A CLOSER LOOK  A Long-Lot Landscape

The most striking feature of the landscape in rural French Canada is the almost limitless array of long, narrow rectangles that subdivide the agricultural land. With the notable exception of the Eastern Townships, property lines and field boundaries replicate the pattern with faithful precision, disdainful of topographic variation, throughout most of the region. Moreover, farmsteads are almost invariably positioned at the same ends of adjacent rectangles so that neighboring farmhouses exist in close proximity to one another with remarkable linearity of location. This distinctive contemporary landscape morphology is a heritage of the earliest days of French settlement in Lower Canada and survived with tenacious persistence and little change for three centuries.

The first element in the pattern was the establishment of a seigneurial system. In the seventeenth century the kings of France awarded land grants (called seigneuries) with feudal privileges to individual entrepreneurs (seigneurs). The seigneurs, in turn, were expected to subgrant parcels of land to peasant farmers (habitants). The seigneuries varied greatly in size, but each fronted on a river and extended inland for a mile or two in some cases and up to almost 100 miles (160 km) in others. A total of about 240 seigneuries was created, involving about 8 million acres (3.2 million ha) of land, mostly along the St. Lawrence River.

The typical land grant (called a roture) within a seigneurty was a long, narrow rectangle, fronting for 150 to 200 yards (135 to 180 m) along the river and extending inland for a mile or more. This gave each farm direct access to the river, which was the only transportation route in the early years. When all riverside rotures had been granted, a road would be built along their inland margin, paralleling the river, and a second rank (or rang) of rotures would be developed. In some cases, up to a dozen rangs were successively arrayed back from the river, separated from one another by parallel concession roads that ran without break for dozens, or occasionally even hundreds of miles (Fig. 7-a).

The habitants invariably built their farmsteads at the end of their rotures.


FIGURE 7-a  A hypothetical model of rang settlement patterns in Quebec. (From Canada Before Confederation: A Study in Historical Geography by R. Cole Harris and John Warkentin, p. 74. Copyright © 1974 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Reprinted by permission.)
adjacent to the river or road; thus an almost continuous string of individual settlements grew up along transportation routes. The most common settlement pattern was the rang double, in which houses were built on either side of the concession road, thus serving rotures that extended in opposite directions from the road. By the early 1800s many seigneuries contained six or seven rangs double along roads roughly parallel to the river and linked by occasional crossroads with no settlement along them. The custom of equal inheritance rights resulted in increasing fractionization of the rotures along the lines of the original subdivision, with each succeeding fraction becoming narrower so that each farmer still had access to river or road (Fig. 7-b). The original "long-lot" farms were designed to be about ten times as long as they were wide, but repeated linear subdivision sometimes created units that were virtually too narrow to farm economically.

The French population grew slowly at the outset, reaching about 3000 by 1660, but the seigneurial domain continued to expand along the St. Lawrence, reaching downstream to the Gaspé Peninsula and upstream to the border of Upper Canada; it also extended up a number of tributaries, particularly the Chaudière, the Richelieu, and the Ottawa.

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FIGURE 7-b An example of the rang-long lot pattern of rural settlement in a portion of the St. Lawrence Valley. The land ownership pattern of such an area can be visualized as long, narrow properties running at right angles to the roads (map data from Army Survey Establishment 1:50,000 series, Beloeil 31H/11W sheet, 1965).

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b Deffontaines noted that at the end of the French rule a traveler could have seen almost every house in Canada by making a canoe trip along the St. Lawrence and Richelieu rivers. P. Deffontaines, "Le Rang: Type de Peuplement Rural du Canada Français," Proceedings, 17th International Congress of the International Geographical Union (1952), p. 723.