This article will attempt to identify particular French Canadian-made axe types prior to 1760. It will address, examine the origin, and clarify some of the confusing terminology in the study of these implements and point out some of the more common, but subtle, features of these axes and hatchets, and help differentiate them between those made in France, or in the “English style.” By using French archival documents, contemporary iconography and the three examples of known French axes from tightly dated French archaeological sites that the authors are aware of at this time (Axes excavated at Fort Beauséjour, Fort Gaspereau and from the Intendant’s Palace at Quebec featured in this article and the next), a picture gradually emerges.

Although numerous excavated axe and hatchet heads throughout North America (in both private and public collections) may indeed be French because of particular “French” attributes, because of the English and American occupations and activity in these same areas after 1760 (the surrender of Canada), the “rock solid” archaeological French axe is extremely rare. Realistically, all legitimate conclusions can only be drawn from these singular examples. It is apparent that, like any local, regional or national artistic form or craft (e.g., paintings, guns, furniture, architecture, fashion, etc.), forged products frequently reflected the style and technical attributes of the blacksmith’s “lineage/school,” culture or time period. While we should, of course, expect great variation with any handmade item, the French, nevertheless, seemed to follow recognizable forms and styles in their axes.

Besides the broad category of axes termed “Biscayan” discussed in Journal of the Early Americas, Vol. 2.4, a variety of axes found in New France are simply recorded as casse-têtes (hatchets), haches de traite (trade axes), haches de service (service axes), haches à bucher (felling axes) or simply haches (axes) which are at times noted with their respective sizes and weight (i.e., large, mid-size, and small). As confusing as this could be for us today, it is important to understand that during the 17th and 18th centuries, French commercial or military records sometimes applied different terms to the same product, depending on the place or situation of the individual writing the inventory. Axes were often listed or described differently along the way from their production source to the end-user or were identified using different terms by various individuals (e.g., private merchants or royally appointed enumerators at the King’s storehouses, posts, and forts). For this reason, we need to place these axes within sub-
categories based on their purpose/ function or distinctive “descriptive terms,” which may lead to a better understanding of the types of axes used and manufactured in New France.

**Haches du pays (Country-made Axes)**

As discussed in our previous article, many of the axes that were originally sold or distributed throughout New France were ordered and manufactured through blacksmiths working out of the town of Bayonne and sent to Quebec, Acadia or Louisiana where they were distributed accordingly.1 After studying a number of surviving yearly statements (sporadically dating between 1719 and 1749) which were sent from the authorities at Quebec to France each year requesting merchandise, weapons, and ammunition for the following year, it would seem that besides the years 1719,2 1720,3 and 1730,4 respectively, continental-made axes, referenced by colonial bureaucrats as Biscayan or Bayonne-made axes, were simply not requested for Canada, possibly due to a number of reasons (e.g., price, quality, geo-political/economical events, supply and demand.). According to archaeological finds and archival documents, as of the 18th century French colonial blacksmiths appear to have been increasingly producing specialized articles throughout New France. Primary source records reveal that by the second quarter of the 18th century, local colonial authorities seem to have considerably reduced what was needed as far as European-made axes to replenish the King’s storehouses. French Canadian blacksmiths working out of the St. Lawrence Valley and at posts and forts in the interior appear to have taken over the production of axes, in replacement of the European-made Biscayan axes which were traditionally needed for Canada, by making colonial copies which took on various designations based on their intended use or purpose. That being said, axes from the mother country were still apparently sent to this colony past the 1720s where, for example, Biscayan axes which were mostly destined for western posts such as Rainy Lake Post as well as the Illinois Territory were still recorded in large numbers in Montreal merchant-outfitters’ ledger books all the way up to 1741.1

As of the second quarter of the 18th century, however, numerous French archival records (merchant, military, etc.) reveal that Canadian-made axes were gaining an ever-increasing popularity. By the 1720s, a specific type of locally produced axe or a grouping of axes would be described as “hache du pays”, literally meaning “an axe made in the country” or a “country-made axe” revealing that these axes were now manufactured in the colony as opposed to Europe. For example, Nolan-Lamarque (a fur trader at Montreal) provided in 1729 a number of mid-sized “country-made axes” (haches du pays) for the fur trade, priced at 50 sols each, whereas a few years later Alexis Lemoine dit Monière, another Montreal merchant, took note of “12 haches du pays” (12 country-made axes) priced at 50 sols. This last merchant-outfitter later described a dozen more priced at 45 sols a piece, as having a steeldge.2 These locally-made Canadian axes appear to have been so popular that even a certain official named Cadet, who had returned home to France after having served in New France during the Seven Years War, stated, “You will also bring me two axes weighing between 5 and 6 livres, in the style of that country [Canada], not in the English style, and in the way we used to make them, already hafted.”3

In 1735, a post-mortem inventory made at the Montreal merchant fur trader named Jacques LeBer listed a total of 79 “cassettes du pays” (country-made hatchets) valued at 20 sols each.4 We are further informed that service axes (haches de service) were also made by local blacksmiths at Montreal where, for example, a dozen of these axes manufactured by a smith named Delorne were destined for the Illinois post in 1735.5

**Haches de service (Service Axes)**

Although there might be other specifically named axes in the cargo of large freight canoes going to the interior, Montreal merchant outfitters (but notably never by the military) occasionally designated certain axes as service axe, apparently for the sole use of company employees in a boat crew, fort, or outpost. These axes were likely used for clearing waterways, making trail footings, cutting and limbing trees, making canoe “cabanes” or poling rods, hewing timber, erecting palisades, or simply cutting firewood. Gérin-Lajoie notes the following regarding these axes supplied to the merchant-outfitter Monière: “… they are often mentioned in the part of the invoice dealing with the canoe equipment or rigging. They must have been a fairly broad and sturdy type of axe, as they are priced three times more than other types.”6 One can be assured that many of these certainly had steel edging, not only because several accounts describe this feature, but also because of their high price when they are mentioned on inventory lists without any mention of a steel edge, or compared to other axes on the same inventory lists. In fact, they seem to be the highest valued axes on merchant’s outfitting lists. This cost further implies that they must have been large and well-made axes. For instance, two of these particular axes were recorded in 1731 and priced individually at a costly 7 livres 30 sols each, whereas a few years later a single hache de service valued at 8 livres was sent to a Sioux post and another two such axes were destined for the Illinois post.7 In contrast, large Biscayan axes included on a fur trade outfitting list in 1728 were priced at 4 livres each.8

---

1. Gérin-Lajoie notes the following regarding these axes supplied to the merchant-outfitter Monière: “... they are often mentioned in the part of the invoice dealing with the canoe equipment or rigging. They must have been a fairly broad and sturdy type of axe, as they are priced three times more than other types.”
2. One can be assured that many of these certainly had steel edging, not only because several accounts describe this feature, but also because of their high price when they are mentioned on inventory lists without any mention of a steel edge, or compared to other axes on the same inventory lists. In fact, they seem to be the highest valued axes on merchant’s outfitting lists. This cost further implies that they must have been large and well-made axes. For instance, two of these particular axes were recorded in 1731 and priced individually at a costly 7 livres 30 sols each, whereas a few years later a single hache de service valued at 8 livres was sent to a Sioux post and another two such axes were destined for the Illinois post. In contrast, large Biscayan axes included on a fur trade outfitting list in 1728 were priced at 4 livres each.
Axes termed “haches à bûcher” (felling axes) were recorded by the hundreds in the King’s storehouses only at Quebec in 1747 (928 units) and 1749 (463 units), priced considerably less at 4 livres 10 sols per unit than the haches de service described by civilian merchant outfitters. A 1747 statement listing merchandise provided to the King’s storehouses at Quebec by a number of merchants and artisans show that the haches à bûcher were valued at 4 livres 10 sols while large axes (groses haches) were esteemed at 5 livres in the same document, suggesting that the felling axes may have been, based on price alone, lighter or of a lower grade than the large axes.16 At Montreal during these same respective years, very expensive axes simply termed “large axes” (grandes haches or haches grandes) were priced at 5 livres 10 sols, a much lower price than the manufac-tured equipment of the King’s storehouses during wartimes could be considered official military equipment, it would appear that the military likely used an axe similar their civilian counterparts, and therefore used the descriptive term “haches a bûcher” (felling axes) or “grandes haches” (large axes) because of this similarity. In fact, many Habitants living in the St. Lawrence Valley were also recorded as owning one or more of these axes, such as Jean Beaugis, Habitants of Beauport, who in 1751 owned “2 axes à bûcher with their handles valued together at 5 livres.”17 Axes stocked up in the King’s storehouses will be further discussed in the “Axes used in war campaigns” section.

In 1752, two axes belonging to the King and presumably of the felling type, since they were stolen from the Forges du Saint-Maurice (King’s Forges near Trois-Rivières) by a woodcutter, were described as “…two axes at the King’s forges whereby those axes were lent to him to work for the service of the said Forges...two axes, one hafted, with a fleur-de-lis on its left side and the other [axe], which has not yet served, is marked on the same side with a fleur-de-lis and with semi-parallelis on the right side...” The “semi-parallelis” are possibly the writer’s analogy to “semi-parallelis” which was an engineering term used in fortification plans to refer to a half star-shaped mark or symbol impressed on the right side of the axe, which was probably a maker’s mark “(pointon)” used in conjunction with the King’s “fleur-de-lis” on the left side. Although no official ordinance has been found at the time of this writing demanding that certain Canadian-made forged tools destined for official use under the King of France in Canada be marked with a fleur-de-lis, it is a logical and possible explanation that certain axes may have been stamped this way to counteract fraud and theft as far as the quantity of steel/iron used in making these tools, or any other similar quality control issue. In fact, a Royal ordinance dating between 1744-1759 required all retailers (merchants, bakers, butchers...) having commercial dealings in the town of Quebec and its suburbs to bring forth to appointed officials their measurement units (aunes, weights, measuring recipients...) to have them verified and marked with a fleur-de-lis in order to avoid any fraudulent transactions.21 Interestingly, “S. Pointons fleur de lict” which can be translated to “5 fleur-de-lys punch” (or stamping tools) were found at the King’s storehouses at Quebec in 1752 under the section labelled “Munitions and utensils for trips and voyages, public works, for the service of the King’s storehouses and offices.”22

While some axes are termed “hache de traite” (“axe for the trade” or “trade axe”) in New France, others that are also clearly included on fur trade related inventory lists or allocated for those destinations are simply termed “hache” (axe). This may lead us to believe that the expression “trade axe” was merely a random or arbitrary term used by individuals, authorities, or officials (and modern historical translators) relating to French fur trade records, and was apparently only used as an added descriptive detail on occasional inventory entries, strongly suggesting that there may not have been any particular difference between certain common axes and those referred to as a “hache de traite” (trade axe). Further, contrary to popular belief today, the expression hache de traite (trade axe) was seldom used by the 18th century Frenchmen living in New France. This was likely due to the fact that because such great numbers of axes were destined for the fur trade at that time anyway, the adjective, “trade” (in “trade axe”), simply became viewed as obvious and therefore redundant. Nevertheless, both civilian “axes” and those for the Indian trade apparently came in three sizes: Large,
goods a number of small haches de traite (trade axes). The following century, axes labelled "trade axe" were also at times inventoried at fur trade posts whereas at Fort Niagara in 1739, one could acquire a trade axe for 4 raccoon pelts. Colonial merchant-outfitters also sporadically noted certain axes destined for the fur trade as "haches de traite" (trade axe). Certain Canadian blacksmiths were also making haches de traite since in 1753; 135 of these were made by the craftsman named Delorme for the merchant-outfitter Monière to be sent to the Illinois territory.

Occurrences of axes which were nonetheless used in the fur trade without being labelled a "trade axe" by the French were quite common judging from the documents we have consulted. For instance, the beaver pelt exchange rate was allotted one large axe. The following decade, a total of four mid-sized axes were given for the women of eight Hurons who were returning to the upper village after a campaign on New-England. The medium and large axes distributed to these Natives likely served to split wood as opposed to being a hand-held tool or weapon. Many mid-sized and large axes were also provided by a number of colonial craftsmen to replenish the King's storehouses. In the 1740s at Quebec, for example, the axes supplied in large quantities by a number of individuals included "large axes" valued at 5 livres, "mid-sized axes" at 3 livres a piece, unspecified axes at 4 livres 15 sols, and "haches a bucher" (woodcutting axes) at 4 livres 10 sols each.

A number of these axes were certainly redetermined to a number of men when travelling whether as part of a war campaign or of a commercial nature. For example, 18 large axes (groses haches) were provided to Frenchmen in 18 canoes during the Chiscawack Campaign of 1739, indicating that each canoe was allotted one large axe. The following decade, 78 large axes were used to outfit 39 canoes for the officers of the troops, militiamen, and Habitants, now indicating the allocation of two large axes per canoe. This practice also applied to Native parties when that very year 17 Ottawais (Ottowas) Natives were provided with two 6-seater canoes and 4 large axes. At Montreal in 1752, a section of the yearly inventory list of the King's storehouses which enumerated the gear used for canoe trips and for the use of the storehouses included 27 large axes.

During the entire period of the Seven Years War in New France, axes were often documented as part of war munitions and likely served as an indispensable tool during a siege or when erecting fortifications. The "Papiers" La Pause dating to July of 1755 revealed that one kettle and one axe were distributed at Montreal and at Lachine for each contingent of soldiers. In the winter of 1756, each officer was given both a small and a large axe, whereas each company was issued "...4 large axes, 8 small axes, 4 hoes whereas 2 with spikes, 4 wood shovels, 4 sickles, 4 billhooks. Monsieur de la Pause also commented that tools received at the beginning of the campaign of 1757 included "...53 [repaired] axes, 4 per company and 5 to the grenadiers; 106 casse-têtes, ditto, 8 per company and 10 to the grenadiers, from which 52 were paid 1 livres 10 sols each," whereas the upkeep of the troops and equipment for the winter campaign included one casse-tête per person and one large axe per four. Officers, on the other hand, were recorded as given one casse-tête and one "hache pour la cabane" which can be translated to "an axe for the shelter" corresponding to a larger axe used for the service of the officer. By 1758, the available axes or the ones most currently in use were apparently so poorly made, that Bougainville himself stated the following with regards to the battle of Carillon: "All axes were made of bog iron without any steel, as well all of them bent like pastry shells on the first strike. The colony almost perished by the poor quality of axes."
Part III of Axes in New France will provide the conclusion to this article and will cover the famed hatchet called the French axe that the English often termed Tomahawk.

(Special thanks to, Francis Back, Marie-Hélène Daviau at the Laboratoire d’archéologie, Ville de Québec, Collections archéologiques de la Ville de Québec, Aurélie Desgens at the Laboratoire et Réserve d’archéologie du Québec, Phil Dunnng at Parks Canada, Brian S. Jaeschke at Mackinac State Historic Parks, and Don Troiani, and Chris D. Fox at Fort Ticonderoga)

About the Authors: Author of The French Trade Links to North America, Kevin Gladysz lives and teaches in Ontario, Canada, where he is actively researching French and Native material culture as well as studying 17th and 18th primary source French records relating to the history of New France.

Since 1983 Ken Hamilton has been an independent seventeenth and eighteenth-century material culture researcher and author focusing on French and Natives in the Northeast. He lives in central Maine with his lovely Penobscot fiancée, Nicole, in the Northeast. He lives in central Maine with his lovely Penobscot fiancée, Nicole, where he is actively researching French-era material culture and teaching in Ontario, Canada, where he is actively researching French-era material culture and teaching in Ontario, Canada.

Endnotes for Axes in New France: Part II: French Colonial-made Axes by Kevin Gladysz and Ken Hamilton:


3 LAC-MG1-C11A, vol. 40, f.220v


5 BANQ: (À Montréal): Charles Nolan-Lamarque, Livres de comptes.—1727-1737, Cote: P239, S1, D1: July 5, 1728, p.139.

6 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

7 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.


9 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

10 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

11 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

12 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

13 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

14 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

15 BANQ: (À Montréal): Charles Nolan-Lamarque, Livres de comptes.—1727-1737, Cote: P239, S1, D1: July 5, 1728, p.139.

16 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

17 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

18 Gérin-Lajoie, Axes.

19 BANQ (À Montréal): Charles Nolan-Lamarque, Livres de comptes.—1727-1737, Cote: P239, S1, D1: July 5, 1728, p.139.

20 BANQ (À Montréal): Charles Nolan-Lamarque, Livres de comptes.—1727-1737, Cote: P239, S1, D1: July 5, 1728, p.139.

21 BANQ (À Montréal): Charles Nolan-Lamarque, Livres de comptes.—1727-1737, Cote: P239, S1, D1: July 5, 1728, p.139.


26 BANQ: (À Montréal): Charles Nolan-Lamarque, Livres de comptes.—1727-1737, Cote: P239, S1, D1: July 5, 1728, p.140.


50 Le journal de M. de Bourgoinville. Le 2 août 1758., Rapport de l’archiviste de la province de Québec de 1923-1924-Tome 4 (Québec: Le - A. Prud’homme Imprimeur De Sa Majesté Le Roy, 1924) 353. (Toutes les haches étaient de fer brûl sans acier, aussi toutes étaient comme des sablés aux premiers coups. La colonie a fini privé par la mauvaise qualité de bois.)


55 Rapport de l’archiviste de la province de Québec: Tome 12, 1931-1932. Relation de Mr Poulard envoyé a Mr le marquis de Montcalm. p.55.