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Volume 3, numéro 1, 1968

Calgary 1968

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030685ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/030685ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)

1712-9109 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Zoltvany, Y. F. (1968). Some Aspects of the Business Career of Charles Aubert de la Chesnaye (1632-1702). *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 3(1), 11–23. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030685ar>

SOME ASPECTS OF THE BUSINESS CAREER OF CHARLES AUBERT DE LA CHESNAYE (1632-1702)

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Merchant, fur trader, seigneur, financier, member of the Sovereign Council of New France, founder of *la Compagnie du Nord* in 1682 and leading shareholder of *la Compagnie de la Colonie* in 1700, ennobled by Louis XIV for his services to the Canadian economy, Charles Aubert de La Chesnaye was New France's most powerful and most prestigious businessman for over forty years. According to his brother-in-law, Claude de Ramezay, his fortune at one point amounted to 800,000 *livres*; ¹ but when he died in 1702 he left debts of 408,000 *livres*. ² The purpose of this paper is to show how La Chesnaye administered his affairs, to explain tentatively how he lost his fortune, and to suggest how his failure might have influenced the economic development of New France in the eighteenth century. An examination of these points, it is hoped, will shed some light on business practices in New France and in a more general way on the nature and functions of the *bourgeoisie* in the early history of French Canada.

La Chesnaye was born in Amiens on February 12, 1632, the son of Jacques Aubert and Marie Goupil. ³ The occupation of Aubert is given as intendant of fortifications of the town of Amiens in his son's letters of nobility ⁴ but simply as "m[archan]d peintre" in the act of birth of his daughter Anne. ⁵ According to La Chesnaye, his family was not wealthy and he himself was "tout pauvre" when he arrived in Canada ⁶ in 1655 as the agent of a company of Rouen merchants. ⁷ By the early 1660s, however, he had clearly become

¹ Ramezay au ministre, 12 octobre 1705, Archives nationales, colonies [henceforth AN Col.], série C 11 A, vol. 22, p. 342 [In all cases where reference will be made to AN Col., the pagination used will be that of the transcripts of the Public Archives of Canada.]

² Liste générale des intéressés de la compagnie de la colonie, 1708, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 125, p. 531.

³ Arch. dept. Somme (Amiens), série E, registre des baptêmes de la paroisse St. Rémi d'Amiens, 1624-1633.

⁴ P. G. Roy, ed., *Lettres de noblesse, généalogies, érections de comtés et baronnies insinuées par le Conseil Souverain de la Nouvelle France*, 2 volumes (Beauceville, 1920), vol. I, pp. 113-118.

⁵ Arch. dept. Somme, série E, *Ibid.*

⁶ Testament de Charles Aubert de La Chesnaye, Archives judiciaires de Québec [henceforth AJQ], greffe Genaple, 26 août 1702.

⁷ La Chesnaye, Mémoire sur le Canada, 1697, AN Col., F 3, vol. 2, pp. 1-12.

a man of means. How he achieved this is not known. Perhaps like his contemporary, Charles Le Moyne de Longueuil, who was also penniless when he arrived in New France, he realized a quick profit on one or two successful fur trading expeditions.⁸

By 1663, La Chesnaye was active in the most important sectors of the Canadian economy. In that year he leased the Tadoussac fur trade monopoly and the taxes on beaver pelts and moosehides for 46,500 *livres* annually for a period of three years.⁹ By that date he also owned a large store in Quebec in which he kept a stock of merchandise valued at approximately 50,000 *livres*. Finally, he had begun to acquire land. In 1659 he paid 1,000 *livres* for 70 acres in the Côteau Ste. Geneviève, a choice site for agriculture because of its closeness to Quebec, and a lot on the *rue du Saut au Matelot* in the Lower Town where he built a fine home in the 1660s.¹⁰ In 1662 he bought the share of Olivier Le Tardif in the *Compagnie de Beaupré*,¹¹ founded in 1638, and thus became co-seigneur of the domain between the Montmorency River and Cap Tourmente on the north shore of the St. Lawrence. During the next three years, acting as the procurator of the company, he sold his own share and those of several other members to Bishop Laval. La Chesnaye, however, retained property in Beaupré. He obtained from the bishop a subfeif of ten *arpents* frontage on the St. Lawrence in the parish of l'Ange Gardien¹² and purchased another from Jean Baptiste Le Gardeur de Repentigny in Chateau Richer.¹³

La Chesnaye also had other interests in lumbering,¹⁴ the fisheries,¹⁵ and a brickyard,¹⁶ but the fur trade, agriculture and the sale of merchandise were his most important enterprises. Except for the fur trade, however, business opportunities were limited by prevailing economic conditions. Agricultural development was seriously impeded by the small population, the Iroquois wars, the lack of external markets and the fur trade's superior appeal. Until card

⁸ G. Frégault, *Iberville le Conquérant* (Montréal, 1944), pp. 30-36.

⁹ *Jugements et délibérations du Conseil Souverain de la Nouvelle France*, 6 volumes (Québec, 1883-1885), vol. I, pp. 39-40.

¹⁰ P. G. Roy, ed., *Papier terrier de la Compagnie des Indes Occidentales, 1667-1668* (Beauceville, 1931), pp. 131-136.

¹¹ AJQ, greffe Aubert, 13 avril 1662.

¹² AJQ, greffe Becquet, 13 octobre 1668, 21 juillet 1677.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24 avril 1668.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Becquet, 13 avril 1671; Genaple, 29 octobre 1701.

¹⁵ P. G. Roy, ed., *Inventaires des concessions en fiefs et seigneuries, fois et hommages et aveux et dénombremens conservés aux Archives de la Province de Québec*, 6 volumes (Beauceville, 1927-1929), vol. II, p. 127; AJQ, greffe Rageot, 3 février 1691.

¹⁶ AJQ, greffe Becquet, 3 février 1679; greffe Rageot, 21 janvier 1691; greffe Chambalon, 20 mai 1694.

money came into common use in the 1690's, the colony was without an established currency. This factor, joined to the impoverished state of many of the *habitants*, meant that Canada lacked a sound economic base. Merchants, as a result, had to do most of their business on credit and frequently found it very difficult to recover the sums owing to them. Thus, La Chesnaye had none of the advantages enjoyed by businessmen after 1713 who were favoured by long years of peace, a growing population, an outlet for wheat at Louisbourg, and the establishment by means of state assistance of the St. Maurice ironworks and shipyards near Quebec.

Because of these economic conditions, the fur trade was practically the only road to wealth in seventeenth century New France. La Chesnaye was aware of this and he strove to gain complete control of this vital activity. His lease of the Tadoussac fur trade which he had acquired in 1663 had been cancelled the following year when the *Compagnie de l'Occident* obtained a forty-year monopoly of the Canadian trade.¹⁷ In 1672, the company leased to La Chesnaye for 47,000 *livres* annually the commercial privileges which it still enjoyed in Canada.¹⁸ By that time these had been reduced basically to the taxes on beaver pelts and moosehides but they had still yielded a profit of 70,000 *livres* in 1670.¹⁹ The acquisition of these important revenues probably explain his decision to move his residence to the seaport town of La Rochelle, which was the nerve centre of commerce between Canada and France. There he would be ideally situated to supervise the sale of his pelts and to maintain contacts with the high circles of French finance. Charles Bazire, an associate, remained in Canada to collect the taxes and look after his other interests.

From 1672 to 1678, when the death of Bazire obliged him to return to Canada, La Chesnaye figured prominently in La Rochelle's thriving commercial life. On two occasions he was honoured by the city's other merchants who elected him to the council of their *cour consulaire*, a body which judged commercial litigation.²⁰ With a group of partners he owned a fleet of ships ranging in size from 60 to 300 tons which sailed between La Rochelle, Quebec, Percé, the West Indies, Amsterdam and Hambourg, with cargoes of fish, fur, and assorted merchandise.²¹ Thus, during his years in France,

¹⁷ W. J. Eccles, *Canada Under Louis XIV, 1663-1701* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 20-21.

¹⁸ AN, G 7, vol. 1312, pièce 69.

¹⁹ G. Lanctôt, *A History of Canada* (Toronto, 1964), vol. II, p. 42.

²⁰ Arch. dept. Charente-Maritime (La Rochelle), série B, vol. 4192 (juridiction consulaire de La Rochelle), n.p.

²¹ The most important documents relating to La Chesnaye's shipping activities are in Arch. dept. Charente-Maritime, série B, vols. 5672-5680 and in the greffe Teuleron.

La Chesnaye continued to enlarge his business and the commercial transactions in which he was involved grew progressively more important.

In 1674, the *Compagnie de l'Occident* was abolished by Louis XIV. The next year a group of French financiers acting under the name of Jean Oudiette and known as the Company of the Farm agreed to pay 350,000 *livres* annually for a cluster of commercial and financial privileges in Canada and some of the other French colonies. The company's Canadian rights consisted of the trade of the Tadoussac domain, the proceeds of the tax on beaver pelts and moosehides and on the wines and spirits entering the colony, and exclusive marketing rights to Canadian beaver in France. In return, however, it undertook to purchase at a set price all the beaver pelts produced in Canada. Three days after the ratification of this treaty, the Company of the Farm leased its Canadian rights to La Chesnaye for 119,000 *livres* annually.²² This transaction enabled La Chesnaye to gain full control of the Canadian beaver trade, but he soon discovered that his resources were inadequate to support such an undertaking. As a result of Governor Frontenac's expansionist policy, the beaver trade was rapidly expanding and supply was exceeding demand. Compelled by the terms of the Oudiette treaty to purchase all these pelts La Chesnaye, by 1677, was struggling with a crushing debt of 1,000,000 *livres*.²³ Fortunately, at this critical point, he was rescued by several powerful financiers, including the receivers general of finance for the *généralités* of Paris and Champagne, who injected fresh capital into the enterprise. Although the transactions that followed are not clear, it appears that the new group acquired 80% of the Canadian farm.²⁴ La Chesnaye retained the balance until 1680 when he sold it for 43,000 *livres*.²⁵

La Chesnaye's associates also soon lost interest in the Canadian farm. In 1680, they decided that the operation was unprofitable and handed the lease back to Jean Oudiette.²⁶ They next had to decide how to deal with the assets they owned in Canada, consisting of merchandise, furs, and sums of money owed by a large number of French and Indians. Pressing for the recovery of these debts was one solution; but since it would have taken time and probably required

²² The rights and obligations of the Company of the Farm in Canada are explained in G. Frégault, "La Compagnie de la Colonie" *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, vol. 30(1960) : p. 6; the sublease to La Chesnaye is mentioned in AN, G 7, vol. 1312, pièce 76.

²³ Arch. dept. Charente-Maritime, liasse Teuleron, 23 avril 1678.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ AJQ, greffe Duquet, 13 septembre 1680.

²⁶ AN, G 7, vol. 1312, pièce 76.

many lawsuits they preferred to sell their title to these assets to La Chesnaye for 410,000 *livres*, payable in four equal annual instalments.²⁷ This transaction can be regarded as the turning point in his career. Although the value of the assets was not stated in the contract, it seems safe to assume that it was much greater than the purchase price because of the uncertainty of the recovery. Thus, La Chesnaye seems to have boldly risked his fortune in a speculative venture that might result in a considerable profit or a disastrous loss.

As security he had to mortgage all his own assets and properties. The notarized inventory in which these are detailed is an important document, for it presents a complete picture of his estate in 1681. Its total value then amounted to 476,000 *livres* made up of five main categories: accounts receivable, 175,000 *livres*; *contrats de rente*, 100,000 *livres*; merchandise, 50,000 *livres*; his house on the *rue du Saut au Matelot*, 60,000 *livres*; farms and seigneuries, 66,000 *livres*.²⁸ Several hundred notarial deeds which record a great variety of business transactions²⁹ cast revealing light on the manner and spirit in which La Chesnaye conducted his affairs. Essentially, they show a man who was intensely concerned with the development of the colony. Unlike the *marchand forain* who sent his profits back to France, La Chesnaye reinvested his in Canada or made loans to the settlers. These practices, unfortunately, were largely responsible for his eventual ruin.

La Chesnaye dealt with people of every social rank and from places as distant as Acadia. He sold on credit merchandise worth a few *livres* or several thousand. Without his account books it is impossible to determine the profit he realized on these transactions, but the fact that he had to appear before the Sovereign Council in 1664 to answer the accusation of charging too much for shoes suggests that he drove a hard bargain.³⁰ He also made a great number of cash loans to settlers, usually to enable them to improve their property. His debtors included Bishop Laval, who borrowed 10,600 *livres* to make a payment on the seigneurie of Beaupré;³¹ Joseph Giffard, the seigneur of Beauport, 4,135 *livres*;³² Cadiou de Courville, a *habitant* of Beauport, 3,000 *livres*;³³ Rouer de Villeray,

²⁷ AN, greffe Louis Baudry, 3 avril 1681.

²⁸ Inventaire des biens, meubles, immeubles, rentes, hypothèques, dettes, articles et marchandises appartenant à Charles Aubert de La Chesnaye, AJQ, greffe Chambalon, déposé le 16 avril 1705.

²⁹ Most of these deeds are in AJQ, greffes Audouart, Becquet, Chambalon, Duquet, Filion, Genaple, La Cétière et Rageot.

³⁰ *Jugements et délibérations du Conseil Souverain*, vol. I, pp. 292-293.

³¹ AJQ, Becquet, 1^{er} octobre 1666.

³² *Ibid.*, 25 février 1679.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25 février 1679.

first councillor of the Sovereign Council, also 3,000 *livres*.³⁴ *Contrats de rente*, which in some ways resembled modern day savings bonds, were issued to La Chesnaye in return for these loans. They yielded an annual interest rate of 5 to 5½% but bore no maturity date. As long as the interest was paid there was apparently no way to recall the capital. At first sight this sort of investment would not appear suited to the needs of a businessman since it froze large volumes of capital for indefinite periods. However, because of the depressed long term economic cycle that affected the French economy from 1630 to 1730 approximately, a 5% return on capital was probably considered good.

Soon after his arrival in the colony, La Chesnaye began to invest important sums of money in farms and seigneuries and eventually became the foremost landowner of his day. Speculation can apparently be ruled out as a factor in these purchases. La Chesnaye acquired land partly because of the social prestige connected with seigneurial status, partly because of his interest in the production of staple crops like wheat and peas for which there was always a local demand. The strength he had achieved in agriculture was demonstrated in 1685 when he settled part of a debt with a shipment of wheat worth 23,000 *livres*.³⁵ In that year he and two other merchants also contracted with the intendant to supply the colony with flour if it should be struck by famine.³⁶

His seigneuries were of two types. There were those like Repentigny, Rivière du Loup and Kamouraska that he acquired when they were still in a wilderness state and without any commercial value. Developing this land was a very costly undertaking. 35,000 *livres* were spent on Rivière du Loup and 33,000 *livres* on Repentigny, but the value of these two seigneuries was only given as 18,000 *livres* and 16,000 *livres* in the inventory of 1680.³⁷ Then there were the holdings near Quebec that were both productive and valuable. The land bought on Côteau Ste. Geneviève in 1659, enlarged by the purchase of adjacent territory in 1675, had become a fine farm that was sold for a *rente* of 450 *livres* in 1679.³⁸ Another farm of 70 acres at Pointe au Lièvre, consisting of a house, barn, stable, gristmill and cattle, was valued at 20,000 *livres* in 1680.³⁹ In most cases,

³⁴ AJQ, greffe Rageot, 1^{er} octobre 1685.

³⁵ Aperçu général de l'état du Canada, 16 novembre 1686, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 8, pp. 339-340.

³⁶ Denonville au ministre, 3 septembre 1685, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 7, p. 65.

³⁷ Inventaire des biens de La Chesnaye, AJQ, greffe Chambalon, déposé le 16 avril 1705.

³⁸ AJQ, greffe Becquet, 30 avril 1679.

³⁹ Inventaire des biens de La Chesnaye, AJQ, greffe Chambalon, déposé le 16 avril 1705.

La Chesnaye did not manage these farms and seigneuries directly. Charleville was farmed out to a *habitant* on a share-cropping agreement which, in 1668, called for an annual delivery of 75 *minots* of wheat and 25 of peas.⁴⁰ In 1689, the seigneurie of Repentigny was leased to a *habitant* named René Goulet for a period of nine years. The annual rent was set at 600 *livres* for a first period of three years, 900 *livres* for the second, and 1,200 *livres* for the final period of three years.⁴¹

While he was transacting with the Company of the Farm, La Chesnaye was also preparing the formation of the Canadian based Hudson Bay company that became known as the *Compagnie du Nord*. He had apparently first become interested in the possibilities of the northern trade after he returned to Canada in 1678 and found that Frontenac and his partner La Salle had monopolized the fur trade of the Great Lakes and Mississippi Valley regions. The French court for its part approved of the extension of the commerce of New France to Hudson Bay since it might succeed in depriving the English company established there since 1670 of large quantities of prime beaver pelts. In 1679, La Chesnaye and Pierre Esprit Radisson, who were both in Paris at the time, were brought together by Bellinzani, the French director of trade. After consultation, Radisson agreed to lead an initial expedition to the Bay in return for 25% of the profits.⁴² In Canada the new governor, Le Febvre de La Barre, who had replaced Frontenac in 1682, urged other merchants to support the enterprise and some 193,000 *livres* were eventually invested in it. La Chesnaye's contribution of 90,000 *livres* was by far the most sizeable.⁴³

The appointment of La Barre had made it possible for La Chesnaye to expand his activities in yet another direction. Soon after his arrival, the new governor had deprived La Salle of his posts and placed La Chesnaye and his group in possession of Fort Frontenac.⁴⁴ A rival faction led by the Intendant Jacques de Meulles saw this action as proof of a partnership between the governor and the Quebec financier. The intendant claimed that the two men had over thirty canoes in the west commanded by Daniel Greysolon Dulhut and that a large quantity of their fur was being sent to the English.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ AJO, greffe Rageot, 10 juin 1668.

⁴¹ Archives judiciaires de Montréal, greffe Adhémar, 9 juillet 1689.

⁴² *Canadian Archives Report*, 1895, pp. 7-9.

⁴³ *Compte général de la baye du nord jusqu'au 30 mars 1691*, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 125, p. 143; *aperçu général de l'état du Canada*, 16 novembre 1686, *Ibid.*, vol. 8, pp. 339-340.

⁴⁴ De Meulles au ministre, 4 novembre 1683. *Ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 278-279.

⁴⁵ *Mémoire à Messieurs les intéressés en la société en commendite de la ferme et commerce en Canada*, 1683, *Ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 351-366.

De Meulles even maintained that it was to defend these private commercial interests that La Barre, acting on the advice of La Chesnaye and a half-dozen other powerful merchants, had declared war on the Iroquois.⁴⁶ There is undoubtedly an element of truth in some of these accusations. Capitalizing on the presence of a friendly governor in Quebec, La Chesnaye had greatly enlarged his trading operations and the value of the pelts and merchandise which he had in the west in 1685 amounted to 100,000 *livres*.⁴⁷ A trading permit issued to him by the New York government in 1684 clearly establishes his involvement in the contraband trade.⁴⁸ But the statements of de Meulles about the origins of the Iroquois war are difficult to accept. For it somehow seems incredible that La Chesnaye would have wantonly plunged into a calamitous war with the Iroquois a colony which he had worked so hard to develop and in which he had great sums of money invested.⁴⁹

In 1682, La Chesnaye was at the height of his power, but soon afterwards his decline appears to have begun. The reasons for this turn in his fortune cannot be determined with precision but they were quite possibly related to the outbreak of war with the Iroquois and to the fire which ravaged the Quebec Lower Town in August 1682. The war with the Five Nations lasted some fifteen years and seriously retarded colonial development. These circumstances must have greatly complicated the task of recovering from the *habitants* the sums they owed to the Company of the Farm. As for the fire, it destroyed 55 buildings including numerous warehouses.⁵⁰ La Chesnaye was among the fortunate few whose properties were spared, but he loaned substantial amounts to stricken Quebeckers to help them rebuild their homes.⁵¹ This may have exhausted his cash reserves when he still owed 213,000 *livres* to the Company of the Farm which was insisting on a full payment. La Chesnaye finally

⁴⁶ De Meulles au ministre, 8 juillet 1684, *Ibid.*, vol. 6, part II, p. 105, p. 108; De Meulles au ministre, 10 octobre 1684, *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁴⁷ Aperçu général de l'état du Canada, 16 novembre 1686, *Ibid.*, vol. 8, pp. 339-340.

⁴⁸ License to La Chesnaye to bring beavers, peltry and other goods in his vessel from Quebec to New York and to trade and traffic in that city, *Calendar of New York Colonial Manuscripts*, p. 128.

⁴⁹ How the Iroquois war began remains a controversial point. G. Lanctot, *op. cit.*, vol. II, p. 88, accepts the version of de Meulles which was endorsed by abbé Belmont, *Histoire du Canada* (Québec, 1840), p. 17, and Gédéon de Catalogne, *Recueil . . .* in R. Le Blant, ed., *Histoire de la Nouvelle France* (Dax, n.d.), pp. 170-171. W. J. Eccles rejects it. See *Frontenac, the Courtier Governor* (Toronto, 1959), p. 163-165. Wherever the truth may lie, there is good reason to doubt that La Chesnaye was one of the warhawks.

⁵⁰ W. J. Eccles, *Canada Under Louis XIV, 1663-1701*, p. 121.

⁵¹ La Barre au ministre, 4 novembre 1683, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 6, p. 263. Mères Juchereau de Saint Ignace et Duplessis de Sainte Hélène, *Les Annales de L'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, 1636-1716* (Québec, 1939), pp. 203-204.

settled this account in 1685 by transferring to the company the 100,000 *livres* of fur and merchandise which he had in the west, wheat valued at 23,000 *livres*, and his share of 90,000 *livres* in the *Compagnie du Nord*.⁵² Up to that time, he had reaped no profits from the Hudson Bay trade. In 1684, the *Compagnie du Nord* had lost pelts valued at 200,000 *livres* when the English, led by Radisson, captured Fort Bourbon on the Nelson River.⁵³

For the balance of the 1680s, however, there was no detectable slowdown in La Chesnaye's business activities. By 1691 he had reinvested 22,268 *livres* in the *Compagnie du Nord* and was once more a leading member of this organization.⁵⁴ He continued to sell merchandise on credit or the instalment plan for amounts ranging as high as 12,000 *livres*,⁵⁵ and to loan money to finance serious projects. He also acquired several new seigneuries. The important ones were Madawaska, on the St. John River, granted by La Barre and de Meulles;⁵⁶ Yamaska, across the St. Lawrence from Trois Rivières, donated by Michel Le Neuf de La Vallière;⁵⁷ St. Jean Port Joli, below Quebec, ceded by Noël Langlois in settlement of a debt of 1,160 *livres*;⁵⁸ Le Bic, in the Lower St. Lawrence, obtained from Denis de Vitré in settlement of another debt of 2,050 *livres*.⁵⁹ In 1689 Denonville and Champigny granted Blanc Sablon in Newfoundland to La Chesnaye and a few other merchants for the cod and seal fisheries.⁶⁰

By the 1690s several indications of the financial difficulties facing La Chesnaye begin to appear. One of these was his relationship with his partner, Jean Gobin. In 1690, La Chesnaye, his son François and Gobin formed a company. The enterprise did not prosper and the two Auberts withdrew from it in 1699 leaving Gobin in possession of two vessels and merchandise worth 102,000 *livres* on the understanding that he would settle the company's debts within two years.⁶¹ La Chesnaye also had several large personal debts. He owed Gobin

⁵² Aperçu général de l'état du Canada, 16 novembre 1686, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 8, pp. 339-340.

⁵³ Etat des profits, dépenses, fond, capital et pertes de la compagnie du nord du Canada depuis 1684 jusqu'en 1691, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 125, pp. 134-142.

⁵⁴ Etat de la contribution faite par Messieurs les intéressés en la compagnie du nord le 29 mars 1691, *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.

⁵⁵ AJQ, greffe Genaple, 8 octobre 1683.

⁵⁶ Acte de concession du 25 novembre 1683, P. G. Roy, ed., *Inventaire des concessions en fief et seigneurie*, vol. III, p. 283.

⁵⁷ Donation du 6 octobre 1685, *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 261.

⁵⁸ AJQ, greffe Rageot, 19 novembre 1686.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 13 novembre 1688.

⁶⁰ Acte de concession du 14 avril 1689, P. G. Roy, ed., *Inventaire des concessions en fief et seigneurie*, vol. IV, p. 39.

⁶¹ AJQ, greffe Chambalon, 14 décembre 1699.

83,264 *livres* as a result of three transactions made in 1692 and 1694 for which he undertook to pay two annual *rentes* totalling 4,180 *livres* on April 23, 1695.⁶² Five days earlier, on April 18, he had signed eight separate obligations for 51,681 *livres* which he owed to European correspondents and Canadian creditors.⁶³ It may have been to obtain cash to settle these debts that he sold some of his seigneuries. Ile Dupas and Chicot were sold for 1,500 *livres* in 1690;⁶⁴ Charleville and Yamaska for 6,250 *livres* and 3,333 *livres* respectively in 1694;⁶⁵ Repentigny for 15,000 *livres* in 1700.⁶⁶

Despite these financial difficulties, La Chesnaye remained very active throughout the 1690s. He engaged in fishing and lumbering⁶⁷ and also looked after the development of his seigneuries below Quebec. Twenty seven settlers and their families were placed in Kamouraska between 1694 and 1700⁶⁸ and the value of this seignury, which had been a wilderness tract only a short time before, rose to 12,000 *livres*.⁶⁹ In 1701, he turned his attention to St. Jean Port Joli where he made four concessions,⁷⁰ but his death the following year interrupted the development of this seignury and its value in 1709 was only 700 *livres*.⁷¹

During those final years of his life, La Chesnaye achieved a position of great social prestige. In 1693 Louis XIV, "[voulant] récompenser non seulement ceux qui se sont distingués dans l'épée et dans la robe mais encore tous ceux qui se sont attachés à soutenir et à augmenter le commerce", granted him letters of nobility.⁷² Two years later he became a councilor in the Sovereign Council of New France. The position which he filled should have reverted to the son of Charles Le Gardeur de Tilly, the late incumbent, but it was ceded to La Chesnaye in settlement of a debt of 6,500 *livres*.⁷³

⁶² *Ibid.*, 23 avril 1695

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18 avril 1695.

⁶⁴ AJQ, greffe Rageot, 11 novembre 1690.

⁶⁵ AJQ, greffe Chambalon, 9 juillet 1694.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 6 octobre 1699, 22 décembre 1700; Archives de la Province de Québec, pièces détachées, seigneurie de La Chesnaye.

⁶⁷ Champigny au ministre, 10 novembre 1692, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 12, p. 146; AJQ, greffe Genaple, 29 octobre 1701.

⁶⁸ The 27 concessions were made before Chambalon between 29 juillet 1694 and 26 mars 1700.

⁶⁹ AJQ, greffe Chambalon, 18 décembre 1700.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, three concessions are dated 10 septembre 1701, one is dated 26 octobre 1701.

⁷¹ Archives de la Province de Québec, tribunal de la prévôté, 29 octobre 1709; pièces détachées, seigneurie de Madawaska.

⁷² P. G. Roy, ed., *Lettres de noblesse*, vol. I, pp. 113-118.

⁷³ Frontenac et Champigny au ministre, 5 novembre 1694, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 13, pp. 39-40; Frontenac et Champigny au ministre, 10 novembre 1695, *Ibid.*, pp. 360-361; Frontenac et Champigny au ministre, 26 octobre 1696, *Ibid.*, vol. 14, p. 235; AJQ, greffe Genaple, 26 avril 1694.

With his office in the colonial magistrature and his letters of nobility, La Chesnaye became a *gentilhomme*, but he did not lose his interest in commerce and finance. In 1700 he purchased on credit 500 shares worth 25,000 *livres* in the *Compagnie de la Colonie* and became the leading shareholder of this newly-founded corporation.⁷⁴ Suitably enough, the last important action of his life was a business trip to France on the company's behalf. He was back in Canada in 1701 and died on September 20 of the following year.

In its essentials, the career of Charles Aubert de La Chesnaye closely resembles that of the pious and austere bourgeois of seventeenth century France. Some historians have pointed out that the deeply Catholic society of the *ancien régime* never fully approved of the *bourgeois* way of life that was based on profit and illegitimate gain. The *bourgeois*, in an effort to dissipate these misgivings and win acceptance, used part of their money to make bequests and donations to churches and religious communities.⁷⁵ The case of La Chesnaye seems to corroborate this thesis. He was a member of the Congregation of the Virgin Mary⁷⁶ and a generous benefactor of religious communities and charitable institutions.⁷⁷ He was opposed to the sale of brandy to the Indians.⁷⁸ Following the great fire which ravaged Quebec in 1682 he made generous loans to help fellow-Canadians rebuild their homes.

In his private life La Chesnaye seems to have practiced the austerity that was encouraged by the Church in New France. The most useful document on this aspect of his personality is the inventory of his belongings that was made following his death. It shows that his house, despite its impressive proportions, was functionally furnished — in one room hung curtains made from old tablecloths — and that his wardrobe was simple. He usually seems to have dressed in a pair of red or grey flannel trousers, a jacket and jerkin made of serge, and an old beaver hat. His only concessions to luxury were a wig and five shirts trimmed with lace. The inventory also tells us something of his taste in reading. All but three of the thirty-five

⁷⁴ G. Frégault, "La Compagnie de la colonie", *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, vol. 30(1960) : p. 14.

⁷⁵ R. Mandrou, *La France aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1967), p. 163.

⁷⁶ AJQ, greffe Genaple, 26 août 1702.

⁷⁷ *Annales de l'Hôtel-Dieu de Québec, 1636-1716*, pp. 203-204, p. 305; fondation de La Chesnaye à la fabrique de Québec, AJQ, greffe Becquet, 4 novembre 1671; cession de rente à la fabrique Notre-Dame, AJQ, Chambalon, 16 avril 1695; constitution de rente à la Congrégation de la Très Sainte Vierge, AJQ, greffe Genaple, 19 mars 1696; cession de rentes par La Chesnaye aux religieuses hospitalières de Québec, 12 mai 1697, AJQ, greffe Chambalon.

⁷⁸ La Chesnaye, mémoire sur la traite des boissons, 24 octobre 1693, AN Col., C 11 A, vol. 12, part II, pp. 778-783.

books he owned dealt with religious themes. Among the latter were the works of St. Francis of Sales, an important figure of the French religious revival of the early seventeenth century.⁷⁹

La Chesnaye, however, was not satisfied with his *bourgeois* status. From an early date, like many wealthy and ambitious members of the French *tiers-état*, he was strongly attracted to the nobility. Born plain Charles Aubert he soon added de La Chesnaye to his name. Long before obtaining his letters of nobility, he had himself described as "noble homme" in notarial deeds. This quest for noble status might also help to explain his eagerness to acquire seigneuries. It is doubtful that he was thinking only of economic return when he spent large sums to develop land, for the same amount invested in the fur trade and the fisheries would have enabled him to net a higher profit. He may also have been thinking of the social prestige which the ownership of fine estates alone could confer.

The religious side of La Chesnaye's personality and his efforts to enter the ranks of the nobility should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the driving force in his career had been the spirit of gain. Systematically, he reploughed his capital into productive ventures in order to realize still greater profits. His house on the *rue du Saut au Matelot* became the seat of an economic empire that extended in all directions and controlled the material resources of New France as well as the lives of a great number of *habitants* who had mortgaged their properties in return for cash loans. With money, in other words, came power the quest for which cannot be discounted as a factor in La Chesnaye's career.

In 1954 in his famous pamphlet, *La Société Canadienne sous le régime français*, Guy Frégault claimed that the driving force in the history of New France had been the French Canadian *bourgeoisie* which had built, controlled, and defended the colony before being destroyed by the British conquest in 1760. A few years later, Jean Hamelin contested the validity of this thesis in *Économie et Société en Nouvelle France*, where he pointed out that the economy of New France had not been built by Canadian *bourgeois* but by the French crown. Of the two points of view that of Hamelin seems closer to the truth, but the story could have been different had La Chesnaye succeeded in building a large fortune in Canada. For this might have encouraged other important businessmen to invest in the colony and a class of powerful Canadian *entrepreneurs* might then have emerged. La Chesnaye, however, had failed. His debts in 1702 amounted to 408,000 *livres* while his assets consisted of little more

⁷⁹ AJQ, greffe La Cetière, 12 décembre 1702.

than his Quebec house, a few seigneuries, 43,000 *livres* of merchandise, and 282,000 *livres* of *rentes* and accounts receivable⁸⁰ of which 200,000 *livres* had to be written off as bad debt.⁸¹ Such a discouraging precedent might explain the subsequent reluctance of private enterprise to risk capital in Canada which, in turn, forced the state to expand its economic role. If this should be the case, La Chesnaye's failure would not merely be that of an individual but, more basically, that of a type of entrepreneurship.

⁸⁰ Tabulated totals of the inventory of merchandise found in his store (*Ibid.*) and of the *rentes* and obligations found in his home and store (*Ibid.*, 3 octobre 1702 and 12 décembre 1702).

⁸¹ AJQ, greffe Genaple, 26 août 1702.