

## Unit 9: Video 1 Transcript

**Q 6, 7, 8:** Why did the seigneurial system last as long as 1854? What led to its abolition? What features still exist?

**A:** The seigneurial system and its persistence through 1854: why did that happen? I mean, after all in France the seigneurial system, the remnants of it, ended with the revolution in the 1790s. It's an interesting question.

Again, my last book, I moved away from the Eastern Townships to look at a seigneur, in fact, and a person who owned a seigneurie, mostly after the system was abolished. So I was interested to start with the tail and go back to the beginning later on how that persisted, the degree to which it persisted, and why people continued to be called seigneurs after it was supposedly abolished.

When I looked at his seigneurie, Lotbinière, in particular, what I found was that there was a lot of hostility towards his father in the way he tried to raise rents and so on. But that Joly de Lotbinière, the person I wrote a biography of, because he was sort of a paternalist, he was able to operate a lumbering business on his seigneurie, hire the local farmers, and they could pay rent. Because once the—when the seigneurial system was abolished in 1854, people still pay rents. And they're allowed to pay it off in one lump sum, but very few in Quebec, or Lower Canada still in 1854, chose to do so because maybe they couldn't afford to. Historians don't know yet.

One aspect of the seigneurial system that I find when I'm trying to explain this to my students is that it's very difficult for students to understand what the seigneurial system is. They tend to—because they have a mindset of our freehold system in their minds, they tend to think that that's the only way property could ever be held. So you're either a property owner or you're a renter. You're renting your apartment or whatever from the landlord. Under the seigneurial system, it's a completely different way of looking at property. Essentially, the only person who owns the property, and I'm thinking back to the origins of it in New France, is the King of France. And then he grants tracts of land, which were called seigneuries, to seigneurs in return for—it's kind of feudal, but in return for an oath of loyalty and a very nominal annual rent, and provided that they introduce settlers to the land. This was supposed to be an obligation, although it was never enforced.

And these settlers are called "censitaires" because they pay "cens et rentes." And these rents originally are quite low, because there's lots of land and very few people. So seigneurs competing against each other to bring these

censitaires in. Anyway, as a censitaires, you're not a tenant because once you've agreed to the annual cens et rentes that you're going to pay, that cannot be changed. And that does not change even with the next generation or your heirs or your heirs' heirs. It's a fixed rent. So there's a lot of stability there. You're allowed to mortgage the land as a censitaire. You're allowed to sell it, although you pay a tax if you do to the seigneur. But the seigneur pays a tax to the king if he sells his seigneurie. So these taxes are kind of onerous, but they were designed to keep people attached to the land, too. Because stability was considered important for a paternalistic society.

So in many ways, the seigneurial system, you could say, benefited the average farmer, or "habitants" as they were known in Lower Canada. Because unlike the English system where speculators, absentee proprietors, with a lot of money could invest in it, tie it up and not sell it. Or once people were desperate for land, charge very high rates. That didn't happen in the seigneurial system. So that's one of the reasons why the Patriotes, for example in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, argue that they want to hang onto the seigneurial system. It's not only because of nationalist reasons that this is somehow distinctively French-Canadian in North America, but also that the British freehold system pushes people off the land. Makes it very difficult for people to get onto the land. And, of course, the French-Canadian population, mostly after the rebellion, but even before it's becoming overcrowded. In the 1840s, what you see is thousands of people beginning to migrate from Lower Canada to New England to work in the—actually, textile mills in the 1860s. But even before that, they are moving into the United States to get land, because there's just none left. So that idea of keeping people in Lower Canada, keeping them on the land is a very important reason why reformers in Lower Canada did not want to abolish the seigneurial system.

The British would have liked to have many of them, because they wanted to be able to speculate and invest in it. But many British bought seigneuries and—partly for investment purposes, but also partly for prestige purposes. Because, of course, to be part of the gentry, you had to be landed. So you made a lot of money in the fur trade or in the lumber trade, and then you buy a seigneurie; that gives you more status. So there wasn't a lot of push to abolish the seigneurial system from the British side either.

Why does it eventually get abolished? Well, I talked earlier, first of all, with Allan Greer's work and how some of the more radical Patriotes were in favor of abolishing it. But that comes up more in the 1838 Rebellion, which had no hope of succeeding because the British military was so strong. Papineau had already fled and so on. So it was kind of a last ditch radical effort. But there's

moves, just as I talked, in the 1840s, towards education reform, municipal reform. Hand in hand with that is seigneurial reform.

So some people wanted to—because some of the seigneurs were charging larger rents. You couldn't increase the rent once land was granted, but land that wasn't granted, they could demand a higher *cens et rentes*. And that would discourage people from moving onto the land. And they also could start—they also started introducing all sorts of other more onerous things like taking some of the fish, or trying to, that were caught. Preventing the seigneurial—the seigneur would monopolize the mill sites, for example, so that only he—well, under the seigneurial system, only the seigneur could own a flour mill. And everybody had to take their flour there. But the seigneurie I looked at, they also monopolized the sawmill sites, because the water power they could control, and anything to do with mining and so on.

Once you move into the 1840s and '50s and you're beginning to have industrialization, railway construction, the seigneurial system is seen as an impediment. Because the seigneur—in order to push a railway through a seigneurie, you would have to deal with the seigneur. And so it was seen as—and, of course, the seigneur, because of his control of the mill sites and so on, might be able to hold back economic development. He might not have enough capital to develop these places. So it's all part and parcel of a change towards a more industrializing impetus and urbanizing, I suppose. And apart from that—I mean it's kind of hard to put one's finger on why then, except it was seen as completely anachronistic by the 1850s and just a matter of time. Because everywhere else, of course, didn't have it. And it was seen as feudal and backwards, in a way.

But what's interesting is that many, many historians of Lower Canada have looked at the seigneuries as a result partly of that debate around the rebellions that Fernand Ouellet was pivotal in. Looking at the degree to which people in rural seigneuries were becoming impoverished or not, or progress was being made or not. Very few looked at what happened once seigneurial system was abolished. So those local studies are very good for the pre-1854 period. There are very few for the post-1854 period. And that's why I decided to work on Joly de Lotbinière, one of the reasons, who was a seigneur, a seventh-generation seigneur. And to see the extent to—or what influence at the local level the abolition of the seigneurial system caused. And, in fact, "abolition" is even too strong a word because you could call it—I think "commutation" is a word that's used. Because the seigneurs continue after 1854 to collect rents from people who were previously paying *cens a rente*. Now it's called "constituted rent." And more importantly, I think,

particularly for Lotbinière is that under the seigneurial system if someone came to you and said they wanted land, some of what we call “wild land,” land that hadn’t been cultivated or granted yet, the seigneur was obliged to provide it for them. He couldn’t hold it back, unlike the freehold system.

Well, what happens once the seigneurial system is abolished, let’s say? Well, the land that hadn’t been settled yet remains in the hands of the seigneur, which means that he can do with it as he wishes. He can grant it or not. And so in a way, they gain more power over the land within their seigneurie, particularly those seigneurs who had seigneuries that had not been densely settled yet. Like Joly de Lotbinière, because Lotbinière is not particularly arable. It’s rather swampy, low-lying land. A lot of it is not arable. So he used it—he was a logger. He had a lumber business. And most of their profits come from logging their land and not from rents that they get from their tenants, let’s call them. They were able to completely control that land. It probably wouldn’t have been granted, a lot of it anyway, because it wasn’t very arable. But the fact that it’s now completely under their control, I think, made it easier for them, let’s say, to raise money from a bank. Because I found when looking at his lumber business, he had to raise capital every year in order to pay the men who were working in the woods in order to pay all of his expenses. And then he would hope to sell and make a profit in the spring. Or most of the logs were sawed during the early summer.

So another interesting thing about Joly de Lotbinière is he was Protestant. Unheard of in many ways, to be a French-speaking politician and a Protestant. But his father was from France and a Protestant. He ran for election in his county, through many elections, and always won and even became Premier for a short time. And I think that’s because of his status as a seigneur. People still saw him as having some kind of prestige and some kind of what I call “noblesse oblige”, right? He was the father of the people, and he would do them favours and so on.

So that mindset, that kind of old paternalistic mindset does not just—it’s not like the Revolution in France where you’re going to behead the seigneurs or anything. It’s a much more gradual shift. So 1854. There’s a young historian at the University of Sherbrooke, Benoît Grenier, who’s doing very detailed work on this now, but he’s the first person to actually look at what is, after all, a pivotal event in Quebec history, the abolition or commutation of the seigneurial system. Nobody had looked at that before, except my study on a very local level on one seigneurie. But he finds much the same thing, right?

In fact, the elements of the seigneurial system persisted into the 1950s. People were still paying rents until finally, the Duplessis government of the 1950s

pays it off. And that's the last vestige of it. So one of the reasons the seigneurial system has not been studied very much is it really wasn't a revolutionary change, in some respects. So that makes it interesting in itself, I think. Why wasn't it? And that's the sort of thing I was kind of interested in looking at. And I think partly it's because the legislation was quite favourable to the seigneurs. They were indemnified for the loss of their feudal rights, and plus, they were able to continue to collect rents. And so in Joly's case, he amassed a lot of capital, could build a new sawmill. It was very profitable for him. Plus, he continues to have the status of the seigneur in people's minds. He's called a seigneur, as many people were, even though technically there was no seigneurial system anymore.