

The Individual Potters of St-Denis

It was 1694 before any individual Canadian potter emerged from anonymity. Basically the potter needs only a supply of clay, one of the most common substances of the earth, and the St. Lawrence valley is well endowed with red-burning surface clays highly suitable for brick, tile and simple pottery. Despite this, early attempts to foster some sort of ceramic industry in the area proved dismal failures. In 1636 brick was being made near Quebec but no potters were listed among the 45 trades and professions covered in the Census of 1681. By 1686 a tile works was finally in operation on the banks of the Lairet,¹ and in 1694 a contract is recorded between the owners of the *Briqueterie de Jean Landron* and a Provençal potter, one Aubain (or Urbain) Salomé, for the production of earthenware vessels, lead-glazed, for local consumption.² Pottery-making in Canada, therefore, can be dated from at least this time.

It was the traditional peasant pottery of France: local clay thrown on the potter's wheel, dusted with powdered lead and fired in a small, primitive, wood-burning kiln. The products of the individual potters differed little one from the other and there was neither need nor incentive for broadening the range of wares offered: the local market demanded only basic earthenware vessels. More sophisticated wares were imported, not manufactured locally.

Local crafts and industries had more scope for development as the eighteenth century began. The territory had become relatively peaceful, the population increased rapidly, and many new communities were established. As these communities grew, local craftsmen were needed: shoemakers, harness makers, blacksmiths and potters. There were potteries at the *fermes St-Joachim* (Côte-de-Beaupré) in 1700 and at Cap-

Santé in 1710. Guillaume Duval of Paris established a pottery at Pointe-aux-Trembles near Montreal in 1753. By the close of the French régime there were probably 13 or 14 potteries in operation in the colony including the Acadian potters in the Trois-Rivières-Lac St-Pierre area. (Trois-Rivières had local pottery-making from an early date.) Four or five potteries were situated near Quebec itself and three or four in Montreal. Many quite small communities supported local potters because good surface clay was readily available: St-Antoine-sur-Richelieu, Rivière Ouelle, St-Roch-des-Aulnaies, Ste-Marie-de-Beauce, and possibly Nicolet and Contrecoeur. But in the slow rise and then the decline of the pottery industry in Saint-Denis-sur-Richelieu is mirrored the cycle of a community over the span of a century.

The initial settlers came to Saint-Denis in the 1730s. Farmers were prospering in the lands of the Richelieu valley and Saint-Denis soon became the commercial and social centre of this rich grain-producing area. The first potters attracted to Saint-Denis were the brothers Louis and Jean-Marie Courtemanche from neighbouring St-Antoine, and Paul Belanger from Quebec.³ They set up shop in 1768 but it was not until the arrival of the Acadian master-potter Simon Thibodeau from Trois-Rivières in 1776 that the pottery industry really took hold in the village. Thibodeau was a shrewd businessman who could see the potential of Saint-Denis. What could be better? Here was a busy community already well situated on an established trading route in the heart of a prosperous rural area, a ready market, and there was plenty of suitable clay and wood to feed the kilns. Thibodeau was ready to invest his capital in such a village. His first purchase in August 1776 was a lot on St. Catherine

Street.⁴ The American Revolutionary War hardly disturbed the tempo of his trade even though towards the end of 1780 there were scattered rumours of renewed invasion attempts from the south. Thibodeau prospered, sold his first property to a potter-friend newly arrived in the village, and in 1786 moved to a better location on the river bank just outside Saint-Denis.⁵ His new house and his shop were solidly built of square timber, and in 1816 his household boasted imported faience and stone chinaware as well as the earthenware *cruches*, *terrines*, jugs and pitchers of his own creation.⁶ As business progressed Thibodeau had branched out profitably into real estate and loans so that he was able to enjoy a comfortable retirement.

Meanwhile, encouraged no doubt by Thibodeau's success, more potters were opening shop in the village. In 1784 Pierre Besse arrived from St-Roch-des-Aulnaies (below Quebec) and bought property on St. Catherine Street almost next to Thibodeau's.⁷ Besse soon shared in the general prosperity and was able to move to a riverside location by 1791. The third master-potter of these early years followed the same pattern. Louis Robichaud, an Acadian friend of Thibodeau's, had arrived in Saint-Denis in 1785 and bought Thibodeau's original shop on St. Catherine Street.⁸ The district was booming. Population expansion in the whole St. Lawrence area meant more customers, more markets for crockery, and Robichaud soon had a flourishing business. In 1794 he too moved to the riverside and a few years later secured from the seigneur the rights to a part of the river bed itself so that his clay supply was assured.⁹

It was the era of the individual in pottery. Each potter worked in his own shop in the traditional manner with one or two helpers. There seems to have

been no formal agreement between potters or between potter and merchant, but in Saint-Denis at this time the potter was in the happy position of being sure that the merchant would purchase all his wares as they were offered. Since the market was ready to take all they could produce, there was no real competition. By 1800 the early apprentices of the original potters were safely launched in their own concerns. Potter-families were emerging. The Duplaquet dit Lambert family, for example, had nine members of the family in the pottery trade in Saint-Denis in two generations. Antoine Daniel had been hired in 1796 by Jean-Baptiste Lambert to teach the trade of pottery-making to his son Antoine Duplaquet dit Lambert. The father bought the property and provided all materials as well as lodging for Daniel while Antoine served the required apprenticeship. The profits of the pottery were divided half and half.¹⁰ Like other successful potters Antoine Duplaquet dit Lambert continued to farm on the side and supplemented his income in this way: a wise move, as later events were to prove.

An 1810 inventory¹¹ of the estate of potter Jean-Baptiste Maillet, first of a line of at least 11 potters in his family in three generations, gives some idea of the living conditions of the time. Maillet, his wife, and eight children were crowded into a house that consisted only of one room and a kitchen downstairs, and an attic above. Maillet's house, a shed, and his potter's shop were all squeezed onto a piece of land on the main street covering only 26 by 60 feet! Maillet owned two other nearby lots: one with a stable, the other with a house. Like so many of the potters of Saint-Denis, Maillet's holdings also included a farm lot which could serve as a source of clay for his pots and firewood for his kiln. Maillet's pottery

shop centred on the vital *fourneau* and contained his potter's wheel (of the treadle type), a mill to grind the clay, a crusher, a ladle, two augers, one lot of wheel spokes, an old robe and a sheepskin, a scraper and a hammer and his stock of 40 dozen unglazed pots.

Each master-potter in Saint-Denis had trained apprentices so there were enough men available for the growing pottery industry to keep up with the increasing demands of the expanding Richelieu valley area. Apprenticeship usually lasted five or six years although one of Simon Thibodeau's employees had been apprenticed by his widowed mother at the age of eight and remained in training until he was 20.¹² By the time this young man, Nicolas Prevost, was in trade as a potter the area's economy was in full bloom. The farming lands of the Richelieu valley were at peak production in the first three decades of the nineteenth century and Saint-Denis itself hummed with commercial activity. Steamers made regular round-trips between Saint-Denis and Montreal. Ships shuttled in and out of the port, bringing in merchandise and carrying out grain. There were tanneries, carriage works, a distillery, and firms manufacturing linseed oil, wooden clocks, spinning wheels and even hats.¹³ The potteries were as busy as the granaries, and the skyline could boast nearly a score of smoking pottery chimneys as well as nine windmills.¹⁴ By 1836 crockery imports (mostly from Britain) seem to have been reduced to 60 per cent of the total requirements of the province and the potters of Saint-Denis were producing about half of all the earthenware originating in Lower Canada.¹⁵ Production had reached its peak. The year 1836 was to prove both the apogee and the beginning of the slump for Saint-Denis.

The effects of the opening of the

railway between St. Johns and La Prairie were not felt immediately but the harvest of 1836 was an almost total failure in Lower Canada, and the following year the region was in the grip of a severe economic depression. Political discontent grew as the communities of the Richelieu valley felt the pinch. Some potters, involved in the fortunes of their communities, became involved in the new political movements. Jean-Baptiste Maillet (son of the Maillet whose household was described above), for example, joined the *Patriotes* and was later forced to seek asylum in the United States from the consequences of his association with the extremists of the movement.¹⁶ Saint-Denis repulsed one attack by several companies of British troops on November 23, 1837 but fell before a second stronger attack one week later. The discovery in the Richelieu of the mutilated body of Lieutenant Weir enraged the troops, and after pillaging the village, they set fire to it. Damage was severe and Saint-Denis never completely recovered. François Duplaquet dit Lambert was one master-potter who felt unable to continue. He rented his pottery to his sons Antoine and François in the spring of 1839¹⁷ while he himself returned to the farming his family had carried on as a sideline for several generations. His sons were never to win back the profitable trade he had known, for the rising of 1837 served as a catalyst in the process of decline which was inevitable once Saint-Denis had lost its position of importance as a trading centre. The opening of the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railroad between St. Johns and La Prairie in 1836 had been one of the signals of change. Saint-Denis was bypassed completely when in 1853 the St. Lawrence and Atlantic Railroad completed a new route between Montreal and Portland *via* St-Hyacinthe,

The Farrars of St. Johns (St-Jean) and Iberville

crossing the Richelieu at St-Hilaire.

Saint-Denis was no longer the hub of the area. The community's energy began to wane. The potters left were not strong enough to combat the challenge of the increasingly popular wares of the tinsmiths and they were overshadowed in their own craft by the growing activity in St. Johns where American stoneware was being produced from 1840. A few attempts were made to improve techniques and expand the range of products. In 1844 Joseph Duplaquet dit Lambert's inventory showed attempts at double-firing and liquid-glazing.¹⁸ But it was too late to win back that portion of the market that Canadian-made products could secure in a field dominated by imports.

As the potteries closed, the potters looked for jobs elsewhere. In 1811 Joseph Maillet had moved to Ste-Marie to operate a pottery there for Seigneur Thomas P.J. Taschereau. Now the Maillet family scattered completely—Amable and his brother Narcisse went to St. Johns sometime after 1843 and joined the Farrars. Édouard went to St-Ours about 1845 and Jean-Baptiste left for St-Eustache about 1851 with his son. Siméon Joubert, who had moved to St-Ours in 1830 made a short-lived attempt to return to Saint-Denis in 1839 but left again for Machiche in 1840.¹⁹ The potters whose families had worked in Saint-Denis for generations began to disappear from local records. By 1871 the only four potters left in Saint-Denis bore the names of those two men who had introduced pottery-making to the village a century before: Courtemanche and Belanger. Before the nineteenth century closed, no potters were left in Saint-Denis, once the pottery capital of Lower Canada.

The potters of Saint-Denis were individual, unsophisticated rural craftsmen producing work designed expressly for the rural community around them. There had been no real market for more expensive decorated majolica and they seem to have produced none. For those who wanted and could afford it there was Staffordshire porcelain flooding Canada in the first half of the nineteenth century. Stoneware was also coming in from Britain as the manufacturers realized the particular needs of the colonial market. But New England potters had also seen the value of stoneware and managed to establish a North American industry. Stoneware was harder than earthenware and cheaper than porcelain, and—most important—relatively easy to produce given suitable conditions. The most important factor in establishing a stoneware industry in Canada to compete with imported goods would be geographical location. Easy access to transportation and consequent lowering of cost were vital for bringing in raw materials not readily available and for shipping out the finished products to a wide market.

St. Johns, in 1838 much smaller in size than neighbouring Saint-Denis, had not been affected as seriously either by the turbulent uprisings or the harsh repressive measures that followed. The only railroad in Canada was the line running from Montreal to St. Johns. Here the railway connected with the Canadian terminus of the Lake Champlain steamship services. The Chambly canal was under construction and would open up navigation to the St. Lawrence. Industry established here then could not only ship in raw materials at relatively low cost but also reach out to an expanded market. St. Johns was the customs port on the Richelieu and a rapidly growing, prosperous, bustling town in 1840.²⁰ It was