Merchants, Landlords, Magistrates

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Merchants, Landlords, Magistrates: The Depont Family in Eighteenth-Century France.

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La médiocrité en tout genre assure le bonheur et des succès à la longue. L'homme d'esprit connaît à peu près ses limites, il se compare, et n'est pas toujours par conséquent content de lui-même. Le sot est trop souvent averti de son impuissance, pour ne pas se sentir humilié. L'homme médiocre est le seul mortel heureux, soit qu'il descende en lui-même, soit qu'il se répande au dehors: l'imagination ne l'entraîne jamais, et il se glorifie d'être exempt de ses écarts. Il cite avec satisfaction les erreurs, les fautes des gens d'esprit. La froideur, la lenteur du sien sont à ses yeux du jugement, de la sagesse, de la raison. C'est un pilote sur une petite barque, qui ne quitte pas la côte, et qui est plus occupé de compter les naufrages des vaisseaux qui voguent en pleine mer, que les succès de ceux qui arrivent à bon port.

—Sénac de Meilhan

"Avantages de la Médiocrité"
La Rochelle has lost little of its eighteenth-century character. The sardine boats and small fishing craft still flit between the massive stone towers of Saint-Nicolas and La Chaine at the entrance to the inner harbor. Looking seaward from the nearby tower of La Lanterne, one can still see the bare outline of Cardinal Richelieu’s famous dike, a thin line of white-caps before the island of Ré a few miles beyond. Closer at hand are the city ramparts, reminders of La Rochelle’s medieval privileges lost forever after the prolonged and desperate siege of 1628. Today the sunny calm of this French resort is broken only by ice cream hawkers and running children, a middle-class vacation spot not yet discovered by American and German tourists. Yet two centuries ago the outer harbor was filled with merchantmen and slave ships. Silt forced them to remain outside the twin towers, and their cargoes of indigo, sugar, cotton, and beaver skins from the Antilles and Canada had to be transferred to shallow-draft vessels, or barques, for landing at the wharves.1 If La Rochelle lacked the proverbial forest of masts hugging the quais, it lacked none of the commercial vitality of its sister ports, Nantes and Bordeaux.

Turning toward the inner harbor, one was confronted with a façade of stone buildings pierced by the Porte de la Grosse Horloge, a massive clock tower, typical of port cities of the Old Regime, and perhaps indicative of a style of life in which time was important. Through the stone arch of this clock tower one entered the principal artery of La Rochelle. The rue du Palais curved gently eastward from the fish market, where the fishmongers still shout “sans sels” (fresh sardines) along the arcades, or porches, past the law courts to the cathedral facing the Place du Château. On the rue du Palais and on the narrow adjoining streets—the core of the “Old City”—lived the officiers and the mer-
chants, perhaps a hundred families in this tight city of seventeen thousand people. Within sight of the clock tower the merchants and shipowners were building a new Chamber of Commerce, which, when finished in 1785, would surpass in beauty if not size the Bourse at Bordeaux. The building was designed to face inward on a flagstone court divided by a Doric colonnade and reflecting the sunlight from stately French windows. The sober elegance of the building was broken by two sculptured bas-reliefs appropriately representing nautical instruments and the high poop decks of the cargo vessels that had made the whole project possible. Much more than the Renaissance hôtel de ville where the Huguenot mayor, Jean Guiton, was reputed to have expressed municipal independence by plunging a dagger into the council table, the new Chamber of Commerce represented the focus of local energies in eighteenth-century La Rochelle.

There are few episodes in the economic history of France that evoke more myths than the Atlantic trade in the eighteenth century. Contrasted with the slow development of agriculture and cottage industry, overseas trade, as evidenced by the ad valorem trade statistics, seemed to grow by leaps and bounds. It was an economy entirely apart from the hinterland. The Atlantic ports of Nantes, Bordeaux, and La Rochelle, as well as Marseilles and Le Havre, were regarded as fabulous sources of quick profit by contemporaries, “growth sectors” in the words of more recent economic historians. The Atlantic trade, and that meant the “Islands” for the French merchants, suggested a number of romantic myths as well. It evoked images of cargo ships off the Guinea and Senegalese coasts, the exotic lure of a tropical island, the shipments of sugar, coffee, and indigo, quasi-luxuries that made six-digit sales for the merchant partners. If one could forget the distant horrors of the slave trade, the predominant impression seemed to be one of adventure, exoticism, and wealth, far from the world of the provincial rentier. The Chamber of Commerce at La Rochelle knew how to evoke these images when the occasion demanded. Even after the loss of Canada and Louisiana in 1763, the chamber could proclaim: “There are no mines of gold and silver in the French colonies as in those of Spain and Portugal; they yield only sugar, coffee, indigo, and cotton, but these products are more precious than the gold of Peru or Mexico because they are the source of an immense trade for France.”

But the greatest myth of all was that of fabulous profits. Only recently have historians begun to measure profits more precisely. Although merchants have a way of hiding their balance sheets from posterity, there are a number of indications that suggest a more sobre picture.
First, it required considerable capital to build and outfit a sailing vessel for the Atlantic trade. Second, it was a long trip from La Rochelle or Nantes to the Guinea coast and then to Saint-Domingue before the return to France, from eighteen months to two years depending on the prevailing winds and, above all, the time required to negotiate and liquidate the cargoes. It is for these reasons that an overseas venture required substantial capital accumulation and a willingness to wait for returns. Moreover, few vessels lasted more than three or four Atlantic voyages so that the rate of amortization of each ship was high. In 1722 a partnership of four merchant families at La Rochelle invested the following sums for the voyage of the *Saint-Paul* bound for the West Indies to sell slaves and bring back sugar and indigo.8

| Cost of the ship (ca. 300 tons) | 20,000 livres |
| Fitting out the ship (food for the crew, ship supplies, etc.) | 16,951 |
| Cargo (brandy, guns, cheap cloth, etc.) | 97,805 |
| **Total** | **134,756 livres** |

In 1729 the *Perle* was purchased, outfitted, and stocked with a cargo for 138,888 livres.9 Vessels of larger tonnage, five hundred tons, for example, might require as much as 200,000 livres as an initial investment.10 Nor did costs end there. Consider the third and last voyage of the *Saint-Louis* which left La Rochelle in early 1741 near the peak of the slave trade at La Rochelle. The entire account of this *campagne* is worth inspection for what it reveals not only about profitability, but also about the human dimensions of the trade in “black ivory” (table 1.1).

If one assumes that the cost of the ship had been amortized, there is still the cost of the initial cargo and outfitting. If the evaluation for the purpose of insurance is a reasonable approximation, there were 130,000 livres in expenses still to be liquidated. True, 79,543 livres were in “accounts receivable” at Saint-Domingue.11 If this sum is added to the income side of the ledger, the bookkeeping profit amounted to 10,000 livres, or about 10 percent of the value of merchandise sold at La Rochelle at the end of the voyage. Unfortunately, the planters on Saint-Domingue were notoriously poor payers.

The six merchants that divided the proceeds of the voyage of the *Saint-Louis* represented a group of Protestant families that had invested in common shipping ventures for more than a decade before 1740. They were almost all related by marriage. Jacques Rasteau had married a Seignette and their daughter had married a Carayon; the widow Carayon was sister-in-law of Paul Depont, and Jean Vivier’s mother was a Depont. This family group was typical of the merchant community of
Table 1.1. General Account of the Third Voyage of the Vessel Saint-Louis, 16 February 1743 (Captain Seignette du Jardin)

**Destination:** the Guinea coast and Saint-Louis, coast of Saint-Domingue

**Résumé** of operations and management, including the sale of “captives” and return cargo, and claims left in the hands of MM. Mirandes and Mende (agents on the island).

**Purchased** on the Guinea coast (March 1741):
- Negro males: 229
- Negro females: 71
- Negro boys: 9
- Negro girls: 2
- Total “captives”: 311

**Cost:**
- 84 pièces Indiennes (cotton cloth)
- 37 pièces Lemenais (cloth)
- 29 ancrees Brandy

**Sale** at Saint-Louis, coast of Saint-Domingue:
- 238 Negroes sold: 255,850 livres
- 71 Negroes died before the sale
- 1 musician (pianiste) left at Cormanti (Gold Coast) where he died
- 1 blind man left at Saint-Louis and can be considered lost
- Total: 311
- Merchandise for the return can be considered a pure loss except for guns, pistols, 2 horses, etc.: 5,386 livres
- Total: 261,236 livres

**Employment** of the said sum at Saint-Domingue:
- 25,748 livres for 146 barriques (barrels) of unrefined sugar
- 101,591 livres for 42 futailles (casks) of indigo
- 79,543 livres in bills (billets) in hands of agents to collect
- 54,354 livres in separate itemized account including bonuses for ship’s surgeon, local taxes, droits, fines, and other expenses at Saint-Domingue
- Total: 261,236 livres

**Receipts**

Sales at La Rochelle (23 July 1742)
- Indigo sold to eleven buyers for transshipment including:
  - M. Alexandre at Bordeaux
  - M. E. Weiss and Co.
  - M. E. Vivier of La Rochelle
  - M. Schellebeck and Sons
- Sale price: 67,384 livres
- Freight charges: 5,579
- Net: 61,805

La Rochelle, or more precisely of those two dozen Protestant families of armateurs, outfitters and associates whose close family bonds greatly facilitated the amassing of capital and maintained the mutual trust so necessary in overseas ventures of such complexity and risk. One senses a certain toughness in this tight community evidenced by a terse “Moy Rasteau for 12/32” in the accounts or by Paul Depont’s note in the margin of his journal: “It has pleased God to have given me a loss on this voyage.” These marginal notations were formulas to be sure, but austere ones all the same.
Table 1.1. (continued)

Sugar sold to five buyers for transshipment including:
M. Allard-Belin of La Rochelle
M. E. Vivier and Co.
Madame Seignette

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>31,051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freight charges</td>
<td>10,206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net</td>
<td>20,845</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diverse merchandise sold locally:
Sugar 11,127 livres
Indigo 4,822
Cocoa 2,829
Other (tobacco, coffee, cotton) 223
Total 19,001

Other (8 dozen hats for blacks, 15 oz. gold, etc.) merchandise sold locally, acquired on the Guinea coast 2,028

Ship inspected and found in need of extensive repairs. The partners have decided to abandon it and sell the dismantled items (anchors, mast, cables, cannon, etc.).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total receipts</td>
<td>108,794</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Expenses:
Commission due Captain Seignette du Jardin by contract of 16 August 1740: 4.5% of the value of the return cargo 3,616
Owed to Captain Seignette 6,667
Wages of the crew 20,478
Tax (Droit) due to the "Compagnie" [des Indes] on 254 "Captives" @ 10 livres 2,540
First insurance policy:
Outfitting 35,000
Cargo 45,000
80,000 at 12.00% at Nantes 9,600
Second insurance policy:
Outfitting 14,000
Cargo 36,000
50,000 at 11.75% at Bordeaux 5,875
Total expenses 48,776
Net receipts 60,018

Division of net receipts (16 Feb. 1743) to:
M. Paul Depont, for 6/48 7,503
Madame Carayon, widow, for 8/48 10,003
M. Jean Vivier, for 7/48 8,752
M. Elie Vivier, for 4/48 5,001
M. Seignette du Jardin for 6/48 7,503
*The ship (Jacques Rasteau) for 17/48 21,256
Total 60,018


*Jacques Rasteau owned the ship; his share presumably included amortization of the cost of the ship and perhaps part of the outfitting as well.

among Catholic families as well—the Pascaud, Goguet, Rodrique—but they were less numerous and invested less frequently in the triangular trade. It took firm family alliances to sustain a series of campagnes, and
those who could outfit only one or two ventures to the "Islands" usually ended in failure. No doubt special stamina was required of those younger members of the family who served as captains on the slavers until they earned their way to full partnership. The stories that Captain Seignette could have told of his two years at the helm of the *Saint-Louis* would surely have exploded many a romantic myth.

Paul-François Depont did not serve as a captain on any of his father's ships. Paul Depont, who had been in the trade himself for more than thirty years, preferred to initiate his son by assigning him a share of his own investments. In 1720 Paul-François began to keep ledgers recording his shares in various shipping ventures and continued to do so until 1734. These accounts reveal that the Depont family knew how to diversify its investments and spread the risks. For example, Paul-François and his father invested an average of 33,000 livres in eight ships in the decade, 1723 to 1734, each ship averaging six voyages. Although precise profits are impossible to determine, this was an investment of about 270,000 livres, and the returns on each voyage must have been sufficient to keep this substantial capital in operation for over a decade. In addition to voyages to the West Indies, at least four of these ships reexported colonial produce, principally indigo, to Amsterdam. Paul-François also invested in smaller lots of merchandise called *pacotilles* which were consigned to the special care of the captain with whom the profits were often divided. Young Depont's journal for 6 March 1721 reads: "Credit: Captain Chauveau for the sale made at Amsterdam of two barrels [barriques] of indigo sent on the vessel, *Les Trois Rois* from the *pacotille* divided among M. Belin, Captain Chauveau, and myself." Paul-François made 5,154 livres (1,909 florins) net on this transaction and his profit was deposited in the Bank of Amsterdam. He also shared *pacotilles* with his sister and brother-in-law and with his father, and kept a strict accounting with all of them. Close family relations were reflected in exact bookkeeping, not in any careless "generosity." Beside a journal item stipulating a sum owed by his father from the proceeds of indigo sold "during my absence," Paul-François entered: "Owed by M. Depont, my father, for one wig (sent from Paris)—eighty livres." Given this early training, Paul-François's attitudes about money in later life should not seem surprising.

At the age of sixty Paul Depont showed no sign of flagging energy. In addition to investments in ship cargoes and *pacotilles*, he handled sales of merchandise sent in other ships to La Rochelle. During the Law Boom of 1719 and 1720 he was particularly astute. La Rochelle had been chosen in 1718 for one of the five branches of the new National Bank, thus providing merchants in the port not only with prompt information of the latest royal edicts affecting the new paper money,
but also with easy access to the bank for making deposits of paper in the accounts of their creditors. This was a great advantage when the Law Boom began to collapse and the government recalled all its billets, reducing their nominal value by three-fourths and eventually converting the paper into rentes at only 2 percent. The summer of 1720 was a time when all over France debtors were attempting to transfer their paper to their creditors' accounts. In Saint-Domingue, where news took months to arrive from Paris, planters who had sent indigo and sugar to La Rochelle learned only too late that the payments they received were worth but a tiny fraction of the real value of the merchandise. Paul Depont was sales agent for more than one Saint-Domingue exporter in 1720. One Arnauld Lalande sold his indigo for 12,324 livres in paper, only to find it worth no more than 3,081 a year later, subsequently transformed into a rente at 2 percent or 61 livres per annum. It was the same with a consignment of sugar from one Sieur Merinville which sold for 1,982 livres anciennes écritures, but ended as a rente of only 13 livres, 10 sous per annum. This is not to suggest that Depont had acted illegally or that he had even sold the merchandise on his own account for hard silver. But he was not going to be caught with any near-worthless paper. In September 1720, just before the total collapse of Law's paper money, Paul Depont deposited 45,000 livres in paper in his creditors' accounts, and retained a token 412 in his own.

When news of the debacle finally reached Saint-Domingue, it was too late for the exporters to change the contracts of sale and require payment en espèces. M. Lassel was wasting words when he wrote, in August 1722, that he had asked Depont to sell his indigo in coin and that "consequently, these banknotes must remain in your account." Another exporter, M. Lalande, was more resigned. "I beg you to regard all this as your business . . . in a word, my banknotes will end up like yours [i.e., worthless]." In fact, the planters on Saint-Domingue had little choice. The terms of trade were against them, and they needed the merchants of La Rochelle not only to handle their exports but also to respond to personal requests often involving their relatives in the motherland. Moreover, the planters were not without means of retribution over the long run. Such an episode made it easier to delay payments for slave imports in the future.18

For Depont, this activity was only one among many. In 1718 he had been named manager of the Compagnie des Indes at La Rochelle, managing its depots, warehouses, and merchandise, purchasing ships, consigning goods to Québec and Louisiana and maintaining correspondence with its affiliate, the Louisiana Company. He also made substantial advances on his own account to the company, claiming 277,938 livres from the directors in Paris in 1722.19 No wonder Paul
Map 2
The City of La Rochelle in 1750

Depont was addressed as "marchand-banquier." He knew how to keep his capital working.

Paul Depont's role in the Compagnie des Indes gave him a quasi-public function and increased his notoriety outside of the province. When La Rochelle was awarded its Chamber of Commerce in 1719, he would play a major role there as well. Among some thirty important merchants, he was chosen by the intendant to be one of the five syndics of the chamber. Even his formal Protestantism was no obstacle. The juges-consuls who had represented the city's merchants in the past supported the participation of Protestants and nouveaux convertis. "We have here such a large number of nouveaux convertis who are the best merchants [négociants] and of such acknowledged probity that, far from having any objection to admitting these Messieurs to the Chamber of Commerce, all the former judges will be delighted to have them." The consuls added, however, that they thought the director of the new chamber should always be a Catholic. But even this limitation could not be enforced. In 1725 and again in 1727 Paul Depont was elected director with a majority of the thirty votes in the chamber. The Catholic minority felt it necessary to protest to Cardinal Fleury himself in 1730: "Contrary to the provisions of the edict prohibiting Protestants from holding any public office, those of La Rochelle have found a way to enter the Chamber of Commerce established in 1719. Not content with two offices of syndic accorded them, they have gained control of the directorship and after M. Depont ..., have elected M. Vivier, a Protestant, claiming that they have twenty-six ships and the Catholics only eleven. ... The nomination of M. Vivier has been sustained."

The twenty years from 1720 to 1740 were unquestionably the best years of the Atlantic trade for the Rochelais, as they were for the other French ports, Nantes, Bordeaux, and Saint-Malo. Not that the volume of trade was less at other times—in the late 1780s, for example. But the sustained prosperity of the Fleury period would never again be equaled. La Rochelle fitted out an average of thirty ships a year in the early 1730s and forty per year in the 1740s. From 1737 to 1741 the slave trade showed a marked increase, and La Rochelle "delivered" over 12,000 slaves to Saint-Domingue in these years, making it second to Nantes with 21,000. The losses among the human cargo almost always exceeded those among the crews, though complete figures are lacking. The losses given on four of Depont's ventures between 1738 and 1743 totaled 286 on a cargo of 1,402 slaves or 20.3 percent. These compare with 16.4 percent for Rochelais slavers in 1786-88 (1,521 lost in a total of 9,323). Of course, the losses varied enormously from ship to ship. The Victoire, for example, lost 111 of 382 on its second voyage in 1740, and 137 of 424 on another voyage.
In 1738 there were two disasters on the Atlantic passage that drove home the perils of the trade. The *Phoenix* ran short of water off the Guinea coast, was obliged to land forty-eight slaves, lost twenty more who escaped as the ship was loading supplies, and then underwent a mutiny, a fire, and finally ran aground off Saint-Domingue. The most dramatic incident occurred when fifteen slave women committed mass suicide by hurling themselves overboard, one devoured by sharks within sight of Captain Champeau. The *Galatée* had been outfitted by one of Depont’s closest associates, Jacques Rasteau. In the middle of the night off Cape Sainte-Apollonie the slaves mutinied and took over the ship except for the officers’ quarters at the stern. The slaves then broke into the arms and powder supply and set fire to the mizzenmast, while the crew and officers literally threw themselves into the sea. From his sloop, the captain witnessed the explosion of the entire ship. The remains of the crew rowed back to the African coast, where they were picked up by an English merchantman. There were no more entries for the *Galatée* in Rasteau’s journal.24

Such disasters were risks of the trade. More ominous over the long run was the increase in English and Dutch interlopers off Saint-Domingue which the local governor and intendant seemed unable (or unwilling) to halt.25 La Rochelle merchants had to pay a certain price for Cardinal Fleury’s policy of détente with the English. There were increasing difficulties with the English off Guinea as well.26 With first rumors of hostilities in 1741, insurance rates began to climb from the customary 11 to 17 percent at Bordeaux and 25 percent at La Rochelle. Even before the formal declaration of war in March 1744, the English frigates seized thirteen ships belonging to La Rochelle merchants.27 In the first twenty months of the war they captured another thirty valued at over eight million livres. The Chamber of Commerce, representing the principal mercantile houses at La Rochelle, made no effort to hide the desperate situation of the trade in a letter to the Navy Department in Paris. “The négociants and armateurs expose with great insistence the deplorable state of their maritime commerce, which is totally ruined by continual seizures by English warships. There is no mail which does not bring disastrous news. ... All expeditions have been stopped because no one in the whole kingdom will insure the ships, nor anyone abroad for that matter.”28

Until recently, historians have emphasized the rapid recovery of the French ports after each successive war with England. But it is becoming increasingly clear that the wars had a permanent debilitating effect upon French overseas trade. Between 1744 and 1763 there were only eight years of peace. How many merchants like Depont, Rasteau, or Vivier, not to mention smaller ones like Goguet, Rodrigue, or Pascaud
could afford to keep their capital immobilized for so long, even assuming they could replace their lost ships and cargoes? And how many English, Dutch, and other interlopers had used the period of French absence from the trade to replace them permanently? Jean Tarrade writes: "All local studies of the port-cities show that the great fortunes, the great families dominating the commercial activity . . . , and the great urban enterprises all date from before the Seven Years' War . . . . This [prosperous] phase lasted until 1743." 29

But even without the constant menace of war and blockade by the greatest naval power of the century, there were other warnings of difficult times ahead for merchants like Depont. As the detailed account of the Saint-Louis demonstrated, even in its heyday the Atlantic slave trade was not a source of certain, much less "fabulous," profits for the French merchant. True, by an astute diversification of investments, by adapting quickly to new opportunities, a Paul Depont could do better than survive. But Henri Robert was probably correct when he attributed commercial success, not to the single "coup à la Volpone," but rather to the long-run accumulation of small profits, mustered by careful management, and reinvested not only in major shipping ventures but also in pacotilles for Amsterdam, consignments from Cap-Français, maritime insurance, outright loans at interest, and real estate, urban and rural. 30

Moreover, the daily accounts reminded the Deponts of those unrecovered debts in Saint-Domingue from the voyages of the Saint-Paul (18,200 livres), the Saint-Philippe (27,672), the Perle (33,494), the Saint-Louis (79,543), and no doubt many more. 31 When Paul Depont died in 1744 there were 218,315 livres in his inheritance noted as "doubtful," most of it representing the unpaid obligations of West Indian planters for Depont's shipments of supplies and slaves. 32 The imbalance would grow worse with time. At La Rochelle after 1750 the planters' debts averaged over 100,000 livres per shipment of slaves to reach a total of eight million livres by 1762. 33 But by then the Deponts were no longer in the slave trade. Their name no longer appears on the armateurs' almanac after 1748. 34 Twenty years later, in a letter to his own son, Paul-François alluded to the traite (slave trade) as if it had been long forgotten. "My father gave me some shipping interests as a marriage portion [in 1723] which I lost in large part three or four years later, when some of his ships were judged unfit for further voyage." 35

Paul Depont died in 1744 at the age of eighty-three. His long life spanned a full cycle of the Atlantic trade at La Rochelle. His death coincided with a new phase in the history of his family as well. Paul-François spent the years from 1744 to 1746 reinvesting his father's fortune before the worst ravages of the English fleet or the full impact of
planter resistance were felt. If his decision to leave trade may have been prompted by his father’s death and the outbreak of the war, his decision to invest in land and rentes was not unprecedented. Nor was the possibility of a different style of life based on public service and landed income something completely foreign to a son who was already in middle age.

Paul Depont, after all, had been investing in land as early as 1687 when he bought the seigneury of Les Granges in the vineyard country some twenty kilometers east of La Rochelle. He added new seigneuries, domains, and farms (cabanes) in 1707, 1711, 1716, 1718, 1726, and 1735, another proof of his investment acumen and unwillingness to leave any capital idle. It was common practice among the shipowners of La Rochelle to buy land in the hinterland, partly to insure their credit as merchants. But surely the economic motive was not the only one at play. Paul Depont was too wise in the ways of the world—he was already sixty in 1720—not to appreciate the prestige only land could bring. Public service was not foreign to him either. In 1718 and again in 1721 he was agent of the Compagnie des Indes, in 1719 he became syndic, and in 1726–27, director of the Chamber of Commerce with the blessing of the intendant. In 1722 he was among the notables of the city who offered to raise sixty thousand livres to dredge the harbor, and he himself subscribed one thousand. No doubt this public service was not entirely disinterested, but it did give him a status somewhat above most of his fellow merchants. In any case, in 1721 Paul Depont purchased the office of Trésorier de France in the Bureau of Finances of La Rochelle for his son.

Each of the thirty généralités that made up the kingdom had a Bureau of Finances, a fiscal administration that varied in size depending on the importance of the district. There were thirty-five trésoriers at Montauban and thirty-three at Toulouse, but only six at Nantes. La Rochelle was among the smallest with only ten. The bureaux were originally intended to administer the Royal Domain, supervise the public highways (voirie), assess the royal taille, receive formal declarations of seigneurial rights (aveux), and register letters of nobility. Important as these functions appear, they were shared by other officials and institutions even from the inception of the office in the sixteenth century. By the seventeenth century, and especially after the Fronde, the most powerful rivals of the bureaux were the thirty intendants whose fiscal and judicial powers gradually sapped the trésoriers of all substantive power, leaving the façade of emoluments and privileges. In addition, despite the efforts of Colbert in 1672 to reduce their number to twelve per bureau, the number of trésoriers increased, spreading the diminishing functions more thinly. La Bruyère and Racine were both trésoriers who never
exercised their functions. In short, the Bureau of Finances was increasing in size but diminishing in power at the time Paul-François entered the office.\footnote{41}

Despite its increasingly perfunctory role in public finance, the office remained part of the hierarchy of "sovereign courts," albeit at the lower end, and conferred \textit{noblesse graduelle} on its owner. That is, hereditary nobility was acquired if a father exercised the office for twenty years (or died in office) \textit{and} if his son followed in the same office for another twenty years (or died in office).\footnote{42} Thus, Paul-François acquired \textit{noblesse personnelle} and \textit{his} son, when he followed him in office in 1744, acquired \textit{noblesse transmissible} or hereditary nobility. Here was one of those many ennobling offices of the Old Regime which, along with that of \textit{Sécrétaire du Roi}, maintained an avenue of social mobility for those who had some legal training, sufficient capital, some "connections" with the public powers either through local notoriety or past services to the Crown, and who belonged to the state religion. Paul-François could meet all of these criteria in 1721.\footnote{43}

La Rochelle had its share of administrative institutions in the eighteenth century. The \textit{capitation} for 1764 listed the following "privileged officiers":

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Présidial (district court)</th>
<th>Receivers of Tailles</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bureau of Finances</td>
<td>Admiralty</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eaux et Forêts</td>
<td>Traites (wine taxes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siège royal</td>
<td>Monaye (Mint)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Election (taxes)</td>
<td>Other</td>
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</tbody>
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| Total                     |                     | 83

But since it was a port city of only seventeen thousand people, the intendance (new in 1694) was the only major judicial or administrative institution. Unlike Bordeaux or even Poitiers, La Rochelle could not claim a parlement, a \textit{chambre des comptes}, or a \textit{cours des aides}. It did not possess those bodies or \textit{companies} which spawned a "high robe" nobility. Very few nobles of any kind lived in La Rochelle. The \textit{capitation} for 1764 lists only thirty-five in residence; most of the \textit{noblesse}—a modest gentry—lived in the bourgs of the hinterland—Saintes, Surgères, Mauzé. Consequently, there remained only two elites at La Rochelle, the \textit{officiers} in the courts and tax bureaus, and the \textit{négociants} of the port.\footnote{44}

Paul-François Depont had simply exchanged one elite for another. Leaving the shadow of the clock tower at the entrance to the harbor he had moved up the rue du Palais closer to the Place du Château and the cathedral, exchanging the mercantile quarter for the "canton" of the \textit{gens de basoche}. But while the new office marked a change of
function and status for the young Depont, it did not lead to a rupture with the merchant community of his father. Financial interest tied both communities together in a network of loans and rentes. Moreover, such a modest provincial town could provide only a limited bonne société. It would not do in the wet winter months to separate the families of some eighty magistrates from those of thirty wealthy négociants; together they could attend the receptions of the intendant and whatever other réunions and soupers the city could muster. Finally there was no “high society” at La Rochelle comparable to what Arthur Young, the famous English traveler, encountered at Nantes or Bordeaux—not to mention Paris—which would further accentuate invidious distinctions.

Access to office and ennoblement in the Ancien Régime did not mean that even the educated and “skilled” were highly mobile. Achievement, ambition, drive are nineteenth-century traits which, to the extent they existed a century earlier, were contained and circumscribed by a profound sense of rank and differential function. Roland Mousnier concludes for the eighteenth as well as the seventeenth century that “most often” families kept their offices in the baillisages and présidiaux jurisdictions for many generations, sometimes eight or nine. Stability at this level of the hierarchy was the norm. This was especially true in middling provincial towns. La Rochelle in the early eighteenth century was a far cry from Boston in the late nineteenth. The Deponts, father and son, had no expectations of rapid upward mobility in 1721. Even a generation later, Paul-Francois was to evince uneasiness, even dismay, when his younger son did not follow paternal advice to marry the daughter of a trésorier de France in the neighboring généralité of Angoulême. The acquisition of the office was regarded as an end in itself, a reward for public service and a mark of acceptance into the local notability, not a way-station to bigger things. Were not the Deponts already at the top of their world—the only one they knew—La Rochelle and the Pays d’Aunis?

Whatever the social potentialities of the office for future generations of Deponts, the immediate rewards were palpable enough. The office of trésorier was a dignité, an honor that signaled admission into a distinct corps of the social hierarchy, the officiers. Paul-François would take his place beside the magistrates of his bailliage—the élus, conseillers and prévôts. He would become part of their world professionally, socially, and even culturally. Of course, some adaptation would be necessary. The younger Depont would slowly abandon warehouse and bourse for a less active life. The economic role of the family would change from shipowning and local banking to the life of the rentier and landlord. Because Paul-François had more leisure at his disposal, it is probable that his library with its complement of religious literature represented a part of his own acquired “general culture” and not that of his father. But a wider
cultural horizon did not mean that Paul-François would welcome the literature of the lumières; in fact, he was deeply suspicious of it along with many other dubious fashions he saw coming from the capital. Indeed, Paul-François Depont’s departure from international trade made him more sedentary and “provincial” than his father and socially more conservative as well. His views on marriage, for example, would suggest that he opposed “alliances” above one’s station and outside of the corps of officiers.51 His own father had been somewhat more adventuresome in this matter.

The first departure from the family custom of marriage within the Protestant merchant community of La Rochelle had occurred early in the century. In 1719 Paul Depont’s younger daughter married Charles-Bernard-Xavier Sauvestre, comte de Clisson, Grand Seneschal of Aunis, a country nobleman of some importance. The seigneurie of Clisson was a considerable distance from La Rochelle, much closer to Nantes and near the heart of the Catholic Vendée. Marie-Anne-Sara Depont’s dowry of 55,000 livres and the expectation of much more no doubt lessened any hesitancy the count may have had toward a mésalliance.52 Clisson’s own financial situation had been rapidly deteriorating. In 1717 he had borrowed 35,000 livres in silver from Paul Depont in order to make a payment on a much larger obligation of 180,000 livres to one Antoine Daraznes, Bourgeois de Paris, contracted three years before.53 Apparently Clisson’s financial obligations to Depont did not end here. Even after the marriage portion had been paid, Paul Depont held a mortgage on the Clisson estate in the amount of 70,000 livres. This obligation was never liquidated by the count and even the arrears in interest were finally given to the new countess as a legacy from her father.54 To say that Depont “bought” a noble son-in-law would be unkind, but Clisson’s financial woes were considerably eased by the match.

Within four years of the marriage the Clissons had four children, one son and three daughters. Paul Depont’s provisions for these grandchildren in 1723 suggest a man willing to write off bad debts in exchange for the promotion of this branch of his family. To his newborn grandson he bequeathed a farm in Poitou, a town house in La Rochelle, and 8,000 livres to purchase a lieutenancy in the “guards.” The importance of a military career for his grandson was underlined by the stipulation that the legacy would be reduced by half if the army grade was not acquired.55 To his granddaughters, he bequeathed modest life annuities of 100 livres if they became nuns, or annuities of 120 livres if they married. Paul Depont, Protestant merchant, was providing for granddaughters who might enter Catholic convents. In fact, two of the Clisson girls, Pauline and Agathe, later did become nuns.

Marie-Anne-Sara Depont, comtesse de Clisson, apparently adapted
quickly to her new status as a member of the Poitevin nobility and converted to Catholicism between 1710 and 1720. She later expressed deep regret that her father, Paul Depont, had died in the “miserable error of Calvinism.” Her eldest daughter, Alexis, eventually married Comte de Lescure, also Poitevin nobility and apparently of more means and higher status than the Clissons. To the son of this marriage Madame de Clisson bequeathed 100,000 livres for the purchase of a military grade, a substantial sum by provincial standards. By contrast, she added only 50 livres to the pensions of her two daughters in orders. Had she lived into the 1760s, Madame Depont-Clisson would have proudly witnessed the marriage of her grandson to a Durfort, high court nobility, and at the very top of D’Hozier’s heraldic almanac. Yet Madame de Clisson’s last will in 1753 bore traces of a certain austerity, possibly attributable to her provincial origins in La Rochelle. One passage in the will read: “Having lost all that I hold most dear, I wish to be buried without any ceremony other than that of a bourgeoisie.”

Paul-François also converted to Catholicism. The exact date is unknown, but it must have been before 1721, the date of his reception into office. After 1685 no one could be a trésorier de France who did not belong to the state religion. His eldest sister, Françoise, had probably converted in 1710 at the time of her marriage to the banker, Pierre Moreau, also a nouveau converti. In a letter to the intendant, written in 1730, even the Catholic faction of the Chamber of Commerce had to admit that “the children of M. [Paul] Depont are good Catholics and have edified the city by examples of piety unknown among Protestants.”

It would be only too easy to see the conversion of Paul-François Depont to Catholicism as one more “adaptation” in a consciously planned strategy for ennoblement and social ascent. But just as the motives for the purchase of the office of trésorier should not be regarded in the light of the status of later generations of Deponts, so the motives for conversion to a new faith must not be interpreted too simply and too cynically. There is good reason to believe that the conversion of Paul-François was sincere, whatever its practical conveniences for his professional career and social esteem. It can be argued that his newfound Catholicism had a profound influence on his entire outlook, shaping his views toward trade and banking, spending and consumption, as well as inculcating a very austere, even chilling set of moral imperatives by which he judged his own and the behavior of others. In the long run, the highly pietistic Catholicism that Paul-François imbibed worked against further social ascent, for it reinforced his latent provincialism, his distrust of Paris and its corrupting influence, especially on his own younger son. Far better to accept one's station—état or vocation were his words—than to risk one's soul in that modern Babylon where un-
restrained ambition was bound to lead. On a very simple level, we see the dual, even conflicting consequences of conversion to the state religion for a mercantile provincial family: on the one hand, conversion was a sine qua non for office and ennoblement; at the same time it also increased doubts about certain forms of money-making, thus contributing to socially approved forms of wealth such as the land and public rentes. On the other hand, conversion, especially in this pietistic form, could contribute to a suspicion of all forms of ambition and reinforce a belief in functional hierarchy (to each his own état or “calling”), keeping evil contamination at arm’s length and avoiding, perhaps unconsciously, the anxieties of an uncertain status.

Paul-François’s conversion came at a very special moment, not only in the history of the Counter-Reformation in France, but in that of La Rochelle in particular. The diocese of La Rochelle presented special problems for the Church, given its reputation as a Huguenot stronghold in the early seventeenth century. The efforts of the Church, not only to convert Protestants, but also to discipline Catholics and enforce the spirit, if not the letter, of the Tridentine decrees, began in earnest in 1648 and continued until 1724. The "offensive" had many phases and contained various packages of techniques, including a new training program for the parish priests, pastoral visits, special missions, the creation of new teaching brotherhoods and sisterhoods, the construction of churches, shrines and sanctuaries, the organization of religious processions, and the planting of crosses, as well as more systematic efforts at charity, aid to the sick, and education, from the petites écoles in the villages to colleges and seminaries in the towns. No Protestant, whether La Rochelle merchant or artisan, could have been unaware of this sustained effort on the part of the Church under the direction of the bishops of La Rochelle, backed by the intendants, and encouraged by such eminent churchmen as Fénelon himself, who led special missions to La Rochelle in 1685 and in 1686.

What was most striking about this campaign was its apparent lack of success in converting many Protestants before 1690. Protestants numbered about 5,200 in a population of 17,500 in 1679. The dragonnades—armed raids on Protestant gatherings—in 1685 provoked some emigration, but even this grim episode did not seem to shake the hard core of Protestantism, especially the groups in the city of La Rochelle itself. But from the arrival of Étienne de Champflour as bishop of La Rochelle in 1702 the situation began to change. Already in 1690 a few important Protestant notables were converted, including Baron de Châtelailhon, Marquis de Culant, Doctor Seignette, and significantly for the merchant community, the négociant Massiot. With Bishop Champflour in the first quarter of the eighteenth century Protestant “resistance” began to
crumble, and by 1765 there were only 835 Protestants left in the port.65
The Depont family was among the négociants who converted.

Although the Depont correspondence does not acknowledge it specifically, one can detect an affinity between the particular approach of the bishop to "Catholic piety" and the later religious outlook of Paul-François Depont. First, Bishop Champflour was more concerned about Jansenists than Protestants when he first came to La Rochelle. He was less zealous than his predecessor and there was no question of using blunt force. He placed great emphasis on education, not only for the villagers, but for the sons and daughters of the well-to-do in La Rochelle. He organized charities, increased the distribution of alms, and expanded the hôpitaux in La Rochelle and in the smaller towns of the diocese. He also appealed to the general public with massive processions on the rue du Palais and with a dramatic planting of the cross in the Place du Château. But what gave Champflour his special stamp was his movement away from liturgy and Christology in general to an emphasis on meditation from prescribed books such as the Journal des Saints. It was not by whim that he encouraged the Jesuit mission to the city in 1704 and the increased activity of the Society of Jesus in the following years; the Spiritual Exercises of Loyola were his obvious model. But as Champflour's new catechism of 1716 would demonstrate, it was Loyola with a special flavor. There would be less emphasis on the sacerdotal ideal and more on "the limits beyond which evil begins." Using the logical pattern of simple questions and answers, the bishop's new catechism stressed "the duties of the Christian Religion" and the "means" to fulfill them—prayer, meditation, the sacraments, and acts of piety. The identification of evil was fundamental. Faith must be protected from heresy and novelty, by inculcating a horror of mortal sin, especially of blasphemy, impurity, drunkenness, and avarice; love of God and of one's neighbor was not stressed. One sometimes forgets that Catholicism can have a Calvinist austerity; it may appear ironic that Bishop Champflour welcomed the papal bull Unigenitus anathematizing Jansenism in the same years he wrote his catechism.66

The awareness of sin and the moral earnestness evoked in the letters of Paul-François to his son in Paris are not mere carryovers from a Protestant tradition. They are the moral armament of a convert. They not only harp on the themes of "death and hellfire" or on such ubiquitous temptations of the flesh as dancing and gambling; they constantly refer to prescribed reading, recommending the texts of the casuists to determine which acts are "evil" and the meditations of the saints to fortify body and soul against them. Paul-François spent many of his long leisure hours in the 1750s and 1760s reading these books which he stocked in his library. He quoted and prescribed them often to his son.
Whatever the inner springs of his own actions, he clearly believed that these were the ideas that should guide Jean-Samuel, and not any others the young man might imbibe in Paris.

Paul-François was partial to the Jesuits and perhaps had been converted by them during their mission to La Rochelle in the first two decades of the century. Later in his life he was much distressed by the expulsion of the Society in 1762. In 1764 he wrote to his son, Jean-Samuel, a maître des requêtes in Paris: “I cannot understand how you can imagine that religion will not suffer from the absence of the Jesuits. Here we have already seen proof to the contrary. It is very difficult to find a zealous and assiduous confessor.” Paul-François much regretted the departure of Abbé Vazeilles, Jesuit tutor of his grandchildren at La Rochelle. He was upset with the attitude of Jean-Samuel who seemed to “applaud” the exile of the archbishop of Paris. You are “as parlementaire as the others,” he wrote, a reference to the avowed Jansenist persuasion of the Parlement of Paris in the 1760s. No doubt Paul-François as a trésorier had good reason to be jealous of the parlements as “sovereign courts,” but their doctrinal deviance counted for something too.

At Christmas 1765 he commiserated with Duc de La Vauguyon, tutor to the royal princes and a mainstay of the pious circle around the Dauphin (the dévots). It was an occasion for one of his frequent laments about “God’s punishment upon this evil land.” “But how can this surprise us, when we see that contempt for religion and moral corruption hold sway everywhere. ... [Many] think that the end of the world is not too far off, but as for me, I am happy that I am rapidly approaching the moment when I shall leave a world where God is so grievously offended, for the contempt for religion has become so powerful that those who speak of God or for Him are almost looked upon as people from another world.”

The beleaguered quality in this passage—not to speak of its wordiness—was characteristic of Paul-François’s letters to his son in Paris, from where all “Godlessness” emanated.

That Paul-François took his conversion seriously is also indicated by his public charities. In the twenty years from 1751 to 1771 he established a series of Catholic foundations on which he spent over forty thousand livres, about 10 percent of his income over that period. These charities included hospital beds for the hôpital général at La Rochelle, a charity school on one of his properties in Aunis, and a number of perpetual masses for himself and his family. The charities were clustered in two periods, one a few years after the death of his father and the other a few years before his own.

Paul-François showed a particular interest in the charity school at
Aigrefeuille. In front of the parish church in the spring of 1754, in the presence of the priest, the syndic, the head of the vestry (fabrique), the huissier, and an assortment of carpenters, caskmakers, small wine merchants, and laboureurs that made up this local winegrowing community, Paul-François formally opened his school. Intended for girls only, the stated purpose of the school was to teach reading and writing, prayer and catechism, and “instruction in the Catholic Religion.” It would also provide one meal a day. The building plans described a house 75 by 40 feet, including a classroom, dining room, kitchen, garden, latrine, and shed. It was to be run by two sisters from the Order of Sagesse. Depont provided a rente of 315 livres “assigned” on his land of Chagnées in the parish. In the 1750s this was enough money not only to provide meals and clothing for the schoolgirls, but also to establish a small medical center (une petite pharmacie) for the parish sick. Paul Depont’s widow approved of her son’s bonne oeuvre de charité and contributed 200 livres income “in perpetuity” from her rentes on the Clergy as well as a house in La Rochelle. The payments were made to the sisters even during the most anticlerical moments of the Revolution. In 1814 the Order of Sagesse was replaced by agreement between the bishop and the prefect by the Ursulines, but a maison de charité “founded by M. Paul-François De Pont, 1754” was still there. In 1840 when the sisters left the parish, the 315 livres (311 francs, 11 centimes, new currency) were still enough to support one indigent patient from the village in the general hospital of La Rochelle. The domain of Chagnées no longer belonged to the family, but Charles-Louis-Marie Depont, Paul-François’ grandson, mortgaged some of his mother’s property in the Vendée to continue the annual payments and pay the arrears accumulated since 1835. After almost a century, the charity school and the “pharmacy” were gone, but for some parishioners the name of Depont recalled something besides seigneurial dues.

Paul-François contributed twenty-five thousand livres to support five sick people and one orphan in perpetuity at various convents and hospitals. In most cases, Depont reserved the right to choose them. He gave eleven thousand more for daily masses in both the cathedral and at the church of Saint-Barthélemy on the rue du Palais. He also donated a perpetual lamp in the parish churches in his villages of Aigrefeuille, Forges, and Virson. Perhaps he was moved by the remains of the old sanctuary at the crossroads at Forges—Notre Dame de Manderoux, a pilgrimage stop in the seventeenth century.

One of the perpetual masses has a special interest. It was established “in order to obtain the conversion of Madame, his mother, to the Catholic Church.” Apparently his wish was fulfilled. A list of pew assignments in the Church of Saint-Barthélemy notes that number 37
was occupied by Madame, the widow Depont, adjoining those of M. Depont des Granges, her son, Sieur Moreau, her son-in-law, M. Paul-
Charles Depont des Granges, her grandson, and Dame Henriette-Lucie
Sonnet d’Auzon, his wife. Like the Clisson branch of the family in the
heart of the Vendée, the Deponts of La Rochelle had “rallied” en masse
to Catholicism. Only Paul-François’s younger son, Jean-Samuel, a
councilor at the Parlement of Paris since 1748, seemed absent spiritually
as well as physically from the family ranks at Sunday mass in La
Rochelle. All the more necessary that Paul-François write often to his
son. As he said many times, he was convinced that he had been chosen
by God to be the instrument of his son’s salvation.

There is no question that Paul-François was deeply concerned about
sin, moral corruption, and salvation. He believed that one must prepare
for the Day of Judgment, and that as head of the family he had a duty
to warn those members who had been careless or lax. His admonitions
stressed more than the faithful partaking of the sacraments of the
Church; they touched economic practice as well. In early 1766 he wrote
to his niece, comtesse de Lescure, of the Clisson branch of the family:

We have a much greater obligation than others to give abundantly to charity. I
discovered long ago, after studying my parents’ account books, that we were
heirs to a fortune that included more than 100,000 livres in ill-gotten interest
d’intérêts mal acquis], not counting those sums about which I do not know, and
which may amount to an equal sum. I have every reason to believe that my sister
[Comtesse de Clisson] has not done what she should have about this, since she
appeared rather indifferent to what I told her—thinking perhaps that such
interest was permitted—and then she fell ill too soon afterward to put her
affairs in order. Judge for yourself, dear niece, what your duties are. As for me,
I believe I have satisfied mine after consulting the Sorbonne and the best
casuists . . . in order to discern exactly which [investments] were usurious
[usuraires] and to conform accordingly.73

The slaves who died by the scores on the Saint-Louis or the Victoire in
the 1730s and 1740s did not trouble Paul-François’s conscience; his
father’s “usury” did. It was not simply a matter of engaging in trade;
Paul-François was not ashamed of the fact that his father had been a
négociant. But his father had acted contrary to the canon law, which a
good Catholic like Paul-François must obey. The sight drafts and other
obligations in his father’s portfolio no doubt included a time limit and
interest. There was no equivocation for a convert like Paul-François.
Only rentes constituées and rentes perpétuelles, where capital was
alienated, were approved by the Sorbonne.74 Paul-François had satisfied
his conscience as well as his sense of respectability and security when he
reinvested 135,000 livres in rentes in the two years after his father’s
death. Almost half of this capital—60,000 livres—was “placed” in the
bonds of the Clergy of France. Surely the fortune of the Depont des Granges, Catholic notables of La Rochelle, was above reproach.

How complex and ambiguous—not to say fortuitous—were the circumstances that led the Depont family gradually to adopt a new style of life. The purchase of land had begun long before the Deponts thought of leaving overseas commerce. It was part of an effort to diversify investment and secure loans. The purchase of office in 1721 was a badge of local public esteem, not a steppingstone toward nobility. What eventually turned out to be a move “upward” was originally only a mutation in the social hierarchy. The conversion of the family to Catholicism was the consequence of a subtle and intense effort of the Catholic Counter-Reformation which happened to bear fruit at La Rochelle in the early eighteenth century. In 1744 the family left commerce more as a consequence of economic conditions and the approach of war than because of any conscious decision to live noblement. At this juncture the death of Paul Depont consolidated changes that were already in motion. Only in retrospect do these developments appear to be part of a concerted strategy of social ascent, a quest for nobility. To a very large degree, these choices were determined by the immediate situation, so that each had its own distinct origin. Nonetheless the cumulative effects of these decisions, however determined by larger and apparently separate developments in French society—the declining opportunities in overseas trade, the relative security of land and rentes, the marks of status in a provincial town, the growth of bureaucracy, the success of the Counter-Reformation—were significant. One can understand how more than one merchant family became bourgeois vivant noblement, particularly in the middle years of the eighteenth century.