a significant episode in Canadian labour history. Not only was it the first major strike to afflict Québec, but it was also a rare victory for the early working class movement.¹²² Its most important consequence, however, was the creation of one of the first labour organizations ever established in the Canadas.

First Steps: *la Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*

Ship carpenters were not the first group of workers in the British North America to organize – there were some antecedents which inspired them, both by their successes and their failures. New Brunswick was the earliest bastion of working class organization. At the end of the War of 1812, Saint John experienced a construction boom, drastically increasing the need for labour. Building trade workers, suddenly seeing an advantage, combined to decrease hours. Unfortunately for them, a number of immigrants had arrived from Massachusetts and, sworn in as British subjects, broke this early attempt at trade unionism. By the 1830s, however, St. John had become a “chief centre of union activity.” The sawyers, for example, seem to have been organized by September 1835. Other trades were also organized by the late 1830s, such as the

¹²⁰ *Le Canadien*, 21 December 1840, 2; *Quebec Gazette*, 21 December 1840, 3.

¹²¹ *Quebec Gazette*, 23 December 1840, 2; *Quebec Mercury*, 24 December 1840, 1.

¹²² There were of course some antecedents to this strike in places like Montréal and the Maritimes which may have inspired workers in Québec. See for, example, Catherine Vance, “Early Trade Unionism in Quebec: The Carpenters and Joiners General Strike of 1833-1834,” *Marxist Quarterly*, 3 (1962): 26-42.

carpenters and joiners. There were even two trade processions in 1840.¹²³ In Québec, there was a very short lived Printers' Union in 1827, and then a more permanent *Société typographique canadienne de Québec* established in 1836, which survived into 1844. However, this society eschewed strikes as a tactic, and was very respectful with regards to their employers.¹²⁴ These fitful early attempts at organization were characteristic of the first period of working class militancy.

It is possible to group the activities Québec's waterfront workers into several distinct periods. The first group (1801-1830) left few traces. It was them that had to assimilate the new realities of a capitalist workplace. They did not mobilize or take collective action and those that were prone to thinking of improvements in working conditions or wages were stopped in their tracks by the mobility of immigrants, a political climate hostile to combination, and the lack of any examples to follow.¹²⁵ But the sharp rise in commerce and the concentration of workers in the 1820s seems to have agitated Québec's port labourers.

The workers of the second period (1831-1860), the group that is the subject of this chapter, were far less docile than their forebears. They wrote petitions, formed mutual aid societies, and sometimes struck.¹²⁶ These activities were common to all the main waterfront trades, but the first agitation came from the stevedores. The effort to organize Québec's stevedores began on 10 January 1834; when the Patriote deputy George Vanfelson presented a bill of incorporation to the Legislative Assembly. The legislators having been assured that it was presented on behalf of members of the economic élite,

123 Eugene Forsey, *Trades Unions in Canada, 1812-1902* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 9-10. See also James Richard Rice, *A History of Organized Labour in Saint John, New Brunswick, 1813-1890* (Fredericton: University of New Brunswick, M.A. Thesis, 1968).

124 *Ibid.*, 14-15.

125 Bischoff, *Les débardeurs...*, 32.

126 *Ibid.*, 41-42.

the bill was adopted on second reading, and sent to committee for a more thorough examination.

It is unclear what the content of the bill was. The most likely thing would be rules for the regulation of the the stevedore trade, as immigration had flooded Québec with thousands of unskilled workers who competed with them for work. Further, many ship captains had complained about shoddy work, which concerned stevedores, always eager to maintain their privileged status as intermediaries between merchants and longshoremen. Whatever the advantages this incorporation might have had, the bill wound up dying in committee. Peter Bischoff argues that it was probably a victim of the intense passions unleashed by the 92 Resolutions of the Patriote Party, and the subsequent elections later that year.¹²⁷ In 1835, The Saint Lawrence's pilots, those workers who navigated ships down the dangerous estuary to the ports of Québec and Montréal, also tried in vain to get their profession incorporated,¹²⁸ but the honour of organizing Québec's waterfront workers would fall to another skilled trade – the ship carpenters.

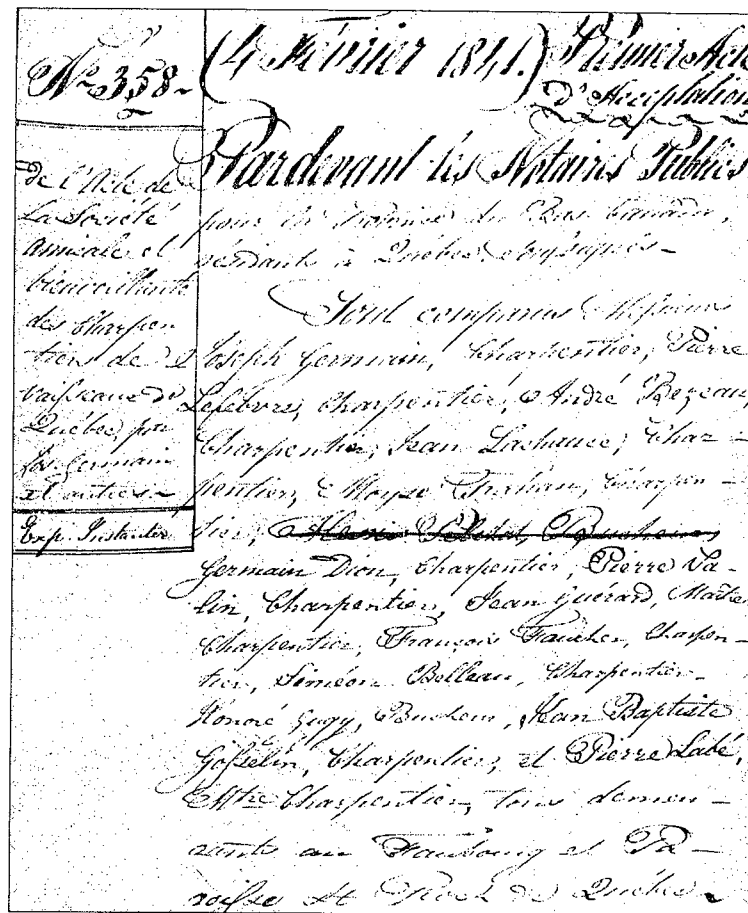
Historians have long noted the existence of the SABCVQ, but few have interpreted it correctly.¹²⁹ The standard work on the 1840 strike and the *Société* that emerged from it is Robert Tremblay's 1983 article *La grève des ouvriers de la construction navale*. This is a generally good piece of scholarship, but it has one major lacuna. Tremblay argues that the SABCVQ was a mutual aid society on the surface, but that it “était voué [*sic*] d'abord à une fonction syndicale d'encadrement de l'action ouvrière.” He bases this argument on the meeting of 19 December, where they threatened to permanently ban

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-46.

¹²⁸ Jean, Leclerc, *Le Saint-Laurent et ses pilotes, 1805-1860* (Montréal, Leméac, 1990), 172.

¹²⁹ See for example Forsey, 15.

Illustration 2.2: Notarial Act establishing the SABCVQ (5 January 1841)



Source: BANQ, Minutier du notaire Joseph Laurin 1839-1888, *Constitution de la société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*, 5 January 1841.

any carpenter that did not obey the strike order. However, this was a temporary provision. There was no mechanism to expel members who would fail to obey a future strike order, nor was there any mention of collective bargaining in their constitution. The SABCVQ, although it was a very important antecedent to true trade unionism, was a limited benefit society, created as a temporary solution to temporary problems. We therefore cannot see this society as “[l]a naissance du syndicalisme chez les charpentiers de navires”.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Robert Tremblay, 233.

If not the birth of unionism, it was nonetheless an important antecedent for the organizations that would see the light of day after 1850. Under the leadership of François Giffard and Joseph Laurin, the ship carpenters spent the aftermath of the December strike drafting the statutes for the new *Société*. By January, they had something ready. The next step was giving the organization a legal basis. This was a significant problem. The political climate in the aftermath of the 1837-38 Rebellions was hostile to anything that even vaguely resembled a secret society, and so the chances of the government acquiescing to incorporating the SABCVQ was unlikely.¹³¹ Furthermore, the stevedores and pilots had both tried and failed to convince the legislature to grant them a legal existence. The carpenters found a way around this, however: they simply created their organization through a notarial act.

Like most contemporary mutual aid societies, the SABCVQ, (Illustration 2.2) established 5 January 1841, was rather conservative.¹³² The governing structure was an example of indirect democracy. The membership of the *Société* would elect twelve directors (Article 4), who would in turn elect a president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and any other officers that would be necessary to carry out the business of the organization (Article 5). These executive positions were salaried, and it was the responsibility of the board of directors to establish pay scales. Members would pay a monthly fee of 1 s. 6 d., November through April, and 2 s., May to October (Article 12). This was a reflection of the much higher cost of living during the bitterly cold winters in Québec, and of the generally lower wages paid for winter work. Shipwrights joining the *Société* in its first year of operation could do so without paying a fee, but those who

131 See Jean-Marie Fecteau, "Les dangers du secret : note sur l'État canadien et les sociétés secrètes au milieu du 19^e siècle," *CJLS/RCDS* 6 : 1991, 91-111.

132 BANQ, Minutier du notaire Joseph Laurin 1839-1888, *Constitution de la société amicale et bienveillante des chapentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*, 5 January 1841.

wished to become members after that would have to disburse a nominal entry fee (Article 12). Working class organizations during this period were for the most part local craft societies,¹³³ but the SABCVQ was unusual in opening up its membership to all workers who laboured in the shipbuilding industry, with the obvious exception of the employers themselves (Article 3). The main purpose of the *Société* was to provide relief for shipwrights who were injured, ill, or otherwise incapable of working. The treasurer would dole out 10 s. a week for the first twelve weeks of missed work, and a further 5 s. for every week after that until the injured member could return to the shipyards (Article 13). Possibly the most overlooked thing about the SABCVQ was that it was an organization with very clear goals in mind. It was created to deal with specific and (it seemed) temporary problems, and after five years, it was to be dissolved (Article 6).

The *Société* was initially quite successful. At its founding, there were 255 paying members on its rolls.¹³⁴ After its first year, it wound up with a surplus of almost £200 in its coffers, and it was decided to lend some of this at a rate of six-percent interest to both members and non-members.¹³⁵ By 1843, the treasurer reported the *Société* to be worth more than £300, and of having paid some £96 out to sick and infirm members.¹³⁶ Its fortunes seem to have abated somewhat in the following years, such that by 1846 it counted only 73 paying members. On 5 January 1846, the SABCVQ, as was stipulated in its constitution, divided its capital equally among its remaining members, and, that done, was officially dissolved.¹³⁷

The elusive question of the SABCVQ's legacy, however, remains difficult to answer.

¹³³ See Forsey, 9-31.

¹³⁴ BANQ, Minutier du notaire Joseph Laurin 1839-1888, *Constitution de la société amicale et bienveillante des chapentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*, 5 January 1841.

¹³⁵ *Le Canadien*, 14 January 1842, 2.

¹³⁶ *Le Canadien*, 18 January 1843, 3.

¹³⁷ *Le Canadien*, 9 January 1846, 3.

Robert Tremblay, as we mentioned, saw in this society the birth of ship carpenter trade unionism. However, as we have seen, there was very little unionist about it. It was, for all intents and purposes, a mutual aid society, and a rather limited one at that. During the strike of 1840, the threat of expulsion was used to keep recalcitrant shipwrights in line. However, the statutes themselves, when finally agreed upon weeks after the strike had ended, contained no mechanism to formally eject any paying member of good standing. It is therefore unlikely that in any future strike it could have been used in the same way as it was in 1840. Furthermore, it was fairly small: in 1846 there were 1913 workers labouring in Québec's shipyards, yet only 73 were members of the SABCVQ. This may have been a reflection of a cyclical downturn which hit between 1842 and 1846, forcing many carpenters to find other employment, and certainly contributing to the *Société's* declining membership.

And yet, the *Société* was a remarkable example of working class self-organization. Not only did it survive the five years it was supposed to, it fulfilled everything it was designed to do. It provided a great deal of relief to ship carpenters who so often lived on a knife edge, and, again unusual for the time, it remained financially solvent throughout its existence. But the SABCVQ was most important because of the example it set. One of the main characters of our story, Joseph Laurin, would take with him the experience of the *Société* and a few years later rise again to become a central figure in the creation of Québec's first incorporated mutual aid society, the *Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society*.

The Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society

In the wake of the SABCVQ, several other groups attempted to emulate its success. After the failure of the 1835 petition, the stevedores waited ten years before once again trying to incorporate their trade. The new, more stable government of William Henry Draper and Denis-Benjamin Viger (1843-1847) provided them with the opportunity. Their main concern was the poor and dangerous manner that timber balks were being loaded: ships were overloaded which increased the number of wrecked vessels, or wood was damaged when loaded, which declined its value. The organization was for the purpose of regulating the trade, accrediting stevedores, and imposing a five-year apprenticeship. Although initially enthusiastic, as is evident by the large number of merchants and other members of the élite who signed the petition, the Legislative Assembly eventually got cold feet and killed the bill. They were probably worried about creating a precedent and the consequent multiplication of demands for incorporation. Although the stevedores tried again in 1849, they had even less luck and saw their efforts crushed even quicker.¹³⁸

On 21 May 1850, Pierre-Joseph-Olivier Chauvreau presented to the Legislative Assembly the petition of a carpenter by the name of Jean Guérard which proposed to incorporate Québec's ship carpenters into a formal craft society. Although Guérard had made a procedural error by neglecting to publish a two month notice, the Assembly decided that the petition could still be read. Québec's merchants and shipbuilders, however, would not sit idly by. Towards the end of July, the Québec Board of Trade responded to Guérard by presenting their own petition, arguing that “were the provisions passed into a law, they would inflict the most serious injury upon the

¹³⁸ Bischoff, 46-58.

important business of ship building in the Province [...]” Furthermore,

such an attempt to restrict and interfere with the freedom of labour, and the right of any man to make the most of his capacities, natural or acquired is at variance with every principle sound and enlightened legislation and once admitted by your Honorable House there would be no end to similar applications and no reason why they should not be prevented.¹³⁹

A few days later, the Board of Trade got some help when Charles E. Levey and Co., “and others, Merchants, Shipbuilders, and others, concerned in the Trade of the City of and District of Quebec”, also presented a petition against Guérard. Finally, on 1 August, Robert Christie, representative for Gaspé, suggested the Assembly push back the vote on the bill for six months, a motion that passed and effectively killed this effort to incorporate Québec's ship carpenters.¹⁴⁰

At precisely the same time that Jean Guérard's petition was being discussed at the Legislative Assembly, another carpenter, Pierre Gauvreau, presented a plan to incorporate a broader mutual aid society. The proposition to create the *Québec Workmen's Benevolent Society* (QWBS) was sponsored by the carpenters' old ally, the *notaire* Joseph Laurin, who since 1844 represented the county of Lotbinière. On Friday 17 May, Laurin presented Gauvreau's petition to the assembly, and on the 29th it was referred to committee. On 3 July, the petition was referred to a select committee composed of Laurin, François-Xavier Méthot, Thomas Bouthillier, Charles-François Fournier, and François-Xavier Lemieux “to examine the contents thereof, and to report thereon with all convenient speed”, and three days later it was accepted. Laurin was ordered to prepare a bill to be presented the following week, but for unknown reasons its reading was delayed for the entire month of June. Finally, on 1 July came the long

139 BANQ, 1960-01-152/2, Quebec Board of Trade Collection, Minutes of Council Meeting, 20 July 1850.

140 JLAPC, 1850, p. 20, 31, 57, 108, 121, 188, 201, 223.

overdue second reading. The final vote on the bill came on the 16 July, and the *Act to Incorporate the Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society* was signed into law two days later. A further victory came when it was declared a public act, abrogating the costs that would have been incurred had it passed as a private bill.¹⁴¹

But why did Gauvreau's proposition pass so easily at the same time that Guérard's was being crushed? Legislators were worried about incorporated trades, as there was a threat that these could turn into unions. But the QWBS consciously avoided exclusively representing a trade, and was rather an open association. Bischoff argues that their ambivalence toward the carpenters' organization was because the government finally understood that mutual aid societies were apolitical in nature, and could not only help suffering workers, but could also turn them into responsible citizens.¹⁴² A few weeks after acquiescing to the QWBS, the Legislative Assembly passed a law formally setting the rules for incorporating mutual aid societies, opening up the field for other organizations of that nature.

There was little overlap between this new association and the older one. Only two of the initial members had been part of the SABCVQ: Louis Lépine, a 44 year old joiner, and Joseph Rosa, a 60 year old ship carpenter. This last one was in a position of responsibility, serving as Assistant-Secretary.¹⁴³ It is likely that he brought with him a certain expertise, and a great deal of experience. Unlike the SABCVQ, carpenters did not dominate this organization, although they were the second most numerous group

141 JLAPC, 1850, 30, 40, 50, 113, 133, 144, 148, 159; Province of Canada, Legislative Assembly, 2nd Session, 3rd Parliament, 13 Victoria (1850) Bill, *An Act to Incorporate the Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society*, Montréal, Lowell and Gibson, 1850; Province of Canada, *Statutes*, 13 & 14 Victoria, chap. 127, *Acte to Incorporate the Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society* (24 July 1850). Also see Bischoff, 74-76.

142 Bischoff, 76.

143 PHSVQ, databases for the 1851 census, Saint Roch Ward folios 2102 and 200.

Table 2.1: Composition of the Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society in 1852, by Trade

Trade	Full Members	Honorary Members	Total	Percent
Joiners	8	7	15	19.4
Carpenters	9	4	13	16.9
Blacksmiths	2		2	2.6
Wood Inspectors	2		2	2.6
Masons	2		2	2.6
Tinsmiths	2		2	2.6
Labourers	1	1	2	2.6
Typographers	1	1	2	2.6
Bakers	1		1	1.3
Furnishers	1		1	1.3
Roofers	1		1	1.3
Sculptors	1		1	1.3
Tanners	1		1	1.3
Water Carriers	1		1	1.3
Indeterminate	20	11	31	40.3
Total	53	24	77	100%

Source: Société bienveillante des ouvriers de Québec, *Règles et règlements de la Société bienveillante des ouvriers de Québec*, Québec, Bureau et Marcotte, 1852.

after their chief allied trade, the joiners (see Table 2.1). In all, the two main woodworking trades accounted for almost two-thirds of the identifiable membership in 1852.

The QWBS was somewhat more democratic than the SABCVQ that came before it. Five managers were elected annually, and two of these were then elected President and VP. To run for these positions, candidates had to pay six dollars. After the election of the managers, the membership would elect a Treasurer, a Secretary, an Assistant-Secretary, and five Directors (Article 2). Membership was more limited, however, and only those workers who were aged 21 to 40 and who were in perfect health would be admitted, and only if four fifths of the members agreed (Article 22). The payment of dues was

complex: a new member would disburse two and a half shillings (about 50 cents), and thirty cents per month for the first year. After a year, members could opt out of paying for the following twelve months, but would have to pay all money owed at the end of that grace period, and begin to pay thirty cents per month for as long as they remained members (Article 25).

Like the SABCVQ, the main purpose of the organization was to aid the injured or infirm. After paying dues for two years, a member who was incapable of working was eligible to receive ten shillings a week, for a maximum of six weeks. Members only had access to six weeks of help per year, but could not get any if the injury came from intemperance or bad conduct (Article 26). Any member could borrow money from the society, so long as he had adequate collateral. Money could only be lent to members of the society. The amount lent had to be between £12 10s. and £50 (Articles 14, 15 and 30), which was an extraordinary amount for mid-nineteenth century workers. This may have been one of the ways ship carpenters obtained capital to begin constructing their own ships.

The most revolutionary provision was also the most worrisome for the authorities.

Article 36 stipulated that

Les membres de la Société se regarderont comme frère en toutes occasions et seront tenus de se protéger les uns les autres et ce, en ce qui concerne les affaires de la dite Société [...] Les membres de la dite Société seront tenus en outre d'employer et encourager, autant que possible, les personnes admises comme membre de la dite Société.

This seems to have gone too far, the language sounding a little too much like a trade union. When the statutes were sent to the Superior Court of the Province of Canada, it accepted all provisions with the exception of Article 36, which it ordered removed.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Société bienveillante des ouvriers de Québec, *Règles et règlements de la Société bienveillante des ouvriers de Québec*. Québec, Bureau et Marcotte, 1852, 22.

The QWBS seems to have been very successful, and continued to exist until at least the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁵ In an era devoid of anything resembling the twentieth century welfare state, benefit societies provided an important security for working class people and their families, who would have been crippled by the loss of their primary wage earner. However, the QWBS's powers were limited, and when came the time to organize Québec's workers into a coherent mass movement, it was noticeably absent.

The Panic of 1857

*My dearest friend, I come to thee in confidence to day,
I'm disappointed awfully ; a large amount to pay ;
Our Banks have all shut down the gates, and say they can't allow,
E'en on the best collaterals, one thousand dollars now.¹⁴⁶*

The period between 1857 and 1859 was an anomaly, a brief but intense downturn in a time of unequalled economic expansion known as the "Panic of 1857." Eric Hobsbawm has argued that 1848 to 1873 can be characterized as the Great Boom, the most extreme period of capitalist development in history.¹⁴⁷ Many mid-century capitalists were convinced that they had created the equivalent of a perpetual motion machine, but as people were only beginning to understand, capitalism functioned as a series of boom and bust cycles. In 1857 came one such bust.

As with all economic downturns, the Panic had both short term and long term causes. In 1853, the Crimean War erupted, pitting Russia against an alliance of France, England, and the Ottoman Empire. Suddenly, Western Europe could no longer rely on critical

145 The QWBS still had money in the Savings Bank of Notre Dame de Québec as late as 1894. See Canada, House of Commons, *Sessionsal Documents*, Ottawa: 1894, Document no. 3A, 238.

146 "Blanc," *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 October 1857, 2.

147 See E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (London: Abicus, 1997).

imports of Russian grain to feed its growing urban population, and was forced to find an alternative supplier. The United States, which was producing massive grain surpluses due to the opening up of the Midwest, quickly took Russia's place. This was a happy conjuncture for agricultural exporters in New York, and helped buoy the American economy while the war lasted. But in 1856 Russia was defeated, and with the return of peace she quickly resumed its position on the world market. The rapid decline of demand for American breadstuffs following the end of the Crimean War reduced the newly opened west to economic stagnation, and, exacerbated by unsound business practices in the banking sector, set the stage for the coming crisis.¹⁴⁸

In August 1857, the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company failed when it was discovered that the director of its New York branch had been embezzling funds and lending irresponsibly. It had been the largest bank in the state, and its collapse sent shivers through Wall Street. The failure of Ohio Life had immediate repercussions. Railroad stocks, dependent as they were on the continued profitability of western expansion, declined in value. In New York speculators and brokers went bankrupt, and a lack of liquidity caused many banks to fail. Things only got worse when on 12 September the *SS Central America* sank, dragging \$1,500,000 of gold and silver down with it. The final straw came in the last week of September, when the Bank of Pennsylvania suspended specie payments. People throughout the northeastern United States panicked and tried to redeem their bank notes or empty their accounts, causing a

¹⁴⁸ James L. Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 5-6, 34. For more on the Panic, see: George W. Vleck, *The Panic of 1857, an Analytical Study* (New York: AMS Press, 1967); Kenneth M. Stampp, *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1990); Charles W. Calomiris and Larry Scheikart, "The Panic of 1857: Origins, Transmission, and Containment," *The Journal of Economic History*, 51:4 (December, 1991), 807-834.

run on the banks and the collapse of thousands of lending institutions.¹⁴⁹

The repercussions of the Panic were felt almost immediately in all the Atlantic economies, including Britain, France, and Canada. Commerce on the canals collapsed, and there was great fear that there would be a run on the banks as in the United States. Worse still, by 14 October no new orders for ships were being received in Québec and naval construction shut down.¹⁵⁰ Contemporaries began to weigh in on the causes of the collapse. According to *Le Canadien*, the problem lay in “notre état de dépendance coloniale, ou, en d’autres mots, au monopole commercial métropolitain.”¹⁵¹ The subservience to the British market was, of course, a key structural weakness of shipbuilding in Québec, and by the fall of 1857, it became impossible to make any sales in England.¹⁵² Even the larger builders were affected. According to the R.G. Dun archives, the shipbuilders Pierre Brunelle and Thomas Lee both had several vessels already overseas, but were incapable of finding a buyer.¹⁵³ As the winter of 1857-58 approached, Québec faced one of the most severe economic crises it had ever had to deal with, and ship carpenters were one of the groups to suffer the consequences of the downturn, prompting them into action.

The Movement for Public Works

The labouring population would of course have to deal with the worst of the coming storm. By mid-September, people had already begun to prepare for what was clearly

149 *Ibid*, 14-17.

150 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 October 1857, 2; *Le Canadien*, 17 October 1857, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 17 October 1857, 2.

151 *Le Canadien*, 13 October 1857, 2.

152 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 October 1857, 2.

153 Canada Vol. 1, p.288, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration; Canada Vol. 8, p.41, R.G. Dun & Co. Collection, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration.

going to be a difficult winter. There was a rash of robberies targeting grocery stores, accompanied with demands that the price of bread be fixed.¹⁵⁴ The debts of working people were also becoming unmanageable, so much so that the Québec's Courthouse reported that there were some 2100 cases that had to be dealt with.¹⁵⁵ This situation was particularly aggravated by the decision by some employers, who were also feeling the pinch, of putting off paying their workers, making it impossible for them to reimburse debts and dragging creditors into the economic morass.¹⁵⁶

The discussion soon turned to providing some form of public works for the labouring population. There were already several construction projects for which money had been authorized, but that remained trapped in bureaucratic limbo. These included the customs house, the prison, the post office, and significant harbour improvements.¹⁵⁷ As the *Quebec Mercury* pointed out, “[i]t may not be generally known that £14,000 is lying in some chest moulding until the Commissioner of Public Works can find a site for the Quebec Post Office.”¹⁵⁸ In total, some £440,539 was available for public works, in addition to £225,000 for the construction of the new parliament buildings when Québec got its turn as the Province of Canada's rotating capital.¹⁵⁹

The municipal government, however, seemed to be in no rush. By the end of September all it had done was set up an exploratory committee to look at the possibility of setting up a house of industry.¹⁶⁰ The *Mercury* once again called them out: “Are the government aware what are the winter prospects of our labouring population ? If they

154 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 3 October 1857, 2; *Le Canadien*, 5 October 1857, 2; *Le Canadien*, 10 October 1857, 2.

155 *Le Canadien*, 17 September 1857, 2.

156 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 October 1857, 2.

157 *Quebec Mercury*, 24 September 1857, 2.

158 *Quebec Mercury*, 17 October 1857, 2.

159 *Quebec Mercury*, 20 October 1857, 2.

160 *Le Canadien*, 30 September 1857, 2; *Quebec Mercury*, 29 September 1857, 2.

are not, they are not fit to be Ministers, and if they are, they are grossly neglecting their duty.”¹⁶¹ The population, however, could hardly wait for the wheels of bureaucracy to switch to another gear. On 18 October there was a large public demonstration in St. Roch and St. Sauveur demanding that the money already earmarked for public works be finally spent.¹⁶² But it was not in Québec, but rather in New York, that things first came to a head.

In mid-October, some three-thousand mechanics in New York City found themselves laid off, bringing the unemployed population of the American metropolis to some 12,000.¹⁶³ By November, things get so serious that there was fear of famine, and the Mayor was forced to promise to find some way of feeding the population.¹⁶⁴ However, it appeared that the government in New York was in no greater rush than the one in Québec, and by 11 November, the population had had enough. Thousands of “hunger processionists” marched on New York's city hall and denounced the mayor as a “humbug”. The police was sent to intervene, and things quickly got out of hand. Soon a riot erupted which got so serious that the US army was mobilized to restore order.¹⁶⁵

The extensive coverage granted these events in the Québec's newspapers suggest that labour leaders were well informed about events in the United States. On Sunday 17 November, two to three thousand workers, the vast majority ship carpenters, held a demonstration in St. Roch. Led by the ship carpenter Narcisse Masse, they presented a petition to Joseph Morrin, the Mayor of Québec, demanding the establishment of public works for the relief of the labouring population.¹⁶⁶ The 46 year old Masse was probably

161 *Quebec Mercury*, 10 October 1857, 2.

162 *Le Canadien*, 19 October 1857, 2.

163 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 17 October 1857, 2; 23 October 1857, 2.

164 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 27 October 1857, 2.

165 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 12 November 1857, 2; 14 November, 2.

166 *Quebec Mercury*, 19 November 1857, 2. *Québec Morning Chronicle*, 19 November 1857, 2; *Quebec*

in desperate straits, having a wife and five sons to feed.¹⁶⁷ The Mayor accepted the petition and promised to give it immediate attention.¹⁶⁸ The next day, a committee chaired by the Morrin himself was set up to discuss the issue of public works. It was thereafter resolved to begin the construction of sewers near the Cul-de-Sac, and £4000 were voted to pay for the project.¹⁶⁹ By then, it began to look like they were going in the right direction. However, things were about to get much more complicated, as on 21 November, the provincial government was dissolved and a general election called. The movement for public works would now have a political dimension.

Québec City seemed to have a huge advantage in obtaining money for construction projects. Charles Alleyn (Illustration 2.3), the commissioner for public works in the Taché-MacDonald administration, represented the city in the Legislative Assembly. Now, at a time when demand was greatest, he needed to come back to Québec to seek re-election.¹⁷⁰ While Alleyn and his two colleagues Georges-Honoré Simard and the shipbuilder Hyppolite Dubord campaigned for election, the City of Québec was still trying to figure out a way to feed its impoverished population. The moneyed class was concerned; they were convinced that something had to be done to provide work for the now idle population. This was not necessarily due to a sense of *noblesse oblige*.

According to the *Morning Chronicle*, the government had to act because

on them will also depend the preservation of the natural mutual dependence subsisting between capital and labor, on them will also depend the

Morning Chronicle, 3 December 1857, 2.

167 PHSVQ database for the 1861 census, Jacques Cartier Ward, folio 1516.

168 *Quebec Mercury*, 19 November 1857, 2. *Québec Morning Chronicle*, 19 November 1857, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 3 December 1857, 2.

169 *Quebec Mercury*, 17 November 1857, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 19 November 1857, 2; *Le Canadien*, 20 November 1857, 2.

170 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 4 December 1857, 2.

Illustration 2.3: The Honourable Charles-Joseph Alleyn

Source: BANQ, Fonds Famille Foran, Honorable Charles-Joseph Alleyn, c. 1864, P137,S4,D10,P46.

preservation of the people from becoming the dangerous dupes of demagogues, and the possible victims or active agents of communistic designs.¹⁷¹

The specter of communism had reared its ugly head.

The construction work on the Cul-de-Sac was obviously quite insufficient to help the thousands of families who were almost destitute for want of work. The committee met once again on 25 November to discuss other options. One recommendation was to lend money to shipbuilders to begin the construction of some vessels and put the shipwrights back to work. However, frugality seemed to be the order of the day, and only two resolutions were accepted: first, continuing the sewer construction already voted on, and

¹⁷¹ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 2 December 1857, 2.

second, hiring workers as stone breakers to macadamize the roads.¹⁷²

The available work being obviously insufficient, the Mayor called for a public assembly to discuss the issue of public works on 2 December. Much to his surprise, three thousand ship carpenters showed up to express their views. The Mayor, astonished, went on to explain that the assembled workers had misunderstood, his call for a meeting was not for them, but that he would form a committee of the “better or more influential class of the citizens [...] to provide means of relief.” The assembly went ahead, but once again the only thing the government could agree on was to set up yet another committee to discuss the issue at another time. At that point, the Mayor attempted to close the meeting, but the crowd that had yet to disperse began to chant the name of Pierre-Gabriel Huot, an opposition candidate in the coming election. Huot took the stage and asked for calm, while at the same time lending his support to the Mayor's resolutions. Marc-Aurèle Plamondon, another opposition candidate, rose to speak after Huot and accused the Mayor of trying to win political points with the misery of the population. Hyppolite Dubord next spoke, conveying his sympathy for the starving population. Narcisse Masse, the 46 year old ship carpenter that led the movement for public works, rose and argued that it was the responsibility of the rich to help those less fortunate. Finally, Colonel Batholomew Guky rose to speak.

Guky (Illustration 2.4) was a very important public figure in Canada East. Having fought for Britain during the War of 1812 and the Rebellions, he was perhaps best known as a skilled orator and accomplished legal scholar. As a rare Tory who could speak perfect French, he engaged in memorable verbal bouts with Louis-Joseph Papineau during the 1830s. As the member of parliament for Sherbrooke, he was an

¹⁷² *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 26 November 1857, 2.

Illustration 2.4: Colonel Bartholomew Guky

Source: *Canadian Illustrated News* (Vol. XIV, no. 1, 1 July 1876), 5.

important opponent of the Rebellion Losses Bill, but also had a key rôle in calming down the mob that in 1849 burned down the Parliament Buildings in Montréal. Not only did he physically prevent a few rioters from assaulting the Speaker of the House, he climbed a lamppost and spoke for two hours to try to disperse the mob. Guky retired in 1854, and frequently traveled to Québec to work in the library at the Palais de Justice.¹⁷³

It was during one of these trips that the Panic struck, and, for reasons known only to him, he decided to get involved. When Guky spoke, people listened. He told the crowd

¹⁷³ DCB Online, Jacques Monet, “Guky, Bartholomew Augustus Conrad.”

assembled on that October in 1857 that not all their schemes were realistic, but that the better-off members of society should indeed make an effort to help those now starving. This brief speech seemed to have an impact, as shortly thereafter the crowd dispersed.¹⁷⁴ However, Guky would soon find himself in the centre of the problems to come.

As an election had just been called, funding from the provincial government in Toronto was frozen. However, this left the field open for those running for office to exploit the situation for their political gain. In early December, Charles Alleyn, commissioner of public works, announced £15,000 in new funding for public works, presumably to be spent after the election.¹⁷⁵ When his train pulled up to the *Gare centrale* in Québec, he was met by thousands of people, ecstatic about the sums that had been promised to the city.¹⁷⁶ Unfortunately, this enthusiasm was premature.

The Riots

A week passed after Alleyn's announcement, and still there was no work available. According to a report by the *Société Saint-Vincent de Paul*, 1327 household heads were unemployed, and 400 families were deemed destitute.¹⁷⁷ On 9 December, around 2000 desperate ship carpenters showed up at the office of public works at the Place d'Armes. They demanded explanations from Alleyn as to when they would get some relief. Alleyn promised that by the following Monday (the 14th) he would find them work repairing the docks, the Marine Hospital, and the cemetery. Colonel Guky took the stage after Alleyn. He asked for calm, and said that if Alleyn did not fulfill his promise, the

174 *Le Canadien*, 4 December 1857, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 3 December 1857, 2.

175 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 4 December 1857, 2.

176 *Quebec Gazette*, 5 December 1857, 2; *Le Canadien*, 7 December 1857, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 12 December 1857, 2.

177 BANQ, *Rapport de la Société Saint-Vincent de Paul sur le chômage*, 11 December 1857, 3.

carpenters were to come back and he vowed to personally lead them. This calmed the crowd down, and they dispersed.¹⁷⁸

One question that deserves asking at this juncture: where was the QWBS during all this agitation? There is not a single mention of its involvement during this massive agitation for public works. This brings up an important point about benefit societies in the 1850s: they were not capable of providing leadership when it was needed. In fact, the leadership of the movement fell upon a single man, the ship carpenter Narcisse Masse, and there is no evidence that he ever belonged to the QWBS. And, as things began to degenerate in December of 1857, some sort of organization was probably what was most needed.

The following Monday, 300 men found work repairing the water works. However this was plainly insufficient, as there were over 1300 families looking for work.¹⁷⁹ Taking Colonel Guky at his word, several hundred carpenters returned to the Place d'Armes to ask him to help them obtain some more relief. He said that there were already some men employed, and that therefore Alleyne had fulfilled his promise. It was then that, according to the *Mercury*,

an explosion was heard from one of the trenches opened for the Water Works, where some men were engaged in blasting. This gave occasion to the speaker [Guky] to observe that such explosions were less dangerous than those of cannon and musketry which they might hear before long if they suffered themselves to be misled into violations of the law.

Threats did not calm the crowd down. People started accusing him of being a sellout, and there were cries of “embrouillez-le!” Sensing that he was losing control of the crowd, Guky told them that he had to go to the Court House, and then he would discuss with them. The hundreds of workers followed Guky to the Court House, where the good

¹⁷⁸ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 10 December 1857, 2; *Le Canadien*, 11 December 1857, 2.

¹⁷⁹ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 December 1857, 2.

Colonel proceeded to lock himself in and slip out the back. The crowd, frustrated and betrayed, broke into the Court House to search for Gogy, and were eventually forced to disperse by the chief of police, M. McGuire, who may have threatened to call in the militia.¹⁸⁰

Things calmed down a bit after the Gogy incident, but there was some low level disturbances from unemployed youths.¹⁸¹ Things really got out of hand on the election night of 29 December.¹⁸² French Canadians and Irishmen fought a furious battle over polling booths in Saint Roch, Saint Jean, and Montcalm. Using clubs, pickaxes, and firearms, each group tried to prevent the other from voting. In Saint Roch, the French Canadians were even able to prevent the candidate, Dubord, from showing up. The next afternoon, another riot erupted, and once again the discharge of firearms was heard. During the vicious fighting that ensued, four people were killed: one French Canadian, and three Irishmen, including a “lad”. The militia was finally called in to prevent further disturbances. Nonetheless Alleyn, Dubord, and Simard were elected.¹⁸³

Why this violence? Election riots were common, but this one was particularly bloody, leaving four people dead. The riots of 1857 were probably more economic than political. Alleyn, who was immensely popular when he arrived in Québec, quickly lost his working class support in Saint Roch when he failed to fulfil his promises. The French Canadian carpenters in the Saint Charles area, always a militant and homogenized block, rallied to his opponents, Huot, Plamondon, and Eventurel (see

180 *Quebec Mercury*, 15 December 1857, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 15 December 1857, 2.

181 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 19 December 1857, 2.

182 Election riots were common in nineteenth century Canada. See Jean Parizeau, “Les mouvements sociaux, la violence et les interventions armées au Québec 1867-1967,” *RHAF* 37:1, 1983, 68-69.

183 *Quebec Mercury*, 29 December 1857, 2; *Le Canadien*, 30 December 1857, 2.

Table 2.2: Election Results, 31 December 1857

Ward	Alleyn	Simard	Dubord	Plamondon	Éventurel	Huot
St. Pierre	1573	1456	1432	57	35	21
Champlain	2361	2015	2005	17	3	4
Total Basse-ville	3934	3471	3437	74	38	25
St. Louis	1366	1343	1266	14	14	7
Palais	1556	1398	1504	18	18	7
Montcalm	1401	1224	1232	30	30	21
St. Jean n. 1	662	608	589	277	271	253
St. Jean n. 2	268	307	281	458	457	421
Total Haute-ville	5253	4880	5038	797	790	709
St. Roch n. 1	267	197	176	1941	1928	1931
St. Roch n. 2	216	247	222	1492	1471	1466
J. Cartier	439	373	342	768	767	744
Total St. Charles	922	817	740	4201	4166	4141
Total	10,049	9168	9049	5072	4994	4875

Source: *Quebec Mercury*, 31 December 1857, 2.

Table 2.2). However, the Irish in the Basse-ville rallied to Alleyn, and with their support and that of the propertied class in the Haute-ville, he managed to handily win the election.

French Canadians and Irish had previously worked together in the campaign for public works. This is clear from the testimonial of Colonel Guky after the riot of 14 December, when he heard the crowd speak both in French and in an “unmistakeable [sic] Tipperary dialect.”¹⁸⁴ During the riot, however, the Irish attacked French Canadians and vice versa. There was thus a sundering of the alliance between French Canadian and Irish. What happened in the two weeks between the attack on Guky and the election riot

¹⁸⁴ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 16 December 1857, 2.

is unclear. We do, however, have one clue: it would seem that, as was usually the case, what little public works that became available was monopolized by French Canadians – the Irish got nothing. There is evidence that the Irish understandably resented this. In a letter signed “IRISHMAN”, a writer to the *Morning Chronicle* complained that

The Corporation has laborers at work in ten or twelve streets now open for laying down the pipes for the Water Works, three of which streets are in St. Peter's Ward. It has also fifty men employed in blasting the rock, at the upper end of Champlain Street. All these laborers are old countrymen. In St. Paul street, St. Rochs, and St. Lewis Wards five trenches have been opened, and there the bands are principally French Canadians. The Provincial Board of Works has over four hundred men employed at the Marine Hospital, nearly every one of whom is a French Canadian, Can nothing be done by the Commissioner or Mr. Gauvreau to give work to some fifty or a hundred unemployed Irishmen, who seem most anxious to get it, at two shillings a day ?¹⁸⁵

What is not at all clear is why the Irish went back to supporting Alleyne. It is likely that the Irish were simply throwing in their lot on an ethnic basis and voting for Alleyne because he was also Irish, but it is impossible to be sure.

By mid-January, things began to improve somewhat. There was an important increase in available public works, so much so that 450 French Canadian labourers sent Alleyne a letter thanking him for his timely assistance. More importantly, some orders came in for ships. In all, 21 vessels were laid down that winter, a far cry from the 47 the winter before, but nonetheless a huge improvement over December. The next year was even worse, with only 18 ships constructed.¹⁸⁶ However, there is no evidence of violence that winter. This is possibly because of an improvement in public works, which functioned like a safety valve keeping things from degenerating. The desperation of that winter was short lived. By the start of the American Civil War, the economy had completely recovered and the shipbuilding industry began its last major period of

¹⁸⁵ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 January 1858, 2.

¹⁸⁶ Marcil, 320.

expansion. Still, the events of 1857-58 remind us of the precarious situation of workers in the golden age of capitalism. Always teetering on the brink, violence remained a fact of life. As the *Mercury* observed: “These are scenes, anything but calculated to assuage the feelings of hatred and discord now unhappily prevailing [...]”¹⁸⁷

The second period of mobilization on Québec's waterfront witnessed ship carpenters set up Lower Canada's first working class organization, the *Société amicale and bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*, and although they failed to get their trade incorporated, carpenters returned to the fore and played a leading rôle in the creation of the colony's first mutual aid society. However, the limits of this kind of working class self-organization soon became evident when the QWBS failed to provide leadership during the tumultuous fall and winter of 1857-58. The 1860s would usher in the era of true trade unions, and turn the strike into an important tactic in the wider labour movement. As the 1850s closed, the shipbuilding industry in Québec was entering its final stage of growth before the end, and the last generation of ship carpenters began to organize for the campaigns to come.

187 *Quebec Mercury*, 31 December 1857, 2.

Chapter 3: “The Famished Wolf is a Terrible Adversary”: Unionization and Strikes, 1860-1868

*We know the shipbuilders' position is a critical and difficult one, but so is that of the thousands in St. Rochs and St. Sauveur who famish for insufficiency of bread and clothing. We do not think the master builders have made proper exertions, [...] to meet their workmen's necessities fairly. They have contented themselves with the starving-out policy, and that policy has produced riot, trespass, intimidation, and death. The famished wolf is a terrible adversary [...]*¹⁸⁸

The 1850s had ended on a very sour note for both shipbuilder and shipwright. The industry had been through some of the worst years anyone could remember, and it was a miracle that it had not collapsed altogether. But as the '50s turned into the '60s, the clouds began to part and a new optimism reigned. The shipbuilding industry had weathered the storm, and was about to enter one of the most spectacular periods of growth it had ever recorded. But not all had reverted to the way it had been. After the hungry winters of 1857-59, workers understood the limits of their first fitful experiences at organization and, armed with a new confidence, began to organize trade unions that would not only provide basic relief, but also a means of improving their working lives. Employers, terrified by these developments, quickly organized to counterattack the emerging workers movement. In the 1860s, the stage was set for a brutal showdown between labour and capital.

Recovery

Richard Rice has identified two main periods of growth for shipbuilding in Canada:

¹⁸⁸ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 29 October 1867, 2.

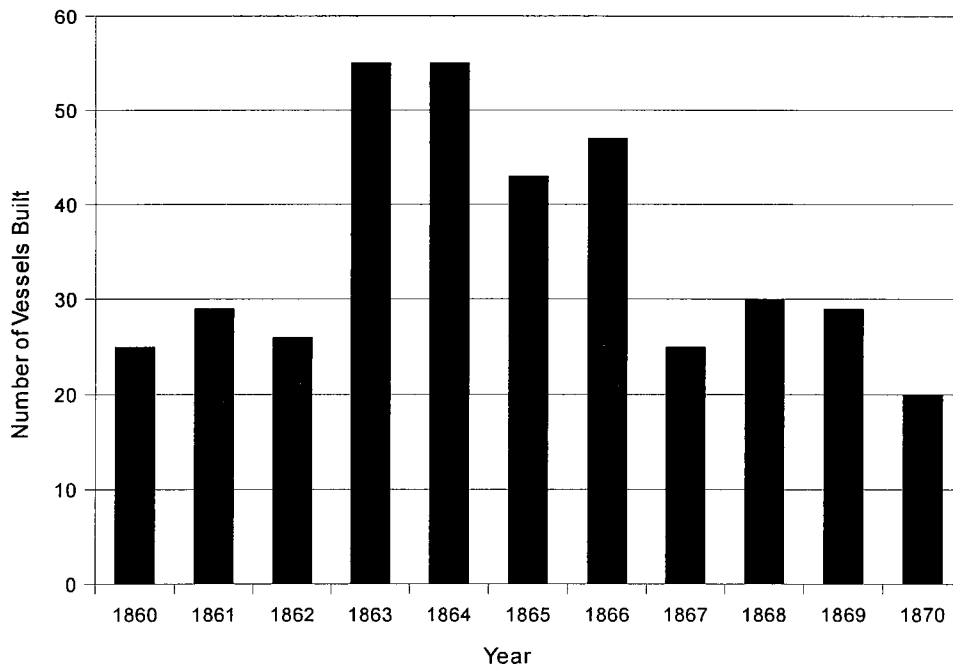
the first encompassing the years 1809 to 1854, and the second 1854 to 1867. Rice argues that the first period ended with the bankruptcy of Edward Oliver. In the fall of 1854 Oliver, who owned 78 ships, failed for £700,000. He was forced to sell his ships at auction, but although they technically should have been worth more than a million pounds, they brought in less than £600,000. The shockingly low prices obtained for the ships shook the industry and severely depressed the market for colonial builds.¹⁸⁹ In the winter of 1855, orders for Québec ships dropped to only 25 ships, down from 40 the year before. But Rice, like most historians who have studied the period, seems to have largely ignored the severe repercussions the Panic of 1857 had on shipbuilding in Québec, and therefore his chronology of the second stage of growth unconvincing.¹⁹⁰

The truth was that the industry in Québec had weathered surprisingly well the storm caused by Oliver's failure. In 1856, the city's shipyards launched 40 vessels, equalling 1854's total, and the next year 47 ships slipped into the water on the Saint Charles, the most productive year the port had seen up to that point. The true end to the first period of growth was, therefore, the collapse of shipbuilding engendered by the economic crisis of 1857-59. The industry reached its nadir in the bitter winter of 1858-59 when only 18 vessels were launched, and did not fully recover until 1863 when an impressive 55 ships were built. We can therefore place the beginning of the second stage of growth at around 1860-61.

For there to be growth in Québec, the Atlantic economy had to shake the miserable economic situation that persisted until the end of the 1850s. In the spring of 1859 the manufacturing sector in the northeast United States began to show signs of life, but the

¹⁸⁹ Rice, 83.

¹⁹⁰ Albert Faucher, as we will see in Chapter 4, was a rare exception, fully understanding the importance of the Panic.

Figure 3.1: The Second Stage of Growth, 1860 to 1870

Source: Reid Marcil, *On Chantait Charley Man*, 320.

ultimate recovery of the American economy had to wait until 1860-61. Those two years, Western Europe had back-to-back bad harvests, which resulted in a huge increase in demand for American breadstuffs. American exports of agricultural product jumped from 3,002,000 bushels of wheat in 1859 to 31,238,000 in 1861 – this was, in the words of the *New York Daily Tribune*, a “resurrection”. The consequent huge movement of wheat from the Midwest to the East Coast ports were a boon for the railroads, which once again returned to prosperity in 1860. Although accompanied by some fluctuations, the economy was essentially out of recession by the start of the Civil War.¹⁹¹

Besides the economic recovery after the severe recession initiated by the Panic of 1857, two other factors account for the massive growth of shipbuilding in Québec during the early 1860s. The first was the opening of the French market to Canadian

¹⁹¹ Huston, 211-215.

builds in 1860. The sale of Québec ships to France was a huge success, and in 1867 it even exceeded the number of ships sold to British buyers. However, this success was fleeting as the Canadian government, in mid-depression, shortsightedly imposed a tariff on French wine, leading to a retaliatory closing of the French market in 1874.¹⁹²

The second major factor was the unleashing of the American Civil War. The division of the United States into two armed camps had a profound impact on shipbuilding in Québec. Firstly, British and Canadian ships gained a huge advantage by virtue of their neutral registry. Secondly the Americans, occupied with the war, relinquished their control of the West Indies trade, and “British American shipowners sailed happily into the breach,” greatly expanding their share of the market and thus their need for vessels. Finally, the outbreak of war significantly reduced American production of merchant vessels, especially in the blockaded Southern ports.¹⁹³ All these factors led to increased demand for Canadian ships and by far the most successful years the Québec shipbuilding industry would ever see. Unfortunately, as we will explore more fully in Chapter 4, these successes were fleeting and did not eliminate the fundamental structural weaknesses that would soon doom the industry.

Working Class Militancy in the Mid-1860s

The 1860s was a turbulent decade in the working class world. The agitation of the labour movement was beginning to shake the market in the United States and Canada, leading to a record number of strikes and other collective actions. Two of these, both taking place in 1866, drew the attention of the Québec's ship carpenters: the Québec

¹⁹² Rice, 85; BANQ, Quebec Board of Trade, *Annual Report*, 1876. (Québec: Printed at the “Morning Chronicle” Office, 1878), 15-16.

¹⁹³ Rice, 85-86.

longshoremen strike, and the New York City ship carpenters' strike.

By 1866, the American shipbuilding industry was entering a slump. The end of the Civil War had led to the United States government auctioning off the massive number of vessels it had no further use for. Some 359 vessels were immediately sold, rapidly depressing ship prices all along the Atlantic coast.¹⁹⁴ Things were particularly bad in New York, one of the key shipbuilding centres in the United States. The slump had unfortunately hit at a time of intense campaigning by the labour movement to lower working hours. In the spring of 1866 the *New York Workingmen's Union* (NYWU) were ready to force the hands of the shipbuilders and impose the eight-hour day. On 2 April, in the Greenpoint shipyards in Brooklyn, around 10,000 ship carpenters, joiners, and caulkers walked off the job.¹⁹⁵ The union, however, had almost immediate problems maintaining the strike order. They fell back on intimidation to force recalcitrant carpenters off the yards. There were also reports that many joiners had broken ranks and were secretly working in house construction.¹⁹⁶

On 9 May there was a meeting of about 500 shipwrights at Clinton Hall. The president of the NYWU, John Reed, denounced the treatment offered them in articles printed by the *New York Times*, and reminded the assembly of the rightness of their cause. It was further stated that other unions were actively sending funds to aid the striking carpenters, and they reiterated their dedication to continuing the fight for as long as it was possible. But the New York shipbuilders closed ranks, and with the support of shipowners and merchants of every stripe, refused to ever hire a union man.¹⁹⁷ By June the builders were estimated to be each losing some \$200 per day, but

¹⁹⁴ Morrison, 158-159.

¹⁹⁵ *New York Times*, 7 April 1866, 5. See also Morrison, 159 and Roediger, *Our Own Time*, 108.

¹⁹⁶ *New York Times*, 10 May 1866., 5.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

were determined to hold out. Violence by strikers had been increasing, and the *New York Times* reported that a police force had to be posted at every yard to prevent the intimidation of the small number of scabs that were breaking ranks. By early June, after over nine weeks of conflict, an increasing number of shipwrights were forced by hunger to renounce the union and return to work.¹⁹⁸ A week later, with so many shipwrights signing yellow dog contracts, the union decided that it was useless to continue the strike. Their demands were rescinded and the men returned to work.¹⁹⁹

Meanwhile, back in Québec, the longshoremen had finally succeeded in incorporating their trade. On 9 June 1862, they formed the *Quebec Ship Labourers' Benevolent Society* (QSLBS). Its vague powers and responsibilities allowed the Irish to take control of it, and, much to the chagrin of timber merchants and shipowners, gradually turn it into a true trade union. The society was immediately successful, quickly recruiting longshoremen from both the French Canadian and Irish communities. This success mitigated the ethnic divide within the organization, which for the time being remained in control. In its first year, the QSLBS's biggest problem was the incredible fluctuation of wage rates. For example, in the spring of 1864, wages were as high as five dollars per day, while falling to 80 cents by the fall. In 1865, the leadership of the Society began agitating for fixed wage rates. Their bargaining position was strengthened by the end of the Civil War and the consequent demand for longshoremen in the United States, and the extension of the QSLBS to the south shore of the Saint Lawrence. Furthermore, shipbuilding was in full swing and the longshoremen did not have to compete with ship carpenters for available work.²⁰⁰

198 *New York Times*, 3 June 1866, 8.

199 *New York Times*, 13 June 1866, 2.

200 Bischoff, *Les débardeurs...*, 131-139.

In April 1866, the QSLBS asked merchants to respect a wage scale between \$2.50 and \$1.60 depending on the job performed. For the first few months, the QSLBS was patient with the hostile merchants that showed little interest in bending to the society's demands. By mid-July, however, it became insistent. Outraged, some captains began to have their vessels loaded on the Lévis side of the river, where some longshoremen decided to form their own association to compete with the QSLBS. The society decided to take action and demand that all longshoremen conform to their new wage rates, and, to enforce this, they would use force if necessary. On 12 July, a band of longshoremen travelled to the south shore to stop the loading of timber at Davie's yard in Lévis. Although they succeeded in breaking in, an armed group of sailors from the frigate *Aurora* dispersed them. Things degenerated further on the 16th, when the captain of the *Norwood* failed to pay the longshoremen that had loaded his vessel. The issue of wage rates was joined by the even more important issue of their actual payment, leading the QSLBS to order a general strike, shutting down the port of Québec on 20 July.²⁰¹

The longshoremen had no strike fund, and thus needed a quick victory. They were thus forced to resort to violence and intimidation to impose the strike order on the waterfront. Bands of longshoremen travelled from yard to yard and forced them to stop the loading of vessels and close their doors. Faced with such violence and agitation, the timber merchants decided to respond in kind. They used a combination of scabs, strikebreakers, and armed sailors to break the QSLBS and restore things to the way they were before. However, one thing that no one had expected was the sudden intervention of the ship captains. Already held hostage by the strike, any lengthening of the conflict threatened their ability to perform a second trip in the fall, and thus severely undercut

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 140-143.

the profitability of the season. At a meeting on the 23rd, the captains decided to acquiesce to the demands of the QSLBS, which they deemed reasonable. With victory in their hands, the longshoremen returned to work on the 24th.²⁰²

These two strikes, one victorious, another defeated, would have important consequences for Québec's ship carpenters. Both, but especially the longshoremen's successful three-day strike, would have been well known to the workers who laboured in Saint Roch's shipyards that summer, and they doubtlessly drew lessons that would be useful in the coming showdown.²⁰³ It was clear that the New York strike failed for two reasons. First, employers maintained their solidarity, something that their colleagues in Québec had not managed to do during the ship carpenters' strike of 1840, nor during the longshoremen's strike in 1866. Second, the New York strike was doomed because too many shipwrights had broken ranks and continued to work, so much that by early June the leadership decided that there was simply no point in going on. The longshoremen's strike was the opposite. Through the use of patrols ready and willing to use force, the longshoremen were able to stay united on their end, aided no doubt by the very brief length of the work stoppage. The merchants for their part were surprised, and in their eyes betrayed, by the desertion of the ship captains, who could not risk a long strike and ended up backing the workers. These two strikes demonstrated beyond any shadow of a doubt the advantages of a strong union, but also the absolute necessity of maintaining solidarity. These lessons were quickly assimilated by ship carpenters, and the following year they themselves unionized.

202 *Ibid.*, 144-149.

203 Shipbuilders were keenly aware of the impact the New York City strike had on ship carpenters. See Thomas Oliver's testimony before the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the General Condition of the Building of Merchant Vessels [hereafter Select Committee], Canada, *Journal of the House of Commons*, 1867-68, I, App. 11, p. 11.

The Ship Carpenters Unite

By the late 1850s, the period of Canadian local craft unionism was ebbing as American and British international unions began to take over. In 1855, a Ship Carpenters' and Caulkers Association was established in the United States, and made a notable effort to raise wages in St. Louis. Unfortunately, when the Panic hit in late summer 1857, most of these hard fought gains were wiped out. Things were further compounded by the rampant corruption that was rife in the organization, which eventually caused its collapse. After the Panic of 1857 subsided, American ship carpenters formed the *International Union of Ship Carpenters and Caulkers* (IUSCC) in 1860. Initially, however, no East Coast unions joined, limiting it to the Ohio River Valley. In 1864 an agreement was finally reached with these unions, which provided for “mutually recognized travelling cards and a commitment to prevent the migration of workers from one area to another during strikes, as well as the provision of financial assistance.” The East Coast unions did not however formally join the IUSCC.²⁰⁴

This was an umbrella organization, linking individual and generally independent local unions. Its constitution,²⁰⁵ originally written in 1864 but translated and republished in French in 1867, was explicitly class-oriented:

nous ne reconnaissons aucune règle d'action, ni aucun principe qui puisse élever la richesse au-dessus de l'industrie, ni les hommes de professions au-dessus des ouvriers. Nous ne reconnaissons aucune distinction dans la société, excepté celle basée sur la valeur, l'utilité et le bon ordre, et aucune supériorité, excepté celle accordée par le Grand Architecte de notre existence [...]²⁰⁶

The IUSCC was the supreme authority and tribunal of last resort for the unions under its

204 Walter Galenson, *The United Brotherhood of Carpenters: The First Hundred Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 10-12.

205 *Constitution de l'Union internationale des charpentiers et des calfats de navires*, Québec: Imprimerie du “Canadien”, 1867.

206 *Ibid.*, 4.

banner. (Article 1 Section 3) Its powers were executive, legislative, and judicial (Article 1 Section 2). The executive and judicial powers rested with its president, and his vice-presidents, of which there would be one representing each local (Article 1 Sections 4 and 6). Judicial power was to be held by the international while in session, and reserved for local unions at all other times (Article 1 Section 5). Each subordinate union was allowed one representative per 150 members, who served as a vice-president in the parent union (Article 2 Sections 2 and 3). The election of the officers (president, vice-president, and vice-presidents from every local) was done by secret ballot. To be declared a winner, a candidate had to obtain fifty percent of the vote plus one. At every round, the candidate with the lowest count was eliminated, until someone obtained an absolute majority (Article 3 Section 2).

The vice-presidents were required to provide to the president with a quarterly report on their local's membership, finances, etc. (in January, April, July, and October), which would be archived by the secretary (Article 4 Section 3). To become a member, a union had to pay a \$3 entry fee, and annual dues of 60 cents per head, calculated on the average of the four quarterly reports. If ever the IUSCC found itself in deficit, a proportional charge would be levied on the individual unions, based on their average income (Article 6 Section 1). Non-charter unions wanting to join the IUSCC would have to pay a \$6 entry fee. New unions were required to fill out a form (Illustration 3.1), and to print their constitution and send it to the IUSCC to be examined, corrected, and eventually approved (Article 8 Section 3).

Article 7 was critically important, as it outlined the process for obtaining aid from the IUSCC in case of a strike. The president of the local union had to transmit a written document, agreed to by their membership, and signed by him and his secretary-

Illustration 3.1: Admission Form to the IUSCC

FORMULE DE DEMANDE POUR UNE CHARTE.

[Date.]

Les soussignés, résidant _____, croyant que l'Union des Charpentiers et Calfats de Navire est bien calculée pour améliorer notre état intellectuel et social, et pour promouvoir notre bien-être industriel et notre avancement, demandons respectueusement à l'Union Internationale des Charpentiers et des Calfats de Navire, qu'elle accorde une charte pour ouvrir une Union nouvelle qui sera établie dans _____, comté de _____, Etat de _____.

Nous nous engageons individuellement et collectivement à être gouvernés par la constitution, les règles et les usages de l'Union Internationale des Charpentiers et des Calfats de Navire.

Source: *Constitution de l'Union internationale des charpentiers et des calfats de navires*, Québec: Imprimerie du "Canadien", 1867.

archivist, describing their grievances, their plan of action, the size of their membership, the daily salary of their members, and any other relevant information (Article 7 Section 2). The vice-presidents / representatives of the assembled locals would then review the documentation and rule whether or not to accept to fund the proposed action, whether it would be strike or otherwise. Should the local's request be accepted, every union would tax its membership between 2 and 25 cents weekly at their discretion, the funds would be sent to the IUSCC's treasury and distributed to the striking union for as long as necessary (Article 7 Section 4). To enforce solidarity, no member was allowed to work while the rest of his branch was on strike, unless he received a special permission from that branch (Article 11 Section 1). Furthermore, a member of the union was forbidden from ever working with a non-union carpenter or caulker (Article 11 Section 3), a

provision that would have important consequences later. Finally, members were forbidden from working for less than the price determined by the local union (Article 13, Section 3)

Article 12 discussed apprenticeship, limiting the number of apprentices per master to four, and the duration to four years for carpenters and three for caulkers (Article 12, Section 1). If a shipyard closed during a young man's apprenticeship, the local union was required to find him work in another yard. When a man completed his apprenticeship, the union had to admit him as a full member (Article 12 Section 2). However, any apprentice who did not finish his training was permanently barred from joining the union, unless he offered a compelling justification for his actions (Article 12 Section 3). Finally, the union incited all members to join the union in fighting for labour reform (Article 16, Section 3).

The union seems to have maintained the ship carpenters' leadership rôle in the wider labour movement. To historian John H. Morrison, they, along with the ship joiners and caulkers, constituted an "advance guard", especially within the campaign for the eight-hour day.²⁰⁷ They led, for example, a procession of 800 to 1000 workmen through the streets of New Orleans in March 1866, where the IUSCC's national president, Richard Trevellick, gave a two-hour speech at Lafayette Square demanding the eight hour day. Because of overwork, he argued, "a laborer returns to his home jaded and care-worn. From the depression experienced, his wife and children are treated with harshness, and life has but little pleasure."²⁰⁸ In May 1867, Trevellick was in Chicago to give another

207 John H. Morrison, *History of New York Ship Yards* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1970 [1909]), 159.

208 Eric Arnesen, *Waterfront Workers of New Orleans: Race, Class, and Politics, 1863-1923* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 9

rousing speech, again in support of the eight hour day movement.²⁰⁹ Later the IUSCC under Trevellick, working closely with William Sylvis of the Iron Molders Union, had a pioneering rôle in the creation of the *National Labor Reform Party*. A political organization, it advocated the eight-hour day, cooperatives, the end of contract and convict labour, and the reform of the currency system. Trevellick pushed the party during meetings of the IUSCC throughout 1868, and succeeded in significantly multiplying its membership by the end of the decade.²¹⁰

Québec's ship carpenters joined the IUSCC in 1867, following a wave of Canadian unions joining American and British internationals.²¹¹ By then the carpenters had already set up their local union, the *Union de protection des charpentiers et calfats de navires de la ville de Québec* (UPCCNQ). But to build that organization, they had to navigate Canada's confusing labour laws. A preoccupation of labour historians since the 1950s has been the question of whether or not unions were actually illegal. In traditional Canadian labour history, the key date was 1872, when, following a strike by the *Toronto Typographical Union*, John A. MacDonald's administration passed the *Trades Union Act*, which provided for the incorporation and legal protection of trade unions.

But were unions actually illegal before 1872? For decades, historians have debated the exact nature of labour law in nineteenth century Canada. Eric Tucker has argued, following E.P. Thompson, that workers' coalitions existed within an “indefinite area of toleration.”²¹² Paul Craven has also argued that there was considerable ambiguity as to

209 David Roediger and Philip Sheldon Foner, *Our Own Time: A History of American Labor and the Working Day* (London: Verso, 1989), 106-107.

210 Robert Mendel, “National Labor Reform Party,” in Eric Arneson ed. *Encyclopedia of US Labor and Working-Class History*, Vol 1 (Routledge, 2006), 965.

211 The first international union in Canada was the Journeymen Shoemakers of the United States and Canada in 1858. The shoemakers were quickly followed by metalworkers, cigar makers, coopers, and a slew of other trades, that by 1873 there were 81 locals of American internationals in Canada. See Forsey, 32-61.

212 Eric Tucker, “That Indefinite Area of Toleration: Criminal Conspiracy and Trade Unions in Ontario,

whether unions were legal or not.²¹³ However, more recent scholarship has argued convincingly that there was not anything technically illegal about labour unions.²¹⁴ The *Masters' and Servants' Act*, passed by the Legislative Assembly in 1847, often referred to as an effort to remove the ambiguity in Canadian labour law, was never in force in Canada East,²¹⁵ and the *Combination Acts* were enacted in Britain well past the date when British laws stopped being enforceable in Canada (1792), and thus they too were never applicable in British North America.²¹⁶ There were of course ways to defeat nascent labour unions, the simplest and best known to Québec's working class was to simply refuse to incorporate them, something that worked very well in second period of waterfront workers (1830-1860). However, by the end of this period, groups like the longshoremen began using mutual aid societies as a transition toward actual unionism, gave up trying to incorporate unions, and simply created them with no permission or input from the government. What the *Trades Unions Act* did was provide a legal framework for something workers had been doing since the early 1860s.

The union that joined the IUSCC as Québec's local was known as the *Union de protection des charpentiers et calfats de navires de la ville de Québec* (UPCCNQ). Its constitution was approved by the IUSCC and published in 1867. The UPCCNQ was, like the IUSCC, a very democratic institution. Important matters were submitted to a vote: for example, the admission of new members (Article 2 Section 1) and the election of officers (Article 4, Sections 3 to 5). The union was equally democratic when it came

1837-77," *Labour/Le Travail* 27 (Spring 1991), 16. The quotation is from E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 508.

213 Paul Craven, "The Law of Master and Servant," in *Essays in the History of Canadian Law Vol 1*, ed. David H. Flaherty (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 182; "Workers' Conspiracies in Toronto 1854-72," in *Labour/Le Travail* 14 (Fall 1984), 49-70.

214 See, for example, Fecteau, *op cit*.

215 *An Act to regulate the duties between Master and Servant*, 10 & 11 Vic. (1847), c. 23. Bischoff, 184.

216 There were three *Combination Acts*: 1799, 1800, and 1825.

to punishments. When a member failed to pay his dues, he was allowed a hearing in front of a disciplinary board, and the proceedings were to be recorded (Article 5, Section 4).

A Christian funeral being of great importance to nineteenth century workers, the UPCCNQ doubled as a benefit society. The union provided funeral benefits of no less than \$5, although if the union was in financial trouble it could avoid paying altogether. The president of the union also had the responsibility of sending invitations for a deceased brother's funeral to all the members in the city (Article 3, Section 2; Article 6, Section 2).

The union used public humiliation as a deterrent. When a member did not pay his dues his negligence was made public in front of all his comrades, the carpenters and caulkers viewing the non-payment of union dues as an insult to *all* of them (Article 5, Section 1). Finally, like many contemporary unions, the organization banned the discussion of religious or political topics at its meetings (Article 5, Section 6). There are two likely reasons for this: it avoided divisive arguments and bickering and thus maintained their unity, and averted the discussion of socialism and other revolutionary doctrines which could compromise the union in the eyes of the law.

Morality played an important part in the construction of the UPCCNQ, as it did in most aspects of mid-nineteenth century society. The requirement for members to be morally virtuous is mentioned twice in the constitution (Article 1, Section 1; Article 2, Section 1). Surprisingly, the union also included a chaplain (Article 5, Section 1). This is very unusual, and is probably the only example, at this time, of a Québec union allowing the clergy to have any part in their proceedings. It is possible the ship carpenters knew a showdown was on the way with the shipbuilders, and looked for any

ally they could find. There is no way to be sure, however, and thus the question remains open.

One of the most important sections of the constitution involves matters of finance. The cost of union dues were set (Article 3, Section 1), credit was prohibited for members (Article 3, Section 3), and fines were fixed (Article 5, Section 2). Furthermore, a member that had not paid his dues could not be elected as an officer (Article 4, Section 2). Finally, the president of the UPCCNQ was invested with the authority to name an officer that would be charged with purchasing necessities such as lighting fuel for the union (Article 6, Section 6).

The establishment of the UPCCNQ, and its admission into the IUSCC, was an important moment in the history of Québec's ship carpenters. Despite being at the vanguard of the labour movement, the carpenters were very conservative in their early demands. The strike of 1840 only aimed to return wage levels to what they had been the year before. Similarly, the organizations put in place in 1841 and 1850, as well as the movement for public works in 1857, were all for the very limited purpose of preventing complete destitution. Their entry into the IUSCC demonstrates that they were on the one hand ambitious, and on the other hand worried. They needed support, and now, with a true trade union backed by a powerful international, the ship carpenters had the potential to actually *improve* their working conditions. The opportunity to do so presented itself quickly.

The Ship Carpenters Strike Again

By 1867, the second stage of growth that had begun around 1860 was over. As the

weather began to cool in early September, Québec's shipbuilders were already expecting to have a miserable year.²¹⁷ While the builders mused over their business prospects, in the shipyards of the Saint Charles and Saint Lawrence there was worry of a different sort. The ship carpenters who laboured there had seen their pay scales stagnate over the last few seasons, and they were now being paid considerably less than their contemporaries in Montréal.²¹⁸ Now, with winter approaching, they began to wonder how they would survive through what now appeared to be a depressed job market. However, unlike the situation a decade earlier, the carpenters had a weapon at their disposal: a trade union that was a member of a powerful international. But the merchant and shipbuilding élite in the city had never quite accepted the existence of trade unions in their midst, and tension was mounting in the shipyards.

On 23 September, a Master-Caulker by the name of T. Oliver was hired to help repair an Australian vessel at the Commissioner's Wharf. The ship carpenters and caulkers, realizing that Oliver was not a member of the union, decided to immediately walk off the job in protest. They had little choice in the matter, the constitution of the IUSCC did not allow them to work alongside non-union member. At noon, the walk-off order was given, and the shipyard was forced to close its doors. Oliver, however, defied the Union and remained at work. By evening the strikers had succeeded in intimidating him and forcing him to relinquish his job to a union man. The next morning, everybody was back at work at the Commissioner's Wharf.²¹⁹

The situation with Oliver was only a taste of things to come. At the same time as those involved in the brief strike of 23 September were returning to work, two more

²¹⁷ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 16 September 1867, 2.

²¹⁸ *L'Union Nationale*, 3 October 1867, 1.

²¹⁹ *Journal de Québec*, 25 September 1867, 2; *Quebec Mercury*, 25 September 1867, 2.

strikes broke out on both sides of the Saint Lawrence. On the 24th, ship carpenters at Valin's yard in Saint Roch and at Samson's in Lévis walked off the job. They communicated two demands to the shipbuilders. The first was to raise their daily wages from 90 cents to \$1.25.²²⁰ The second was more important: they demanded that builders stop the practice of firing workers who were found to be members of the union.²²¹ The shipbuilders offered a raise of 10 cents per day, but were silent on the issue of the firing of union members. The union quickly rejected the offer, and mobilized their entire membership to support the campaign.²²² Within days, 2,300 ship carpenters and caulkers were on strike, shutting down the shipbuilding industry and causing no small feeling of panic amongst the builders.²²³ On 27 September, the shipbuilders responded by uniting against the union and its demands. In a joint declaration, they announced that they would take legal action against anyone who tried to prevent men from working in their yards, and that they would not rehire any worker that did not sign a declaration that he had left the union.²²⁴

What was the cause of this massive conflict? The strike was ostensibly about wages, and until now, this had been the general consensus of historians that have noted its existence.²²⁵ But for it to last more than three months, there had to be other factors. The 1840 strike had lasted only 18 days before someone caved in, and the longshoremen's strike in 1866 only three. But in 1867, both sides were well entrenched and ready to fight each other to exhaustion. The carpenters were particularly well prepared: they had

220 *Le Canadien*, 25 September 1867, 2; *L'Union Nationale*, 30 October 1867, 3.

221 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 1 October 1867, 2. Employers did the same thing to cove labourers who worked on the waterfront. See Bischoff, 154.

222 *Le Canadien*, 27 September 1867, 2; *Journal de Québec*, 27 September, 2.

223 Hamelin, 19-20.

224 *Le Canadien*, 27 September 1867, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 26 September 1867, 2.

225 See for example, Jean Hamelin *et al. Répertoire des grèves dans la province de Québec au XIXe siècle* (Montréal: Presse de l'École des HEC, 1971); and Forsey, 79-80.

the support of the IUSCC, which supplied them with much needed funding, essential if they were to support their families during these three months.²²⁶ The long bureaucratic process necessary to receive these funds suggests that they were just waiting for an opportunity to fight the shipbuilders over the key issue of union recognition. The twin issues of wages and, more importantly, the Oliver situation on 23 September gave them their *cassus belli*. On the shipbuilders side, it was also clearly about union recognition. They would eventually offer the carpenters a wage increase of 20 cents a day, suggesting that on that issue they were willing to negotiate. However, they would not budge when it came to the open shop. T. F. (likely the timber merchant Thomas Fry), writing in the *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, explained it succinctly:

The battle has to be fought out some time or other; the sooner the better both for masters and men. Capital is a very sensitive thing, and without it master-builders can do nothing. It will fly from such scenes as we are now witnessing, and I trust the masters will remain firm in the stand they have taken, until that pestiferous thing called a "Trades Union" exists no longer in our midst.²²⁷

The strike was therefore only partially about wages: it was the issue of union recognition that explains its length and ferocity.

Riot at the Samsons' Shipyard

With the exception of a failed attempt by the builders to get the strikers arrested on charges of criminal conspiracy, things remained fairly calm during the first weeks of the strike. But the union had one major thorn in its side: several shipyards, but principally at Julien and Isidore Samson's, continued to operate using non-unionized labour.²²⁸ Both of

²²⁶ *Quebec Mercury*, 28 November 1867, 2.

²²⁷ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 2 December 1867, 2.

²²⁸ *L'Écho du Peuple*, 12 October 1867, 2.

these men, along with the Valin brothers, had been ship carpenters in the past, and Julien Samson had even been a founding member of the SABCVQ in 1841.²²⁹ However, by now, they had become bosses. On 24 October, the carpenters mobilized to clear out the scabs. Somewhere between five and six hundred strikers marched along the Saint Charles, visiting every shipyard that was hiring non-union labour. Upon reaching the Samsons' yard, a riot erupted between strikers and scabs, the latter refusing to leave work. The strikers decided at that point to force them off. A group of them climbed aboard a ship under construction, and in the midst of the confusion, the 57-year-old François Martineau, another founding member of the SABCVQ, fell off the scaffolding to his death. This tragedy ended the riot.²³⁰

The details regarding the death of Martineau were initially unclear. But on 26 October, the Coroner's Report was published. It concluded that

Que le 24e jour d'octobre présent, le dit François Martineau est tombé accidentellement de l'échafaud d'un navire en construction dans le chantier de MM. Julien et Isidore Samson, recevant par cette chute des blessures mortelles dont il est mort le même jour ; et le jury est d'opinion que la plateforme de l'échafaud autour du dit navire, et qui a causé la chute du dit François Martineau, n'était pas suffisamment sûre et aurait dû être liée à l'échafaud par des clous.²³¹

Although the coroner concluded that it was an accident, Québec's newspapers disputed the verdict. According to the *Mercury*, the death was caused by “mob violence, which, if not quickly arrested by the authorities, will soon become supreme.” (Illustration 3.2)²³² Furthermore, “notwithstanding the verdict of the inquest, these men are homicides,

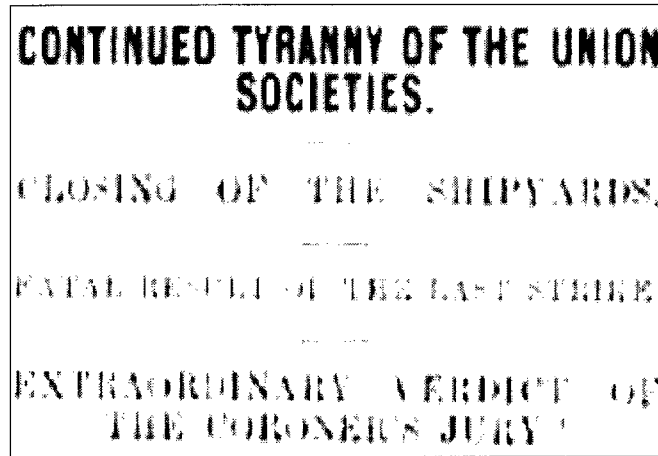
229 BANQ, Minutier du notaire Joseph Laurin 1839-1888, *Constitution de la société amicale et bienveillante des chapentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*, 5 January 1841.

230 *Journal de Québec*, 25 October 1867, 2; *Quebec Mercury*, 25 October 1867, 2; *Le Canadien*, 25 October 1867, 2; BANQ, Minutier du notaire Joseph Laurin 1839-1888, *Constitution de la société amicale et bienveillante des chapentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*, 5 January 1841.

231 *Quebec Mercury*, 26 October 1867, 2; *Journal de Québec*, 26 October 1867, 2.

232 *Quebec Mercury*, 26 October 1867, 2.

**Illustration 3.2: Publication of the Coroner's Report
(as seen by the *Mercury*)**



Source: *Quebec Mercury*, 26 October 1867, 2.

morally, if not legally [...]”²³³ *L'Union Nationale*, organ of the *Grande Association de Montréal*, for its part argued that “[c]’est la faute des ouvriers en grève, disent les journaux officieux. C’est la faute du système, dit le bon sens. S’il n’y avait pas eu d’injustice, il n’y aurait pas eu de grève, et par conséquent, Martineau n’eut pas eu cette occasion de perdre la vie.”²³⁴ On both sides of the conflict, the death of François Martineau was exploited in the crucial war for public opinion.

The city began to be worried about the possibility of another outburst of violence. On the evening of 24 October, only hours after the riot at the Samsons' shipyard, the chief of police made the decision to arm all his officers with revolvers.²³⁵ Three days later, on the night of 27-28 October, the deputy police chief, M. Reynolds, with a force of some 30 policemen, went to Saint Roch to arrest 20 carpenters suspected of being the leaders of the anti-scab riot at Samson's yard. Two of the carpenters managed to evade

²³³ *Quebec Mercury*, 28 October 1867, 2.

²³⁴ *L'Union Nationale*, 4 November 1867, 3.

²³⁵ AVQ, QC1-08/1410, *Police Board* (1867-68), entry for 24 December 1867.

the police, but the 18 others were taken in.²³⁶ The next morning, over a thousand ship carpenters, members of the union, assembled in front of the courthouse. They demanded that the police release the arrested carpenters, or they threatened to break in and liberate the prisoners themselves.²³⁷ The mayor panicked and called in the militia. Two detachments, one from the Rifle Brigade and another from the 30th Rifles, came to protect the courthouse. Jacques-Philippe Rhéaume and Marc-Aurèle Plamondon, who represented the accused, also demanded the conditional release of the accused, but the judge refused on the grounds that two of them were still not apprehended. The prisoners were thereafter escorted to the prison by the Mayor and a detachment of soldiers with fixed bayonets.²³⁸ The next day, the prisoners were returned to the courthouse. Escorted by 30 Hussars with sabres in hand, the carpenters were marched in front of four companies of riflemen charged with keeping the peace. The large crowd gathered at the courthouse was peaceable, however.²³⁹ The 19 accused were then released on \$200 bail each, with an additional bail of \$100 to ensure their appearance in court on charges of riot.²⁴⁰

Following the riot, the death of Martineau, and the demonstration before the courthouse, things calmed down briefly. Some of the papers even began suggesting that perhaps the union and the builders were nearing an agreement.²⁴¹ However, none of the problems that caused the strike had gone away, and the conflict would soon resume with

236 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 29 October 1867, 2; *Journal de Québec*, 28 October 1867, 2. The prisoners were Magloire Elois, Narcisse Bougie, Marcelle Laroche, Michel Guay, Francois Beaubien, Louis Nadeau, Antoine Moisan, Pierre Roberge, Louis Bussiere, Xavier Poulin, William Gunner, Christopher Lachance, Noel Petit, Cleophas Torrens, Joseph Richard, Bernabe Julien, Adolphe Grenier, and George Hebert. None of them were part of the strike leadership.

237 *Journal de Québec*, 28 October 1867, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 29 October 1867, 2.

238 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 29 October 1867, 2; *Journal de Québec*, 28 October 1867, 2.

239 *Quebec Mercury*, 29 October 1867, 2; *Le Canadien*, 30 October 1867, 2.

240 *Quebec Mercury*, 28 October 1867, 2; *Le Canadien*, 30 October 1867, 2.

241 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 13 November 1867, 2; *Journal de Québec*, 12 November 1867, 2,

an even greater ferocity.

Québec Under Siege

On the evening of 21 November, more than 3000 people attended a meeting at the Salle Jacques Cartier. Augustin Gagnon, the 47 year old president of the UPCCNQ, was the first to speak. He reiterated the determination of the union to obtain a fixed wage. After this brief speech, Gagnon ceded the floor to guest of honour of the evening, Médéric Lanctôt from Montréal. Lanctôt, one of the organizers of the *Grande Association de Montréal*, was already an important leader in the French Canadian labour movement. He argued for a compromise between workers and employers, and also advocated the construction of a dry dock that would be owned and operated by the carpenters. After Lanctôt's speech, John LeMesurier, a leading businessman and one of the candidates for Québec's upcoming Mayoral election, rose to speak. He pronounced himself in favour of the carpenters' cause, but also asked the union to be reasonable in its demands. At the end of the assembly, the 3000 participants unanimously adopted the motion to build a communal dry dock, with \$10 shares payable through work. Morale was high as the strike entered its third month.²⁴²

Although his speech was anything but revolutionary, Lanctôt's arrival provided ammunition to the newspapers' attempts to paint the strikers as dangerous radicals. According to the *Journal de Québec*, Lanctôt was “un espèce de Danton au petit pied” that was “[a]nimé d’une haine féroce pour nos institutions.”²⁴³ The *Morning Chronicle* accused him of wanting “the elevation of the working-man by means of rattening,

²⁴² *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 22 November 1867, 2. Gagnon's age was estimated with using the PHSVQ database for the 1871 census.

²⁴³ *Journal de Québec*, 23 November 1867, 2.

Illustration 3.3: Médéric Lanctôt

Source: *L'opinion publique*, Vol. 8 No. 34, p. 399 (23 August 1877).

strikes and organised violence against masters.”²⁴⁴ *Le Canadien* suggested that Lanctôt “a joué le rôle de démagogue d’un bout à l’autre de sa harangue.”²⁴⁵ The *Quebec Mercury*, for its part, suspected that he came “to inflame the passions of the populace and to excite them to a spirit of sedition and treason.”²⁴⁶

By 26 November, the strike had become so important that the Lieutenant-Governor of Québec, Sir Narcisse-Fortunat Belleau, felt forced to intervene. He convened the

²⁴⁴ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 25 November 1867, 2.

²⁴⁵ *Le Canadien*, 22 November 1867, 2.

²⁴⁶ *Quebec Mercury*, 28 November 1867, 2.

shipbuilders at his home and discussed the possibility of finding some compromise, but was quickly convinced that “tout rapprochement entre les maîtres et les employés étaient, pour le présent, impossible, et que ses efforts se briseraient contre l’entêtement des ouvriers en grève.”²⁴⁷ While the builders dined with the Lieutenant-Governor, on the carpenters' side things were more dire. Although spirits were high, by late-November the union was beginning to run out of resources. The IUSCC had just sent them some funding, accompanied by a letter advising that they would not be receiving any more. The ship carpenters were now on their own. Many of them began to go back to work, risking the ire of their colleagues and being forced to accept wages far lower than they were making before the strike began.²⁴⁸

The union began to worry about the unity of its membership, and decided to take action. Using tactics inspired by the New York shipwrights' of 1866, they quickly made preparations to close, with force if necessary, all the shipyards where scab labour was present.²⁴⁹ On 9 December, hundreds of carpenters assembled in Saint Roch. The union then sent patrols to monitor the movement of Québec's small police force. These patrols reported to the leadership through an elaborate system of signals.²⁵⁰ Between 9 and 12 December, the crowd was, according to the *Mercury*, the masters of the city.²⁵¹ Under a banner carrying aloft the decapitated head of a calf, hundreds of ship carpenters visited, one by one, all the shipyards along the Saint Charles. Anyone found working illegally was severely beaten, their tools smashed, and the yard forcibly closed.²⁵²

247 *Journal de Québec*, 27 November 1867, 2.

248 *Quebec Mercury*, 28 November 1867, 2. *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 3 December 1867, 2.

249 According to Thomas Fry: “the machinery of the strike was borrowed from New York, some French Canadians having brought it from there.” (Select Committee, 13.)

250 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 11 December 1867, 2.

251 *Quebec Mercury*, 10 December 1867, 2.

252 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 10 December 1867, 2; *Quebec Mercury*, 10 December 1867, 2; *Journal de Québec*, 9 December 1867, 2.

On 11 December, the union sent a delegation to the offices of the *Journal de Québec*. They ordered the paper to cease the publication of defamatory articles about the strikers, and declared that they would return should they resume their anti-union tirades.²⁵³ The crowd then proceeded to the office of M. Ross, a well known businessman. Luckily for him, he was absent at the time.²⁵⁴ The carpenters having full control of the streets, many merchants and bankers began to hire private security to defend their property.²⁵⁵ The *pro tempore* Mayor Joseph-Édouard Cauchon, angered by the police's seeming incapacity to keep the peace, ordered the Chief of Police to sleep in the police station and take immediate action if “anything indicating the beginning of a riot comes to their knowledge.”²⁵⁶

The morning of 12 December, the union called another assembly to discuss the strike. According to the *Mercury*, many participants were so hungry that they were willing to risk incarceration to get bread for their families. The same day came another blow when John LeMesurier, denouncing the riots, publicly distanced himself from the union.²⁵⁷ On 13 December, warrants were issued for the arrest of 18 carpenters suspected of violence in the latest riot. They all turned themselves in and were subsequently released on bail.²⁵⁸ The situation having gotten so out of control, the union decided on the 15th to stop using violence or intimidation to enforce the strike order. They also declared themselves willing to go to an arbitration mediated by the Québec Board of Trade.²⁵⁹

253 *Journal de Québec*, 11 December 1867, 2; *Quebec Mercury*, 11 December 1867, 2.

254 *Le Canadien*, 11 December 1867, 2.

255 *Quebec Mercury*, 11 December 1867, 2.

256 AVQ, QC1-08/1410, *Police Board* (1867-68), entry for 11 December 1867.

257 *Quebec Mercury*, 12 December 1867, 2.

258 *Journal de Québec*, 14 December 1867, 2.

259 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 16 December 1867, 2; *Le Canadien*, 16 December 1867, 2.

Dénouement

The leaders of the union, Augustin Gagnon, Charles Jobin, John Irving, and Elzéar Auger, drafted a letter to the Board of Trade asking them to intervene.²⁶⁰ They explained that

We do not pretend that our proceedings, in a legal point of view, have been all regular and correct, but our trials and privations have been extremely great, more severe than the public is aware of, and of a nature different from those which the persons with whom we are at issue have had to contend. [...] If those under whom we work will be kind enough to meet us in the same in the same spirit of conciliation, we are convinced that the friendly interposition of the Board will be productive of beneficial results for all the interested, - results which we do not see it is possible to attain in another way.²⁶¹

The Board agree to see the delegation of carpenters, but only as individuals, not as part of the union.²⁶² If the carpenters still believed that the Board could be trusted to be impartial, its persistent refusal to recognize the union should have been a red flag. On 24 December, the builders Henry Dinning, Henry Warner, Jean-Élie Gingras, William H. Baldwin, J. J. Nesbitt, Guillaume Charland, Laughlan McKay, and Toussaint Valin were received by the Board of Trade. Dinning moved, seconded by McKay and carried unanimously by the shipbuilders present, that they would agree to rehire all carpenters that were members of the union, upon a “simple declaration that they had left it”.²⁶³

Two days later, a delegation of seven carpenters was received by the Board. These included the president Augustin Gagnon, Charles Jobin, Joseph Richard, Elzéar Auger, Charles Knowles, and William Rusk. The carpenters were then read the prepared

260 BANQ, 1960-01-152/2, Quebec Board of Trade Collection, Minutes of Council Meeting, 21 December 1867.

261 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 28 December 1867, 2.

262 BANQ, 1960-01-152/2, Quebec Board of Trade Collection, Minutes of Council Meeting, 21 December 1867.

263 BANQ, 1960-01-152/2, Quebec Board of Trade Collection, Minutes of Council Meeting, 24 December 1867.

decision of the Board. It concluded that although wages were indeed too low to support the ship carpenters and their families, the solution nonetheless lay in the free market: “the only remedy the Council see, at present, is either for some of the men to turn temporarily to other employments, or remove for a time to some other place, so as to lessen the supply of labor.” Although the Board was sympathetic to mutual aid societies organized purely for benevolent purposes, “it is evident [...] that the organization of the Union has gone far beyond these, and has been used for the promotion of objects altogether illegal, violent in their character, and subversive alike of the true interests of both masters and men.” The Board decided to follow the suggestions of the shipbuilders, “who exhibited a conciliatory spirit,” and implored the carpenters to give up their demands:

the Council are impressed with the fact that they [the shipbuilders] are unanimous in refusing to employ any men, as long as they remain members of the Union, and the Council would only be deceiving you, if they did not tell you that they believe it to be perfectly hopeless to attempt to alter this resolution. [...] The Council earnestly advise you and your associates to abandon your present organization, and accept the proposals of the builders, thus leaving every man free to make the most he can of his labor, and every master free to employ such men as may suit him.²⁶⁴

The assembled carpenters, seeing their last hopes crushed, refused and defiantly walked out of the assembly, leaving behind the Board's judgment on the table.²⁶⁵

Meanwhile, the *pro tempore* Mayor had had enough with the police's inability to control the streets. The chief was informed that he would be replaced on 1 May 1868, but that if any other riots broke out until then he would be immediately fired.²⁶⁶ On 17 December, Québec's mayoral elections were finally held, resulting in a clear victory for

²⁶⁴ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 28 December 1867, 2.

²⁶⁵ BANQ, 1960-01-152/2, Quebec Board of Trade Collection, Minutes of Council Meeting, 26 and 27 December 1867.

²⁶⁶ AVQ, QC1-08/1410, *Police Board* (1867-68), entry for 19 December 1867.

John LeMesurier. Even though he had distanced himself from the carpenters' cause after the riots of 9-12 December, the *Journal de Québec* was livid: “la victoire du maire était le triomphe de l’union des charpentiers contre M. Cauchon !” and “la majorité des voix enregistrées pour M. Lemesurier appartient à des gens qui n’ont aucun droit de voter.”²⁶⁷

By the end of December, both sides were exhausted. The Prime Minister of the Province of Québec, Pierre-Joseph-Olivier Chauveau, visited the city and asked Jean-Élie Gingras to reopen his shipyard. The Prime Minister promised Gingras protection by police officers armed with firearms.²⁶⁸ On 23 December the shipyards reopened, but few carpenters returned to work, as the builders refused to rehire any worker that did not immediately renounce the union, something they still refused to do.²⁶⁹ But by 30 December, exhausted and starving, most workers reluctantly abandoned the union and returned to work.²⁷⁰ On 1 January the union finally had no choice but to accept the terms advocated by the Board of Trade. The strike was over.²⁷¹

The events of the fall of 1867 left a profound legacy. It led to the firing of the chief of police, and the arming of the city's police force. The support of the UPCCNQ helped John LeMesurier win the mayoral election that December, but in the end this paid them few dividends. The new government of a federal Canada felt it “expedient”, following the events of December 1867, to enact new laws to keep the peace, passing *An Act respecting Riots and Riotous Assemblies* in May 1868.²⁷² This Act harmonized the laws

267 *Journal de Québec*, 18-19 December 1867, 2.

268 *Le Canadien*, 22 December 1867, 2.

269 *Quebec Mercury*, December 1867, 2; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 24 December 1867.

270 *Journal de Québec*, 30 December 1867, 2.

271 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 1 January 1868, 2; *Quebec Mercury*, 1 January 1868, 2; *Le Canadien*, 1 January 1868, 2.

272 31 Victoria, Cap. 70 (1868), *An Act respecting Riots and Riotous Assemblies*.

against riot in the four Canadian provinces, giving new powers to police and government. However, no ship carpenter who was arrested for the riots in October and December 1867 could be tried under the new bill, as “such prosecution be commenced within twelve months after the offence committed” (Article 8), and the Act would only take effect on 1 January 1869 (Article 9). Was this an olive branch to the workers who had endured so much? We cannot know.

The greatest consequences on the strike, however, lay on the ship carpenters and more generally on the shipbuilding industry as a whole. Most of the workers were forced to abandon their union, although there is fragmentary evidence that it continued to exist in some form. More importantly, they had thrown all their resources into the strike and lost, and were never able to mount another significant action against capital. As for the shipbuilders, whose victory was short lived at best considering the low prospects the market showed that year, they too entered a period of uncertainty. The construction of sailing vessels had begun its inexorable decline, a steady retreat that soon turned into a rout. What, or who, was to blame? As we shall soon see, fingers pointed all too easily at the ship carpenters who were accused of, through their greed, dooming them all. What could be done to forestall the inevitable? No one really knew. In the crisp, cold air of the winter of 1868, the twilight of shipbuilding in the *Vieille Capitale* was approaching.

Chapter 4: Twilight of Shipbuilding in Québec, 1868-1893

The immediate difficulty is this : shipbuilding is in a state of transition ; wooden ships are nearly out of date, and new principles of construction are adopted. The favourite ship in Great Britain at present is the composite, but the very few builders here who have some means, are afraid to risk them in building ships the cost of which they cannot estimate, and merchants for the same reason are shy of advancing money to those who have no means.

-Henry Fry, 1868²⁷³

In the aftermath of the strike of 1867, the shipbuilding industry began to decline at a precipitous rate. What seemed at first to be another cyclical slowdown quickly became a rout, leading to an endless stream of questions as everybody tried to figure out what was actually going on. Whatever was to blame for the industry's woes, one thing was clear: an era was passing in Québec, and those that had spent their lives constructing sailing vessels would soon have to turn to other things. This chapter describes the last decades of the shipbuilding industry in Québec, and what happened to the ship carpenters that could no longer ply their trade in the empty shipyards of Québec's waterfront.

Decline and Death

As we have seen, Canada had several advantages when it came to the construction of wooden sailing vessels, not the least of which was the ready supply of cheap timber from the hinterland. Québec, as the most important timber port on the Atlantic coast, was particularly well suited for the trade. However, by the time of the transition to iron and steam, Canadian shipbuilders found themselves unable to compete with Britain and the United States, both countries with significant domestic production of iron, something

273 Testimony of Henry Fry before the Select Committee, 13.

Canada at this time lacked. As Richard Rice notes, iron ships “found no echo in British America.”²⁷⁴

The decline of shipbuilding in Québec came in two stages: the first began around 1867 and ended in 1875, and can be characterized as the slow erosion of export markets as the Americans returned to the world market after the Civil War, and the British significantly expanded their production of iron vessels. The second stage began in 1875, turning the retreat into a rout. During this stage, the Norwegians began to make huge inroads in the Atlantic shipping trade. Rarely purchasing new builds, the Norwegians tended to sail aboard cheap second-hand ships, significantly lowering the cost of their operations and making newer, more expensive Canadian ships harder to sell. Worse still, due in part to high wages back home, the Canadian merchant fleet was by then mainly operating from English ports. Canada's chief exports were also changing, switching from timber to animals and animal products, commodities that were best served by steam vessels.

During this final stage of decline, the traditional relationship between shipbuilder and timber merchant disappeared completely, and Québec wooden shipbuilding became completely uncompetitive vis-à-vis the British and Americans following the depression of 1878-79. Furthermore, British iron ships became less and less expensive due to technological innovations, and because of an acute lack of capital, it was unlikely that any Canadian shipbuilder “could afford to invest in the technology necessary to break through cost barriers.” Québec's labour force also lacked the necessary skills to construct the new ships, and all iron would have had to be imported. These problems were such that by 1893 the last wooden sailing vessel was launched from Québec, and an era had ended.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁴ Rice, 86-89.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 89-97.

Blame

At the behest of Québec's shipbuilders, in the spring of 1868 the House of Commons set up a select committee to investigate the condition of the shipbuilding industry in Canada. Headed by Pierre-Gabriel Huot, the committee interviewed thirteen people, eleven of which worked in Québec. These included the shipbuilders Narcisse Rosa, Ph. Labbé,²⁷⁶ William H. Baldwin, Guillaume Charland, Thomas Dunn, Etienne Samson, and Thomas H. Oliver, the customs collector J.W. Dunscombe, and the merchants J. Bell Forsyth, J. Patton, and Henry Fry. The select committee asked them a series of twenty questions, most of them regarding two subjects: first, the usefulness of enacting protective duties to help protect the industry; second, the possibility of constructing composite ships – wooden sailing vessels that were built around iron frames, combining the best characteristics of both building materials in a transitional design between wooden ships and ironclads. However, the most interesting question was number three: “Are you of opinion that that industry is not as active and prosperous now as it formerly was in the place where you reside: and if so, please point out the general causes of that state of affairs?”²⁷⁷ This gives us a fascinating opportunity to look at what contemporaries thought the problem was. Not surprisingly, blame was thrown in every direction, but we can divide them into four categories: lack of capital, Lloyd's classification, the ship carpenters' strike of 1867, and finally the advent of iron vessels.

Many builders complained that they had difficulty obtaining capital to invest in new builds. According to the testimony of Narcisse Rosa, there was a monopoly of credit in Québec, to such an extent that only one man – he does not mention whom – controlled all

²⁷⁶ There is no record of a Ph. Labbé in Québec, thus this was probably Pierre Labbé.

²⁷⁷ Select Committee, 2.

the money shipbuilders had available. This, according to Rosa, “compels the builder to comply with his terms”, which he believed were rarely beneficial. Thomas Oliver, for his part, pointed out the high rate of interest and the “heavy commission” of lenders, which combined with low prices on the British market, caused the major problems of the industry.²⁷⁸

Another frequent complaint by the interviewees was the way the Lloyd's Register classified Québec ships. The London based *Register of Shipping* was established in 1760 as a direct response to the needs of maritime insurance companies. A classification system was required to evaluate the quality of vessels and thus the risk to insurers. In 1834, it merged with a competing registry company to form the *Permanent Committee of Lloyd's Register of British and Foreign Shipping*, better known as the Lloyd's Register. The Lloyd's classified ships with ratings ranging from “A” for the best builds, followed by “AE”, “E”, and “I”, the last being third-class vessels only appropriate for short voyages. The ship's equipment (anchors, cables, etc.) was given a simple rating of 1 if it was satisfactory, and 2 if it was not. Finally, a ship was given a number of years before it had to be reevaluated.²⁷⁹ For example, a ship classed 10 years A1 was a first rate vessel with satisfactory equipment that could be expected to remain at that class for 10 years.

The classifications for Québec ships was a constant irritant for shipbuilders.²⁸⁰ When interviewed by the Select Committee, Labbé, Forsyth, Dunn, Samson, and Fry all agreed that the classification system used by the Lloyd's was flawed and put their ships at a huge

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-10.

²⁷⁹ Maril, 195-197.

²⁸⁰ The Québec Board of Trade was constantly complaining about Lloyd's classification, going so far as to have the builder Pierre Valin write a letter explaining in detail how their ships are built and why the rating should be improved (BANQ, 1960-01-152/2, Quebec Board of Trade Collection, Minutes of Council Meeting, 21 January 1853 and 22 March 1853). For more examples of the Board's campaigns, see the Council meetings of 13 April 1842, and 25 January 1855.

disadvantage compared with similar vessels constructed in Britain. Labbé argued that the system was “unjust”: according to Lloyd's, their vessels would usually receive 7 years A1. Forsyth agreed, saying that their classification should be extended one or two years, and that this would make them more profitable. Lloyd's would also give a greater rating to iron ships, usually up to 12 or 14 years. Henry Fry explained that this was because “they are stronger, rarely leak, and are insured at a lower rate of premium.”²⁸¹

Patton identified the “injurious combination of the workmen” as a major cause for the decline.²⁸² Interestingly, he was the only one to mention the strike as a cause for the decline, but it would become an important topic in the years to come. By 1873, a pamphlet describing industry in Québec had no qualms saying that the problems in the industry were directly the fault of the ship carpenters in 1867.²⁸³ Narcisse Rosa, who remained quiet as he stood before the committee, would later reminisce about those greedy workers who dared to oppose the builders that year.²⁸⁴ The strike had visible shaken them, however. Many also admitted that wages were actually very low in the autumn of 1867, even below the cost of living, and far lower than the equivalent in England.²⁸⁵ This was an extraordinary admission for the shipbuilders and merchants, those who had so vocally argued only a few months before that they were paying fair wages.

The most common complaint concerned the new iron vessels being produced in England. William Baldwin was rather pessimistic about any future upswing in the Québec

281 Select Committee on Merchant Vessels, Canada, *Journal of the House of Commons*, 1867-68, I, App. 11, p. 4-13.

282 *Ibid.*, 8.

283 *Annuaire du commerce et de l'industrie pour 1873* (Québec, 1873), 1.

284 Rosa, 14-15, see also the criticism of his book in our introduction.

285 Select Committee on Merchant Vessels, Canada, *Journal of the House of Commons*, 1867-68, I, App. 11, p. 3-11.

shipbuilding industry's fortunes. He told the committee that the trade “is not as active, nor ever will be, as regards wooden built vessels ; because this description of vessels is becoming more unsalable every year on the European markets : its place being taken by composite ships.” Patton, Charland, Dunn, and Samson all agreed with the assessment that Québec could not compete with the new iron-hulled ships sliding out of the shipyards in Great Britain.²⁸⁶ This is historically the most common explanation for the decline in shipbuilding in Québec and elsewhere but, as we shall soon see, it is not the most convincing.

Most of the other questions asked by the committee touched on ways the industry could be saved. As we have seen, as late as 1890, former shipbuilders like Narcisse Rosa were still convinced that wooden shipbuilding could be profitable. The main suggestion was to begin constructing composite ships. Fry, Labbé, and Oliver all believed that the building of composites could be “easily” introduced in Québec. The main problem, however, would be obtaining high-grade iron and skilled shipwrights who could install the frames. Fry considered that “it would be best to import from Liverpool, Glasgow, and Wales, all the iron in a prepared state.” All the imported materials would cost less than \$3 a tonne, and the ship could easily be sold for \$4. Fry did not however consider the cost of domestic materials or labour costs, making his scheme rather unrealistic. Oliver generally agreed, saying that a removal of existing duties would suffice.²⁸⁷

Fry and Oliver categorically rejected any protection or duty, dedicated as they were to free trade. The shipbuilder Labbé, saw government intervention as essential if the construction of composites was to be undertaken. For Labbé, “it would be necessary for

286 Select Committee on Merchant Vessels, Canada, *Journal of the House of Commons*, 1867-68, I, App. 11, p. 5-10.

287 *Ibid.*, 5-8.

the Government to extend protection in the shape of a bounty to persons building such ships with our timber,” but for the project to truly be viable, Québec needed “manufactories at Quebec for the manufacture of iron in the shape of knees, ribs, &c., to be used in shipbuilding [...]” However, he gave no details of how this could be achieved. The Montréal shipbuilder S. Cantin noted that even the industrial metropolis of Canada did not have the necessary resources to manufacture the materials for constructing composite ships.²⁸⁸ But regardless of whether or not these ships could be built, the introduction of iron vessels was not the main factor causing the decline of the shipbuilding industry in Québec. Rather, some fundamental structural problems were at work.

Structural Problems in Québec's Shipbuilding Industry

We have mentioned time and again that the key structural weakness of the Québec shipbuilding industry was its dependence on exports to Britain. So long as builders could sell their vessels in England, the industry functioned brilliantly. Some of the men that stood before the select committee in the spring of 1868 were close to understanding the problem. Fry, Oliver, Rosa, and Labbé all pointed out that if export markets were expanded, they would all benefit greatly. According to Labbé, “shipbuilding would be greatly developed if the builders and owners had the right of selling on different 'markets, [sic] or to other nations other than England.”²⁸⁹ What they did not understand was that any opening of markets would be too little too late. The truth was that the industry had been declining for some time, but the question of for how long this had been the case has

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4-7.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3-11.

been the subject of some disagreement among historians.

The key historiographical debate is between Albert Faucher and Richard Rice. Faucher was the first historian to study the decline and collapse of shipbuilding in Québec. In his landmark article *The Decline of Shipbuilding at Quebec in the Nineteenth Century*, he argued that the growth in the second period (1860-1870) was artificial in nature, unlike the earlier upswing in the early-1850s. The true decline of shipbuilding could instead be traced to the commercial collapse of 1857. The growth in iron ships in the 1860s was important, but was one of many causes, and it may have “blurred the picture and the other factors were lost to sight.” But any “attempt to interpret the decline solely in terms of iron, steam, and steel, or labour and sales methods in the British market sound quite admissible, but they rest on the assumption that shipbuilding at Quebec was structurally affected in the late sixties only instead of ten years earlier.” The crest of 1854 could be attributed to “a steady increase in the carrying trade, marked by cycles that reflected business conditions.” This and the Crimean War created a steady demand on the British market and Québec built fast ships to ferry troops to the Black Sea. However, by 1855 there were entirely too many ships and they were being sold below cost. Thus according to Faucher, the Panic of 1857 aggravated an already fragile situation and caused a collapse, as we have seen.²⁹⁰

The crest of 1864 rested on far shakier foundations, resulting from a brief upswing resulting from the American Civil War. In 1865, while builders still launched vessels at an impressive rate, the Québec Board of Trade was already convinced that there was something wrong in the system. The reason shipbuilding was in such a precarious position, even during the glory years of 1864-65, was “that the locational advantages of

290 Faucher, 197-199.

shipbuilding at Quebec had undergone a profound change, as a consequence of a modification in trade channels.” The good years had been in part due to Québec's advantageous position as the key port in the Saint Lawrence, which made it an entry point for immigrants and the export centre for the North American timber trade. Both of the situations had changed by the early 1860s, meaning that Québec lost its competitive edge, causing a decline in shipbuilding, even during the second stage of growth. The timber trade was already declining in the 1860s as Great Britain was looking to new sources, while a great deal of the trade was being redirected toward Albany, New York. Even without this shifting in the patterns of the timber trade, Montréal, increasingly industrialized, was now far better suited in the trade in sawed lumber, a development which even further redirected the trade away from Québec. In 1860 the British duty on timber went down to 1 shilling a load for hewn or 2 shillings per load sawed, removing any preferential advantage that the Province of Canada had in the trade. The carrying trade also began to definitively shift toward the major American East Coast ports like New York and Boston, and the immigrants followed in their wake, ending Québec's position as a major entry point into the continent. The true start of the Age of Iron can be traced to the White Star Line's first iron clipper, launched in 1869, but by then, Québec's shipbuilders were “out of the race.”²⁹¹

Richard Rice, writing decades later, took issue with Faucher's argument. Although Rice agreed that the industry's decline took place significantly earlier than contemporaries thought, he placed its start a decade earlier than Faucher. He pointed out that by the period 1837-46, British America “held a commanding third position in international merchant-ship construction, a relative position that was thenceforce only to weaken” The

291 *Ibid.*, 200-203.

peak in production relative to British and American shipbuilding came two decades before the absolute summit (1864), and three decades before the final decline. Rice suggested that this indicated “an even earlier appearance, than Faucher has suggested, of structural changes that worked against British America.” The repeal of the Navigation Acts removed the shelter that Quebec shipbuilders had enjoyed, and left them exposed to foreign competition. The British bought a greater share of American ships. However, the coincidence of two huge cyclical upturns (1850-1854 and 1862-1865) masked these problems. In absolute terms production was increasing, but Canada's market share was diminishing. The true beginning of the decline could thus be identified as 1846, the year of the repeal of the Corn Laws and the final victory of free trade forces. From then on, although the size of the pie may have expanded from time to time, Québec's slice kept shrinking. When the pie began to shrink, Québec wound up with an empty plate.²⁹²

New Horizons

The decline and collapse of the shipbuilding between 1867 and 1893 had huge repercussions for all those that had toiled away year after year constructing wooden sailing vessels, especially ship carpenters. By the 1870s, after having lost their last major struggle to against the shipbuilders, they now had to deal with their trade's complete disappearance. What options did these highly skilled craftsmen have as the shipyards began to empty in the 1870s? What would become of them?

By 1870, many ship carpenters began to recycle themselves as longshoremen. This was a trade the carpenters already knew well, as many of them had worked at the docks during the summers. But now they came permanently. The Irish had until then dominated

²⁹² Rice, 29-33.

the *Quebec Ship Labourers' Benevolent Society*, but the influx of French Canadian ship carpenters shifted the ethnic balance. Quickly, four of the five chapters gained a francophone majority, notably the powerful Local No. 5 (Saint Roch / Saint Sauveur). This created a great deal of resentment among the Irish, who jealously guarded their control over the longshoreman trade.²⁹³ The carpenters entered the longshoreman trade in two waves. The first began around the time of the cyclical slowdown at the end of the 1860s. Although the timber trade was in general decline, it was temporarily buoyed by the massive export of wooden beams. Bolstered by the influx of ship carpenters, the French Canadians began to demand a bigger share of the shrinking demand for longshoremen, hitherto dominated by the Irish. They asked the stevedores to split the workload equally between the two ethnic groups, a proposition which was resolutely refused by the Irish-dominated QSLBS.²⁹⁴

By 1874, the longshoremen had succeeded in imposing their wage-scales and setting up a closed shop. However, by 1877, timber exports were declining rapidly, and the French Canadian majority began to accuse the union of stifling the market with their high wages and rigid rules. In July 1879, Local 5 (Saint Roch, Saint Sauveur) of the QSLBS decided to secede from the mother union, claiming that they were unjustly treated. The Society's enemies, mainly the timber merchants and the stevedores, took advantage of the schism and began to mobilize. The stevedores once again tried to organize, setting up the Stevedores' Benevolent Association a few weeks later. The Association was blessed with a highly experienced secretary in Charles Knowles, a former ship carpenter who was one of the leaders of the 1867 strike.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ Bischoff, *Les débardeurs...*, 252-253.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 257-258.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 258-263.

Meanwhile, the French Canadian secessionists from the QSLBS began to organize too. Supported by the former shipbuilder Jacques Blais of Cap-Blanc, the secessionists created a rival association known as the *Union Canadienne* (UC). Former ship carpenters were crucial in setting up the UC, bringing with them a wealth of experience and giving them their first president and secretary, Édouard Lachance and Jacques Wiseman respectfully.²⁹⁶ The tensions between the two unions however quickly came to a head, culminating in brutal riots in August 1879, and May 1880.²⁹⁷

Although the ship carpenters of the first wave managed to find work in the longshoremen trade, those of the second wave, arriving after the shipbuilding industry's collapse, were not so lucky. At the same time as carpenters attempted to find work unloading ships, the timber export market began to decline rapidly, while Montréal began to take a bigger share of what was left. Many of Québec's merchants began to see their fortunes in the metropolis, and moved their operations there.²⁹⁸ The competition from the Norwegians also contributed to this decline, as their crews were paid far less than their Canadian and British counterparts, and were often forced to unload the ships themselves, undercutting Québec's longshoremen.²⁹⁹ During these years, many carpenters could thus not find work at the port, and were forced into public works, barely surviving on their minuscule wages. Such was their misery that in June of 1878 they joined other workers in a massive strike.

The Last Gasp: The General Strike of 1878

In early June 1878, Québec's papers were concentrating on one issue: the provincial

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 262-265.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 266-276.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 244-146.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 234.

election of late May had ended with 32 Liberals and 32 Conservatives, with a single conservative MPP supporting for the incumbent Liberal Premier, Henri-Gustave Joly. Joly gave him the coveted speaker of the house position and managed to form a government, which led to no end of public debate.³⁰⁰ But for those labouring on public work, the most pressing issue was not political but economic: they had been working for a pittance, some making as low as 50 cents a day. These were little more than starvation wages. But some politicians did notice their plight, and Arthur Murray, an MPP, wrote a letter to Joly demanding that something be done for them.³⁰¹

On 3 June, the workers employed in the construction of the Department Buildings struck, demanding an increase in wages to \$1 a day.³⁰² The next day, the strikers forced the men working on the St. Jean Railway and the government buildings off the job.³⁰³ They did not wait this time to resort to violence, and by the the second day of the strike there had already been arrests for assaulting recalcitrant workers. They also prepared a document that they wished the employers to sign, guaranteeing their wages.³⁰⁴ Soon, 400 men were in the streets, shutting down any workplace that was not paying at least \$1 a day. A mill owner in Saint Roch and a house builder on the Grande Allée were both forced to raise their wages or be shut down.³⁰⁵ Then, on 6 June, around 500 strikers marched through the Basse-Ville toward the Parliament House. Congregating in front of the provincial government, they demanded to speak to the Premier. Joly and his attorney general D. A. Ross quickly appeared before the crowd. The embattled Premier informed

300 DBC Online, Marcel Hamelin, "Joly de Lotbinière, Sir Henri-Gustave."; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 June 1878, 2.

301 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 7 June 1878, 3.

302 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 5 and 6 June 1878, 3.

303 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 5 June 1878, 3.

304 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 7 June 1878, 3.

305 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 6 June 1878, 3.

the assembled workers that the government could do nothing as the public works had been subcontracted, but that he had secured a one shilling (20 cent) raise from the contractor M. Cimon, which caused grumblings of discontent in the crowd.³⁰⁶

By 10 June, some of the “ringleaders” of the strike began to appeal for some sort of compromise, and Joly even offered to pay the fines of the imprisoned strikers, but the wage issue was not resolved, and the strike continued. The same day, 700 strikers paraded through the Plains of Abraham and Wolf's Cove, descending upon John Roche's mill. However, a detachment of the Water Police led by Chief Trudel had raced to the mill by boat, arriving just before the strikers. When the crowd arrived, they demanded Roche sign a document guaranteeing \$1 a day for workers, and \$1.50 for those that laboured on the docks. Roche spat back that he was already paying those wages, and that if the crowd did not believe him, they were free to ask his employees. Unmoved by this, they pressed their demand that Roche sign the document. Things quickly degenerated, and a rain of large stones began to fall upon the police forces that attempted in vain to keep order. Chief Trudel was struck in the chest, and many of the men were severely injured by the projectiles. Although they were armed, Trudel refused to give the order to fire on the crowd, and he and his men fell back into the mill. The police having withdrawn, Roche had no choice but to sign the document, but not before the mill's windows had been smashed and the fence wrecked. The strikers then marched to Henry Dinning's shipyard, where they demanded that he too sign the document guaranteeing his employees \$1.50 a day. They then forced the shipwrights off the yard, which probably indicates that Dinning refused. The strikers ended the day at G. E. Paré's match splint factory, where they once again forced the closing of the establishment.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 7 June 1878, 3.

³⁰⁷ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 11 June 1878, 2.

After the riot at Roche's mill, employers began to fear that the strikers had been “emboldened”, and they began to demand that the government intervene to crush the strike. By 11 June, the strikers had succeeded in shutting down most of the city. They met at the Grande Allée, where they were addressed by “a French Communist”. Meanwhile, Cimon, the contractors hired by the city and whose low wage rates had caused the strike, threatened to sue the city for “not affording them proper protection from the strikers, to enable them [scabs] to go to work.” On 12 June, things completely degenerated. That morning, between 2 and 3,000 strikers met at the Jacques-Cartier Hall in Saint Roch. The unnamed “French Communist” gave another speech, this time warning them that their only purpose was to shut down the workplaces, and if any of them were caught stealing, they would be “strung up”. After the remarks, the assembled crowd marched under the French tricolour toward Mr. Peters' mill. Having been forewarned, Peters appealed to the Mayor, Robert Chambers, for protection. Chambers ordered the entire police force and 100 infantrymen and cavalry from Battery “B” to protect Peters' mill. Upon their arrival, the strikers found Peters' office closed, and they proceeded to smash the door and destroy everything they found inside. They tracked down Peters and forced him to sign the document guaranteeing \$1 a day. When the police and army made their appearance shortly thereafter, they were met by a volley of stones that “fell as thick as hail.” The commander of “B” Battery, Colonel Strange, then appealed to the crowd and told them that “he was there to enforce the law and to do his duty, but that he would retire with his men if the mob would quietly disperse.” This quieted spirits and the two sides slowly withdrew.³⁰⁸

The crowd then descended upon Valier's factory – whose proprietor quickly agreed to

308 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 12 June 1878, 2-3.

sign their document – and returned once again to Parliament where they were met by Joly. The Premier “reminded them that he had succeeded in obtaining for them an extra shilling a day and advised them to accept work wherever they could get it.” This did not placate the crowd, who decided to track down Cimon and force him to agree to raise his wages. Arriving at his hotel, they found that he had already left, and having no idea where to find him, the strikers returned to the Basse-Ville with the intent of looting the Renaud flour stores on Paul street.³⁰⁹

Renaud tried to reason with the mob, but the crowd, who had been starving even before the strike began and were now desperate, pushed him aside. The *Morning Chronicle* describes what happened next:

Carters who happened to be in the vicinity were pressed into the work of drawing away the stolen property, and load after load of flour was seen on its way through Paul street to St. Rochs, each surrounded by a gang of five or six men. On some of these trucks as many as eight barrels were counted. A large quantity of flour was also rolled out upon the wharf behind the store, and taken away across the river, to Beauport, to the Island, or to St Joseph de Levis. Many of those in possession of stolen flour were unable to remove it, and quantities were sold at \$1 per barrel or 25 cents for a bag worth \$3.³¹⁰

By the early afternoon, word had reached Colonel Strange, and he quickly led his forces to intercept the strikers. On his way to Paul street, several men were seen running ahead of his forces, bringing word to the strikers that the army was on its way. All along the streets, homeowners were busy boarding up their windows, anticipating the confrontation to come. Meanwhile, a group of “leading citizens”, including the ship carpenters' old friend John LeMesurier, tried and failed to calm the strikers down. As the police and army came down Paul street, Colonel Strange addressed the crowd, telling them that “it was useless to oppose themselves to the strong arm of the law”. The strikers responded with a

309 *Le Canadien*, 14 June 1878, 1-4; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 June 1878, 2.

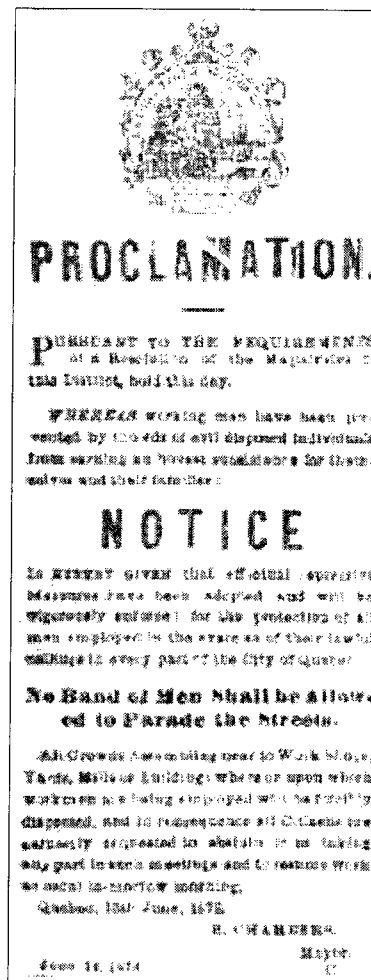
310 *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 June 1878, 2.

shower of stones, wounding a number of soldiers. Captain Short's cavalry then drew their sabres and rode into the crowd, attempting to intimidate them into compliance. This failed, and the strikers tried to pull the men from their horses, receiving “ugly cuts” from the cavalrymen's sabres. As things began to spin out of control all around him, Mayor Chambers finally read the Riot Act, authorizing the use of force against the mob. As the strikers charged the soldiers positioned between Renaud's store and Dambourges street, Strange ordered his men to fire. The first volley was ineffective, but the second time, the crack of the rifles dispersed the crowd. The strikers ran in every direction, leaving behind one man dead and ten others wounded. The *Morning Chronicle* describes the scene: “The corpse presented a most ghastly appearance, the forehead was crushed in as if by a heavy blow from a stone, and the eye-balls protruded in a hideous manner, while the crimson gore trickled slowly down his neck and formed a pool on the ground.” With this, the riot ended.³¹¹

Shortly thereafter, one of their leaders, a mason named David Giroux, was arrested. At about seven thirty that evening, the strikers assembled at Jacques Cartier Square, and vowed that “We'll have someone's blood to-morrow for that blood shed to-day.” That night, a crowd assembled at the Mayor's residence and demanded to be let inside. When this was refused, they smashed the door in and searched from “top to bottom” to find Chambers, threatening to lynch him should he be found. Luckily for him, he managed to escape through the back. Facing this unprecedented rebellion, the mayor decided to bolster his forces. An organization of special constables was formed to patrol the streets, and the Mayor wired Montréal to send reinforcements. The military agreed to send three regiments of infantry and a troop of cavalry to aid Québec in restoring order. Mayor

311 *Le Canadien*, 14 June 1878, 1-4; *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 14 June 1878, 2.

Illustration 4.1: The Mayor's Proclamation



Source: *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 15 June 1878, 1.

Chambers then made a proclamation, ordering all citizens to stay off the streets and forbidding public assemblies. Québec was, for all intents and purposes, under martial law (see Illustration 4.1).³¹²

The reinforcements from Montréal arrived that morning, and brought the armed forces at the Mayor's disposal to over 1000 men. There were also rumours that a British regular regiment, the 97th, was to be sent from Halifax. As a demonstration of their might, the

³¹² *Ibid.*

troops paraded through the city before reaching the Parliament House. Meanwhile, the strikers were meeting at Jacques Cartier Hall, being again addressed by the “French Communist.” He declared that they would have “bread or blood”, and “called upon them to follow him, and said that if he was killed, he trusted some one else would take his place.” The arrival of the military seems to have put some doubt in the minds of the crowd, who were not at all inclined to meeting the army's bullets. The strike leaders, for their part, ignored the fiery orator and asked the strikers to remain peaceful, at least as long as the military was in control of the city. They tried to organize another march in defiance of the Riot Act, but when the military appeared they dispersed. That morning, one of the leaders, Forrest, was arrested, and when a crowd of spectators appeared around the prisoner, Colonel Strange ordered his troops to shoot him if he attempted to escape. This calmed things down, and Forrest was thrown in the gaol.³¹³ The following day, even more troops arrived, and exhausted strikers began to slowly trickle back to work. Although they had succeeded in receiving a small increase in wages, they had failed in their campaign for a \$1 day.³¹⁴ By the morning of 14 June, the men returned to work.³¹⁵ These workers, which included an unknown number of ship carpenters, launched a desperate campaign to raise their miserable wages, but were once again crushed under the combined might of police, army, business, and government.

The Ship Carpenters Disperse

Not all ship carpenters wound up as longshoremen or in public works, but most had to find something else to do as the industry disappeared around them. An analysis of the

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 15 June 1878, 2.

³¹⁵ *Le Canadien*, 14 June 1878, 2.

census data from 1881 and 1891 gives us a good idea of the many avenues that were available to those displaced workers. We must however begin with a caveat. It would be ideal to begin our analysis in 1871, but there seems to be a statistical anomaly between the 1871 and 1881 census'. We know that the shipbuilding industry had declined precipitously after 1875, but in the 1881 census, there were still 1217 workers calling themselves carpenters. There are some possible explanations for this anomaly. The first is that these men were working as ordinary carpenters, something ship carpenters frequently did during the summer months. The second possibility is that although they may have held other jobs, when asked about their profession by the census taker, most of these people still considered themselves carpenters and answered as such. The first is likely, but we can definitely confirm the second hypothesis by looking at the case of Jacques Wiseman, who we know was working as a longshoreman in 1880, but still considered himself a carpenter in the 1881 census.³¹⁶ By 1891, however, we can clearly see the decline in ship carpenters, with only 308 left in the yards. We will therefore analyze the difference between the 1881 and the 1891 censuses to ascertain the path many carpenters were forced to take after the closing of the yards.

To pair off carpenters from the two censuses, we must separate those that are married and those that are single. By matching couples, we can ensure that if there is more than one person with a certain name (which is common), we can identify the correct person. Out of the 915 married carpenters in the 1881 census, we have taken a sample roughly 10%, a total of 90 people taken at random. We have then sought out these 90 carpenters in the 1891 census, to see what has become of them. There are two general categories: those that remained in Québec, and those that left. Of those that remained, we can see that the

³¹⁶ PHSVQ, database for 1881 census, Champlain Ward, folio no. 27.

Table 4.1: New Horizons for Ship Carpenters (1881-1891)

Profession	1881	1891
Carpenter	90	12
Joiner		8
Labourer		2
Grocer		1
Grocery Clerk		1
Musical Instrument Repairman		1
Carter		1
Sewing Machine Salesman		1
None / Retired		1
Absent		62
Total	90	90

Source: PHSVQ, databases for the 1881, and 1891 censuses.

largest group remained carpenters, followed by their allied woodworking trade, the joiners (see Table 4.1). The remainder took up various jobs, like grocery clerk and carter.

The majority of ship carpenters, in fact two-thirds of our sample, did not find work in Québec and left the city. Although a detailed analysis of census records from the rest of Canada and of the United States is beyond the scope of this study, there is some evidence that the latter country was the main destination of these now uprooted French Canadian ship carpenters. Many emigrated to the Great Lakes region to work in the shipbuilding industry there, where the desperate carpenters took work at very low wages, displacing workers there, and causing no small amount of nativist anger.³¹⁷

In the 1870s and 1880s, the industry that had been so important to Québec, that at one time put food on the table for fully one third of its population, and that was so important to a city that saw itself as a major port in the Atlantic world, completely disappeared. Although from time to time someone would discuss restarting the industry, most

³¹⁷ Thiessen, 51; *New York Times*, 3 October 1886, 1; 25 December 1888, 1.

understood that it was gone. With its passing also went the ship carpenters. Some became longshoremen, at least until that industry too fell apart. while others wound up living on the razor's edge of public works. Yet others began new lives, sometimes in Québec, but most likely somewhere else. A determining chapter of Québec's history had passed, and the *Vieille Capitale* would never be the same.

Conclusion

On n'ignore pas sans doute que l'industrie de la construction de navires en bois a été pendant nombre d'années la source où des milliers d'ouvriers venaient puiser le pain de leur famille. Depuis l'homme de profession jusqu'au plus humble charpentier, toutes les classes de la société comptaient avec elle. C'était le nerf de la prospérité de nos populations.³¹⁸

-Narcisse Rosa, 1896

The shipbuilding industry was, as Albert Faucher put it, “an outstanding achievement of nineteenth-century Quebec.”³¹⁹ From humble beginnings during the French Régime, the construction of sailing vessels became by the 1820s the most important industry in Québec. This was mainly due to its being buoyed by the lucrative export of timber from the city's hinterland. The trade in lumber necessitated ships capable of getting them to market in Britain, and shipbuilders happily took advantage of the immense opportunities the trade presented them. In this trade, Québec had a significant competitive advantage, being able to produce ships significantly cheaper than their contemporaries in England. This inaugurated the first major stage of growth, which began in 1809 and lasted until the 1850s.

The shipbuilder was the key figure in the industry. It was him that provided the capital and the expertise to construct the great sailing vessels of the age. They came in several waves. The first to arrive in Québec were the Scots, who, beginning with Patrick Beatson in the late eighteenth century, set up much of the industrial geography that would give the port its character. Later came the Irish, who further expanded the industry in Québec. Finally, dozens of French Canadians entered the trade, the majority

³¹⁸ Rosa, 5.

³¹⁹ Faucher, 195.

former ship carpenters who accumulated enough capital to start their own businesses.

Ship carpenters were the backbone of the trade. They were by far the largest group of workers labouring in the shipyards, and their high degree of skill and training meant that they displayed a great deal of craft pride. They were a remarkably homogeneous group, being almost completely dominated by French Canadians. Not only were they all come from the same background, but Québec's ship carpenters generally lived together in the working class suburb of Saint Roch. This uniformity contributed to their extraordinary capacity for self-organization, something displayed again and again between 1840 and 1867.

In December 1840, thousands of ship carpenters walked off the job and shut down shipbuilding in the port of Québec. This action was a resounding victory for the early labour movement, and a few weeks later, Joseph Laurin signed a notarial act creating one of Lower Canada's first working class organizations, the *Société amicale et bienveillante des charpentiers de vaisseaux de Québec*. The society itself was fairly limited in scope, and only operated for five years, but it set the stage for more permanent organizations to come. In 1850, ship carpenters were once again at the vanguard of the labour movement when they succeeded in incorporating the *Quebec Workmen's Benevolent Society*.

But the limits of these types of benefit societies soon became evident. In the fall of 1857, the American economy completely collapsed, taking Canada down with it. Suddenly, the thousands of shipwrights who depended on shipbuilding to make ends meet found themselves unemployed, and the existing system of relief was totally inadequate to help those in need. Ship carpenters once again provided leadership to Québec's working class, leading a huge movement demanding that the government

provide public works to help the city's destitute. Though the movement eventually degenerated into an election riot in December, the carpenters and their allies succeeded in forcing the government's hand and obtaining work for the unemployed.

In the 1860s, ship carpenters mobilized again, but this time they went in the direction of a true trade union. Knowing that a showdown with the shipbuilders was inevitable, they set up the *Union de protection des charpentiers et des calfats de navires de la ville de Québec*, which soon became a local of the powerful *International Union of Ship Carpenters and Caulkers*. Armed with these organizations, the ship carpenters once again went on strike in the fall of 1867. This time, however, the shipbuilders were determined to crush the union, and after over three months, two riots, and one death, management emerged victorious, crushing the UPCCNQ and forcing the workers to sign the dreaded yellow dog contract.

The 1870s were a troubled time for the shipbuilding industry. As the market for Québec ships dried up, the shipyards began to empty and the ship carpenters were forced to look to new horizons. They fell back into several trades. The luckiest ones became longshoremen, shifting the ethnic balance of the trade toward French Canadians, while some former carpenters like the Wisemans provided much needed leadership in their unions. Others, not so lucky, were forced into public works, labouring for pitiful wages and approaching destitution. Desperate, they joined other workers and launched a brutal strike in June of 1878, which ended when the army was called in to intervene, leaving the streets stained with blood. The last group of former ship carpenters simply dispersed. Some changed careers and became joiners, grocers, or mechanics. But a large segment simply left Québec, never to return.

In all, the four chapters of this study have brought to light the extraordinary

organizational capacity of a group of workers who resisted until the bitter end the degradation of their craft. In the end, however, technical innovations and the instability of the market doomed these proud workers to obsolescence. Although the ship carpenters dispersed from the shipyards of the Saint Charles and Saint Lawrence, they left a profound legacy. They were pioneers in the history of working class self-organization, and they were at the vanguard of many important labour mobilizations both in Québec and abroad. Although they would cede their leadership rôle when the trade collapsed, the workers that picked up the pieces and embarked on new campaigns in the last quarter of the nineteenth century owe the ship carpenters a great debt.

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