Shipbuilding in New France
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Shipbuilding in New France began as a modest enterprise in the early to mid-1600s with the building of boats and barges at the request of local merchants and the colonial administration. These craft were built to carry goods between Quebec City and the various coastal communities in the lower Saint Laurence River. This shipbuilding activity was carried out by local carpenters who doubled up as shipwrights. France also undertook to send pre-fabricated kits of boats for local assembly. Local shipbuilding expanded with the first arrival from France of four King's shipwrights in 1663. These were skilled tradesmen who worked at the shipyards of Rochefort and La Rochelle in France. They were sent at the request of the colonial government to build a number of flat boats to ferry troops in the war against the Iroquois. These shipwrights were paid by the colonial administration, as opposed to their Canadian counterparts who relied on the free market to gain a livelihood.

The presence of the King's shipwrights in New France expanded the skill of shipbuilding. They took Canadian apprentices and taught them the trade of building sailing ships for sea-going service, as opposed to the inshore craft that had been built up to then. Shipbuilding now meant the construction of naval and commercial ocean-going vessels. The administration in France continued to put significant emphasis on shipbuilding in New France by sending additional shipwrights. Besides the four shipwrights that arrived in 1663, there were four more in 1665, three in 1666 and six in 1670. The presence of these skilled shipbuilders helped further to train Canadian shipwrights.

During this time, the population of New France amounted to about three thousand. The principal preoccupation of the inhabitants was cultivating the land. Yet, shipbuilding was active in addressing the various requests of a coastal colonial community that also depended on the sea for its military needs and commerce. The colonial administration maintained its prerogative to commission ships for its navy, while local merchants placed orders for ocean going vessels to engage in overseas trade, and fishermen ordered fishing craft to go out to sea. These various needs helped advance shipbuilding technology so that ship orders did not only specify the length, breadth, and load capacity of a vessel, but also the type of wood and where and how it was to be used in the construction of the vessel. The evolution of shipbuilding as a technology saw the emergence of the master shipwright. When signing contracts, these began to adopt their

own individualized mark instead of a signature. This consisted of a stylized axe, saw, hatchet, and so on.

The first colonial government shipyard came into being in 1666 at the Rivière Saint-Charles. Several small private shipyards also dotted the Saint Lawrence around Quebec City. Canadian shipwrights begin to acquire a high level of workmanship. They ably demonstrated that they had the requisite skills to be able to work without needing any help from France. Canadian shipbuilding began to excel and attained a world-class standard that attracted orders from other countries. After the Treaty of Utrecht between France and Britain in 1713, Quebec City saw a rapid increase in inter-colonial trade in the triangular route starting from New France, proceeding to the French Antilles and then onward to France. This increase in sea-going commerce caused the ship building trade to grow further and resulted in a high increase in the number of shipwrights. It was common for a master shipwright to have under him between fifteen to thirty workers engaged in a variety of ship building tasks. The colonial administration decided to adopt strict shipbuilding standards for its own shipyards and for those pertaining to the private sector.

Private shipbuilding in French Canada was kept going by a handful of Canadian families. Shipbuilders such as Fabien Badeau, Guillaime Levitre and David Corbin, as the business heads of their families, distinguished themselves with their shipbuilding knowhow and as masters of the trade. These families also made it a point not to seek recourse from France for their needs and to safeguard the secrets of their trade by apprenticing within the family. As a result of their monopoly they began asking for higher rates. This frustrated the colonial administration who kept asking France to send more shipwrights.

In 1738 France sent Rene-Nicolas Levasseur who arrived in Quebec City as superintendent of shipyards to direct the construction of warships for use against the British. Larger ships were built, one of which was the 700 ton warship *Caribou* built in 1744 at Rivière Saint-Charles. To meet the increase in demand by the colonial administration for the building of naval vessels, a larger colonial shipyard came into being at Cul-de-Sac on the Saint Laurence River in 1748. This replaced the shipyard at Rivière Saint-Charles, which was turned into a port. With the opening of the Cul-de-Sac shipyard, the construction of naval vessels became more ambitious. This culminated in the building of the 72 gun warships *L'Orignal* in 1750 and *L'Algonquin* in 1753. This was followed by the frigate *Abénaquise* of 38 cannons, launched in 1756. The frigate *Quebec* was begun but never finished as a result of the Cul-de-Sac shipyard being abandoned when the British took Quebec City in 1759. It was reopened by the British administration after the British conquest in 1763 and called the King's Yard.

From the arrival of the first King's shipwrights in 1663 up to the British conquest the colonial government of New France had built over 230 large vessels.

Source
Real Brisson. *La Charpenterie Naval a Québec sous le régime Français*. Québec: Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1983.