The Parish Assembly and Its Delegates in the Loudunais and Acadia, 1650–1755

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Most historians of western France conclude that rural community political life there was weak; they cite limited collective agriculture and communal property, and an outdated parish assembly that lacked regular meetings, wide participation, or written records.¹ In contrast, many historians of Acadia, a French colony that was ceded to Great Britain and called "Nova Scotia" after 1713, claim that rural community political life there, led by elected deputies, was unusually active and egalitarian. They maintain, moreover, that this was "a crucial step in the continued evolution of a distinct Acadian identity," perhaps even a "commitment to a democratic society."² They further argue that these characteristics emerged from the need of the new British regime and the Acadian population to establish relations after 1713.³ Taken together, these conclusions contrast a new and dynamic colonial political culture with an older one in the home country that had become stale and subordinated to the

centralized state institutions of the Old Regime. This essay challenges both of these assertions, comparing directly the political institutions of rural communities in the Loudunais, a region between Poitou and Touraine from which several Acadian founding families originated, and Acadia.

This comparative approach reveals that there was, in fact, much continuity between the political structures, principles, and goals of the rural habitants of Acadia and the Loudunais. The parish assemblies of both places proved reasonably strong and were led by capable elected representatives. They were able to maintain order and effective relations with the government, while at the same time defending local interests and the authority of the senior heads of household. This is not to suggest rural inertia—indeed, one of the most important characteristics of these enduring traditions was their flexibility in adapting to new challenges and demands.

The Parish Assembly and the Community in the Loudunais

Parish assemblies in one form or another had existed in much of France for centuries and were the principal means through which the habitants governed themselves and resolved disputes.\(^4\) In the seventeenth-century Loudunais, the assembly's main responsibilities were tax collection, political representation, and oversight of the vestry. Every year, the habitants selected a delegate (*syndic*), a churchwarden (*marguillier*), and a group of tax collectors. The assembly then regularly approved the fiscal work of their officials, namely the tax rolls and vestry accounts. Other meetings were called as necessary, such as when security concerns, new state demands for money or information, or disagreements between habitants arose.

All heads of household in a community were potentially members of the assembly. Historians have usually assumed that

only a few of the most influential peasants participated, making the assembly their tool. Yet, in the parish of Aulnay, fifteen of fifty heads of household (about thirty per cent) were listed as present for assemblies in 1754 and 1755. Further, when we compare the list of names, only six were at both, meaning that at least twenty-four heads of household or about half of those in the community were involved directly in its political life. Nor does this appear to have been a new or isolated case. In the larger parish of Martaizé, three assemblies were held from April 1696 to September 1697. Between twenty and thirty heads of household participated in each, and nearly fifty heads of household attended at least one. While not everyone was at every meeting, there was sufficient participation to conclude that the parish assemblies of the Loudunais were a true expression of the broader interests of the community.

Tax collection was by far the most important and time-consuming duty of the assembly in the Loudunais. The collectors were nominated by the delegate and selected by the assembly in the fall; their names had to be registered with the clerk of the élection. It was up to the collectors to divide the parish's tax assessment among the habitants under the assembly's supervision. Inevitably, disputes arose, and the assembly would

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7 ADV, 4E 53/509: "Minutes de notaire Pierre Voyer," assemblies at Martaizé, 15 April 1696, 9 September 1696, and 15 September 1697.

8 Archives Nationales de France, Paris (hereafter AN), G7 450 : Poitiers, 28 August 1685; Controller-General to Intendant of Tours (1687) in A. M. de Boislisle, *Correspondance des Contrôleurs-Généraux des Finances avec les intendants des provinces* (Paris, 1874), 113; examples of assembly records involving the selection of tax collectors can be found in ADV, 4E 53/509: "Minutes de notaire Pierre Voyer," 1695–1698.
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rule on the matter when necessary. For example, in 1727 the collectors of Aulnay and Martaizé both included the peasants working on the métairie (leased seigneurial domaine) of Brizay on their tax rolls. The confusion came about because the land was on the Martaizé side of the parish boundary, but belonged to the seigneur of Aulnay. Eventually, the assembly of Aulnay agreed to remove the habitants concerned from their list. Although uncommon, the assembly's decisions could be appealed to the officials of the élection, which created an awkward confrontation between the complainant and his parish's delegate.

In general, the collecting of state taxes through the assemblies worked well. In rare cases of outright nonpayment, the state might fine the delegate and imprison the collectors. One poor fellow from St. Martin d'Ouzilly was arrested in 1757 and 1759; the second time he had to be dragged out from under his bed by the maréchaussée. Indeed, the records of the royal prison at Loudun show us that, during the Seven Years' War, the subdelegate frequently ordered the arrest of parish tax collectors. Usually, the state was less heavy-handed; those communities that regularly paid on time might be rewarded with tax breaks during periods of difficulty or famine. Lacking local fiscal officials of its own, the state was content to have the parish assembly take care of taxes at the local level. For their part, the

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9 ADV, 4E 110/15: "Minutes de notaire René Lanlaud," Saint-Clair, 9 March 1727 (Aulnay). The intendant confirmed the assembly's power to resolve these disputes, preferring them to be resolved at the local level. AN G7 519: Tours, 2 June 1684.

10 Examples include ADV, C848: "plumitifs de greffe de l'élection de Loudun," 4 July 1739 and 16 December 1758.


12 The maréchaussée was a kind of state rural mounted police chiefly responsible for the security of the king's highways as well as the arrest and transportation of state prisoners.


members of the assembly were happy not to have royal tax officials in their parish and to distribute the tax burden themselves.

The delegate represented the parish and defended its interests in the manors of the seigneurs, the offices of the subdelegate and the élection, and in the royal court (bailliage) of Loudun. He presided over the assembly, nominated collectors and other local officials, and could serve as a mediator. It is important to emphasize that the delegate's discretion was very limited; the significant decisions were always made by the assembly. For the state, the delegate was a convenient local official who could deliver and execute orders, assemble reports, and (perhaps most important) be held accountable when anything went wrong. Clearly the delegate had to be someone of relative wealth and prominence in the community; he needed the time, the influence, and the competence to complete these tasks. Since the position was to be held only for one year, it is likely that many, if not most, of the principal heads of household served at some point as the delegate. Not unlike the position of chair in a small history department, it seems most gamely took their turn. This gave the position a certain corporate character; there was no reason for the delegate to stray far from the viewpoint and interests of the group of prominent peasants who supported him and to which he would soon return.

During the reign of Louis XIV, the delegate's responsibilities gradually expanded as he became a kind of parish captain for the intendant. Every winter, the kingdom's growing number of soldiers needed quartering and the Centre-Ouest of France was a common location. The intendant assigned billets among the parishes, indicated what supplies were needed (for example, hay

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15 The delegates submitted reports on vital statistics for their parishes to the intendant, for example, ADV, C62: “Résultats des États de Population de la Généralité de Poitiers.” After 1650, the intendants increasingly gave orders directly to the delegates through the subdelegates, rather than the local office-holders. Brigitte Maillard, Les campagnes de Touraine au XVIIIe siècle: Structures agraires et économie rurale (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1998), 24.
needed for the dragoons' horses), and how much the unfortunate hosts would be reimbursed. Originally, peasants applied directly to the intendant through the local subdelegate to recover their expenses, but the intendant found that working through the delegates reduced fraud and helped ensure that the soldiers got everything they needed. The delegates were also required to institute the new militia system ordered in 1688. Each parish was expected to provide and equip one soldier drawn from among its single men. The delegate approved the list of eligible men, supervised the lottery, arranged for the purchase of the gun, clothes and other necessities, and, perhaps most difficult, ensured that the unlucky winner actually showed up when summoned. While a deserter risked imprisonment or worse, his delegate could face a fine of five hundred livres. Winter quarters and the militia were annual events, but unusual state demands for men or resources might also come to the delegate should deserters or criminals be on the loose or wolf attacks be on the rise, as they frequently were in Touraine at that time.

In addition to increasing military demands, the delegate could be called upon to look after a variety of local concerns. Larger communities such as Martaizé and Arçay often hired guards for their fields, and the delegate was responsible for supervising and paying these officials. He was also at the forefront during community disputes with local seigneurs, some of which ended up at the royal court of Loudun. For example, the habitants of Aulnay argued with the seigneur of Sautonne, a

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16 AN, G 7 522: Tours, 25 Oct. 1695; AN G 7 449: Poitiers, April 1678.
local landowner but also a powerful official from Paris, over
who owned the wall that surrounded their cemetery, while those
of Angliers resisted their seigneur's claims to own a rare piece of
communal pasture.20

Because historians looking for collective economic activity,
frequent meetings, and formal records, have found none of those
things in the Loudunais, they have concluded that the parish
assembly there must have been weak. But when we look at the
records of the intendant and subdelegate, the Contrôle des Actes,
the royal court and the élection, the parish assembly emerges as
an institution with considerable political and social importance.
For example, the assembly decided who would pay what taxes
and who would be assigned soldier billets, and it ensured that its
own unlucky militia soldier reported for duty. It also seems that
the assembly was widely supported by the local population and
not simply the tool of a privileged few. This support was an
important factor in the assembly's ability to adjust to and perhaps
limit the increasing demands of the monarchy while maintaining
local autonomy.

It is common to emphasize the seasonal cycles of rural life,
such as the religious holidays or the seeding and harvesting
schedules. But we should not forget that the business of the
assembly—the selection of parish officials, the assessment of
taxes, militia training and winter quarters, reviewing the vestry's
accounts—had its own seasonal pattern. These matters directly
affected the lives of peasants. In routine years, the assembly
might only have to meet a few times a year, simply approving
the work done by its selected officials. Yet, if required, the
assembly and its delegate were also there to deal with any
unforeseen dispute, demand, or danger to the community.
Indeed, the flexibility of these political structures appear to be
their defining characteristic. Even during the upheavals of the
Revolution, the habitants of the Loudunais relied on their

20 ADV, 2 C 3 Q 1942: "Contrôle des Actes (Moncontour)," 16 April
1762; 5 B 3, 27 January 1751, 5 August 1752.
delegates and their assemblies to make the necessary decisions and to respond to an even more demanding and erratic state.  

The Assembly and the Community in Acadia

At first glance, we might suppose that the parish assembly would have had a reduced role in the French colony of Acadia. There were no taxes to collect, and there were practical obstacles to organizing communities dispersed widely around the Bay of Fundy. In outlying areas of New France, for example, as few as ten percent of the heads of household attended the assembly. As in the Loudunais, there is no indication that Acadian communities had much collective property or revenue, while extravagant claims for collective farming made by some Acadian historians remain unproven and unlikely given the expanse of the land and the dispersed settlement pattern.

Despite all this, it seems that the parish assemblies in Acadia were well attended. Why? The most obvious answer is that the borderland conditions in the colony made political decisions very important; the community needed to choose

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21 For example, in 1792 the delegates (now called mayors) were instructed to report on local noble families if they became émigrés. ADV, L29. Also see Jacques Peret, Histoire de la Révolution française en Poitou-Charentes, 1789–1799 (Poitiers: Projets Éditions, 1988), 29-31.
24 Griffiths, From Migrant to Acadian, 384.
effective representatives to negotiate the demands of governors, invaders, and raiders. It is clear that the Acadians, if not unified in their views, generally closed ranks in the face of these outsiders. They chose to fight as militia against the English in 1707, but not to do so in 1704 and 1710. They decided to emigrate to Île Royale, then to stay in the years following the Treaty of Utrecht (1713). For several years, they refused to swear an unconditional oath of allegiance to the British king, but later agreed to one that claimed to guarantee their right to live in peace (1727–1730). This sort of collective action would not have been possible without a strong assembly.

The first recorded delegates of Port Royal were Claude Petitpas and Michel Boudrot in 1639. Acadian delegates also participated in the negotiations when Port Royal fell to invaders in 1654 and 1690. Between 1690 and 1699, a small council of French officials and Acadian delegates governed in the absence of any formal government. In the more distant communities of Minas and Beaubassin, the local delegates took on an expanded role in local justice and administration because there was nobody else to do it. We can imagine the sorts of disputes over land and rights that developed within communities expanding rapidly into new marshlands and needing to ensure the dyke system worked effectively. Significantly, these Acadians wrote to the French commandant Joseph Robineau de Villebon asking for his approval of their delegates, thus ensuring that any decision on land rights they made would be recognized.

We should note that, from the beginning of the colony, there was more than one delegate for each parish. In the Loudunais, a

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26 "Capitulation of Port Royal, 1654," in Collection de manuscrits contenant lettres, mémoires, et autres documents historiques documents relatifs à l'histoire de la Nouvelle-France recueillies aux archives de la province de Québec, ou copiés à l'étranger (Quebec, 1883–1885), 4:145; Griffiths, From Migrant to Acadian, 77; John Clarence Webster, Acadia at the End of the Seventeenth Century (Saint John: The New Brunswick Museum, 1934), 29.
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A parish of a few square kilometers and fifty to one hundred and fifty households could be served by a single delegate. But in Acadia, each parish could be much larger both in size and population. Assembly meetings could still occasionally be held at the parish church, but it was easier for a few delegates to work together than to have every head of household travel (and leave their farms) every time a decision needed to be made. Thus, the physical dispersion of the population, in addition to the lack of state officials and the dangers of frequent imperial conflict in the region, led many Acadian delegates to assume more direct responsibilities for decision making than their Loudunais counterparts; in short, they became something more than simple representatives.

Although the French government had moved across the Bay of Fundy to Nashwaak in 1690, this did not mean that its demands on Acadian parishes disappeared. Villebon's journal reveals that he constantly demanded from the Acadians provisions, timber, and labor to support his new fort and settlement. He also required billets for sick soldiers and even ordered the delivery of letters and gifts to the Mi'kmaq. At the same time, the French could not protect the Acadian communities from pirate attacks or raids from New England. Once again we see the delegates step in to fill a void. At Beaubassin, Germain Bourgeois assembled the habitants and beat off a pirate attack in 1693; in 1696 he stayed behind and negotiated with the leader of a much larger raid while the rest of the Acadians fled into the woods.27

Another potential duty of the delegate was to negotiate with the Mi'kmaq, possibly with the assistance of a missionary. Unfortunately, we know almost nothing about these negotiations. If there was an explicit accommodation that kept the Acadians out of the forest hunting grounds, as John Mack Faragher has suggested, then this had to be revised when settlements

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expanded. Further, many Mi'kmaq groups came to hunt, fish, and gather shellfish from the rich marshlands, a potential source of tension and squabbles with farmers building dykes. Negotiations would have been required to keep the peace.28

The return of the French government to Port Royal in 1699 led to new demands on the Acadian communities, such as the creation of militia companies. Orders for provisions and billets for soldiers also increased. The Acadians did in fact rally to Governor Subercase in 1707, helping him defeat two different English landing forces at Port Royal. The fighting left many homes ruined, however, and Subercase was unable to secure financial aid or supplies from France because of the war in Europe. The few reinforcements for the garrison that arrived were teenagers. Out of money and with sickness and dissension growing in the garrison, Subercase faced a new and larger attack of over two thousand men in 1710 and was unable to again convince the Acadians to mobilize. They had shown that they were willing to fight, but they would not throw their lives and farms away on hopeless struggles.29 Of course, Acadian delegates were soon facing new demands for "contributions" from Port Royal's latest conquerors.30

In Acadia, the tumultuous history of conflict forced the delegates to negotiate directly with raiders and conquerors, while the assemblies made tough decisions about when to meet or ignore demands—indeed whether to fight or flee. We should recall that the Loudunais had also been a military frontier, first between English and French during the Hundred Years' War and

30 Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa (hereafter LAC), CO 217: Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island—Original Correspondence Colonial Office, 16 November 1710; Griffiths, From Migrant to Acadian, 241.
later between Catholics and Huguenots during the Wars of Religion. Thus, we can imagine the delegates and assemblies of the Loudunais facing similar problems and demands, such as when the Catholic armies of the Duke of Anjou (the future Henry III) met Coligny’s Huguenots near Moncontour in 1569.\(^{31}\) This frontier legacy probably reinforced the strength of local political structures in the Loudunais, but it likely also contributed to the commitment of later Acadians to neutrality when caught between rival powers.

After the Treaty of Utrecht, the British Council at Annapolis Royal found itself largely on its own in a colony full of French-speaking, Catholic Acadians as well as sometimes hostile Mi’kmaq. They hoped that English-speaking, Protestant settlers would soon arrive, from New England or Europe, either assimilating or displacing the Acadians altogether. In the meantime, these new "conquerors" needed to find a way to work with the Acadians, if only to ensure that trade continued and that they would be able to feed their garrison. As the Acadians on their own initiative sent their delegates to open negotiations, we should not be surprised that the British chose to recognize this existing political structure, calling the delegates "deputies" and confirming annual elections as well as French customary law.

As the Acadian population expanded, so did the number of deputies. We have already seen that in the seventeenth century the Acadians in each parish chose two or three delegates each because of the requirements of the position and the dispersal of the various settlements. The British formalized this and had each parish assemble and then divide into sections in which each chose one deputy. Ultimately, the parish of Grand Pré (Minas) had twelve, Annapolis Royal had eight, and Beaubassin had

six.\textsuperscript{32} This sounds like a lot, but, when we consider the
geography and the rapidly growing population, this appears to
simply extend the existing practice. For example, Grand Pré's
sections were based on several distinct villages and hamlets
clustered along separate rivers. As settlement continued to
expand, new parishes and new deputies were created in
communities such as Pisiquid and Cobequid.\textsuperscript{33}

In Acadia, the deputies continued to be chosen from the
principal heads of household. By the eighteenth century, these
Acadians had developed considerable wealth and status, some by
trading with the English; they understood very well the
importance of working with the government.\textsuperscript{34} In return, the
British Council made a point of consulting with the deputies on
civil matters. Regarding the well-known negotiations between
the Council and the Acadians over swearing oaths of allegiance
to the British Crown, the delegates were ultimately able to secure
a conditional agreement that recognized British sovereignty but
also Acadian neutrality to a large degree. The extant documents
on this issue are our best indication of how the parish assembly
continued to function in Acadia under the British. The deputies
took the British demands for oaths back to the assembly and
returned with counter-propositions and signatures from the many
participants. On a few dramatic occasions, the governor or his

\textsuperscript{32} 28 April 1720, 4 May 1720, Minutes of the British Council, Annapolis
Royal, in Thomas B. Akins, ed., \textit{Acadia and Nova Scotia: Documents relating
to the Acadian French and the first British Colonization of the Province, 1714–
1758} (Cottonport: Polyanthis, 1972), 23-25; Griffiths, \textit{The Contexts of Acadian
History}, 42.

\textsuperscript{33} Clark, \textit{Early Nova Scotia}, 217.

\textsuperscript{34} Maurice Basque, “The Third Acadia: Political Adaptation and Societal
Change,” in John G. Reid, Maurice Basque, Elizabeth Mancke, Barry Moody,
Geoffrey Plank, William Wicken, eds., \textit{The Conquest of Acadie, 1710:
Imperial, Colonial, and Aboriginal Constructions} (Toronto: University of
Toronto Press, 2004), 155-59; Maurice Basque, "Conflits et solidarités
familiales dans l'ancienne Acadie: L'affaire Broussard de 1724," \textit{La Société
officers even spoke directly to a parish assembly. Unfortunately, the eventual compromise did not resolve the underlying issues and could not survive once war resumed in the colony in the 1740s. The British remained paranoid that the Acadians would support the French and Mi'kmaq en masse, and they also remained covetous of the Acadians' rich farms. Once their position in the colony had improved with the establishment of Halifax in 1749 and especially the eventual defeat of the French throughout the region by 1755, the British moved forward with a plan to get rid of the Acadians entirely.

Conclusion

By the middle of the eighteenth century, we can see strong political structures at work in the parish assembly and the delegate in both Acadia and the Loudunais. Led by the principal heads of household and supported by governments that, frankly, needed their support to function, this system aimed to maintain order and protect local autonomy—and it largely succeeded. The secret of its success was that it also served the larger interests of the state. In both Acadia and the Loudunais, the trend was towards increasing state demands and new responsibilities for delegates and assemblies. The habitants did not like these demands, but they understood that meeting them through negotiation was better than outright refusal. Their goal was to preserve their autonomy, no matter how grandiose the larger pretensions of the state might be.

Some historians have diminished the importance of the assemblies in western France, while others have claimed that Acadian political life was new and distinctive. In fact, the

35 Examples of Acadian assembly responses: LAC, CO 217: Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island—Original Correspondence Colonial Office, 13 January and 22 January 1715, 28 March 1715, 26 May 1720; Governor Armstrong to Secretary of State, 17 November 1727, in Public Documents of Nova Scotia, 80. For more on the oath of allegiance negotiations see Griffiths, From Migrant to Acadian, 267-306.
continuity between these political structures and the commitment to them shown by the habitants of both places is of fundamental importance. In fact, the assembly in the Loudunais was a very active institution with wide participation from a relatively large group of heads of household, because its meetings and decisions mattered in everyday life. Furthermore, an emphasis on neutrality and negotiation pursued by elected representatives was not a uniquely Acadian characteristic. This is not to suggest that there was no difference between the habitants of Annapolis Royal and Martaizé. One hundred years after colonists from the Loudunais (and elsewhere in Poitou-Touraine) had arrived in Acadia, their respective societies had changed much. Each faced unique challenges and developed distinct identities. But the structures of their political life—and indeed the perspective they had on how to make political decisions—remained largely the same. This is deserving of consideration precisely because the political, economic, and environmental conditions were so different in each place. The most obvious reason for this continuity is, of course, because these political structures worked, a fact recognized both by the state and the habitants themselves.