2002

Was There A Consumer Revolution In Eighteenth-Century New France?

Robert S. DuPlessis
Swarthmore College, rduples1@swarthmore.edu

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

Follow this and additional works at: http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/258

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.
Was There a Consumer Revolution In Eighteenth-Century New France?
Author(s): Robert S. DuPlessis
Published by: Michigan State University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/41938112
Accessed: 08-11-2016 21:32 UTC
Was There a Consumer Revolution In Eighteenth-Century New France?

Robert S. DuPlessis

Récemment, des historiens ont proposé une "révolution de consommation" au XVIIIe siècle qui aurait eu de grandes conséquences économiques, sociales, culturelles, et politiques. L'examen des tissus et des vêtements catalogués dans un échantillon d'inventaires après décès des colons de Montréal et de sa région dans la deuxième moitié du XVIIe siècle et encore en 1770–74, nous permet à vérifier cette thèse.

Au début, l'habillement de toile et de drap importé prédominait de beaucoup, indépendamment d'âge, sexe, richesse, ou profession. Mais aux années 1770, les cotonnades remplaçaient de plus en plus la toile dans les armoires des colons de toute condition. Au même temps (bien qu'au moindre degré), les droguets et les toiles du pays, presqu'absents au XVIIe siècle, commençaient à déplacer les tissus européens.

Les continuités pendant le siècle rendent discutable l'idée d'une révolution de consommation en ce qui concerne le textile. Pourtant, une "révolution cotonnière" s'est produite. Celle-ci pourrait avoir éventuellement contribuée à l'industrialisation de Grande-Bretagne, quoique son influence fut diminuée par la croissance du textile local et par la demande durable pour les draps chers tissés à la main. Et si la consommation des cotonnades aurait encouragé la standardisation culturelle, d'autres pratiques textiles différaient les sexes, les rangs, et les générations.

Robert S. DuPlessis is Isaac Clothier Professor of History at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

© French Colonial History
Vol. 1, 2002, pp. 143-159
ISSN 1539-3402
The study of consumption is in fashion these days. No longer on the dusty back shelf of market researchers and museum curators, it is now a hot item displayed on the front counter of many disciplines. Nowhere is this more evident than in history—further evidence not only of the discipline’s opening to approaches and theories derived from such fields as anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, but also of its current rethinking of many time-honored issues. Historians now devote attention to a pre-industrial “world of goods.”¹ As a result, many historians accept that a wide-ranging eighteenth-century “consumer revolution” laid the basis for factory industrialization, shaped modern attitudes about and behavior by both the individual and larger social groupings, and—most audaciously—encouraged colonial rebellion.² Originally focused on early modern England, consumption studies now propose that the Continent and European colonies in North America experienced similar changes, with ancien régime France another epicenter.³

Some scholars contend the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century was a decisive turning point in human history, comparable to—maybe even greater than—the industrial and political revolutions that followed and perhaps flowed from it. But are the claims true? Did changes in consumption registered in the eighteenth century extend as deeply and as far as to constitute a revolution? These questions are too big to answer definitively in this short essay. We can, however, examine some of the assertions that scholars advanced by considering the history of consumer goods in a specific place during the purportedly crucial period. Thus our analysis will consider cloth sold in Montreal and its district and clothing manufactured from it during the second half of the seventeenth century and the early 1770s.

Why fabrics and garments? Although these items can be difficult to study, the attempt is well worth the effort. Cloth and clothing were major items of consumption among all segments of the populace, irrespective of age, gender, ethnic group, locality, or occupation. Typically, they composed the foremost category of goods traded both within Europe and overseas,⁴ while also dominating the business of many individual merchants.⁵ If a “consumer revolution” occurred, in short, significant changes should be evident in textile and garment consumption. As the largest single manufacturing sector of pre-industrial economies, moreover, and preponderant among those turning out consumer goods, cloth and the clothing made from it were crucial to economic development. Analyzing consumption of these goods thus attends directly to interpretations holding that changes in demand rather than supply launched the Industrial Revolution. Besides, fabrics and dress were crucial to processes of individual and group self-fashioning that ostensibly became more prominent in this period.⁶
The dates chosen bracket the 1740s and 1750s, years during which, according to some scholars, a colonial consumer revolution occurred.\textsuperscript{7} Hence our documents should reflect any changes in consumption that may have occurred in New France. In addition, the early 1770s give us a strategic vantage point upon consumption on the eve of mechanized factory industrialization—in its initial years largely a matter of textile crafts. Finally, the Montreal area can reveal the consumption habits of a cross-section of New France's people, for it was home to merchants, administrators, military men, professionals, artisans, and \textit{habitants}.

Probate inventories, on which this study is based, reveal both the cloth available for purchase in the Montreal region, disclosed in the extensive listings of goods that constitute the largest part of merchants' inventories, and the clothing that was made from these textiles, information about which is found among the enumeration of property in the inventories of individuals.\textsuperscript{8} However, as scholars have repeatedly noted probate inventories are a problematic source.\textsuperscript{9} Of the many potential pitfalls, three deserve further consideration.

First, inventories exist for only a minority of New France's population. Besides losses due to the ravages of time, not every death originally generated an \textit{inventaire après décès}. The goods belonging to children, indentured servants, slaves, and Native Americans were virtually never inventoried, and neither were those of many other adults. These documents were most likely to be drawn up when minor children were involved, to provide guardians comprehensive lists of their wards' property; when the death of one spouse resulted in the dissolution of a community of goods between two spouses or between a decedent and her or his children; when one or both spouses left surviving children from more than one marriage; when creditors demanded an accounting; or when heirs disagreed.

Second, even when they exist, inventories can be incomplete or faulty. Thanks to negligence or to disinterest in the tedious enumeration of objects with little or no market value, to agreement by successors simply to accept certain articles \textit{en bloc} irrespective of their worth, or to concealment by heirs, notaries might lump together dissimilar items under a general category or price, omit significant information, or even exclude individual pieces or whole categories of goods. For their part, appraisers, drawn from among the neighbors of the decedent, with merchants and artisans called in when expertise was needed to value stocks of commercial goods or professional tools, might incorrectly assess the worth of items.\textsuperscript{10}

Third, inventories give a snapshot of possessions held at the end of a life, not the history of an individual's consumption; they show what the deceased owned at the moment of death, not what was acquired across a life.
These are potentially serious problems, but they do not invalidate the use of the Montreal inventories. To begin with, although inventories do not exist for most residents of the town and its region—or for virtually any non-Europeans—those that have survived cover a surprising range of ages, both genders, occupations, wealth, and locations. Decedents of every stripe left minor children, who needed to be provided for, communities of goods to be disposed of, exigent creditors, and fractious heirs. Of great value, given the paucity of merchant accounts and similar records from the French regime period, are the detailed warehouse inventories subsumed into inventories compiled upon merchants’ deaths. Remarkably, too (particularly in contrast to British colonies), inventories of women’s property were common in New France. So while the inventories on which this study is based do not constitute a random sample of the Euro-American population who lived in Montreal, they do form a representative sample (a claim that I elaborate below).

Most important of all, many inventories from New France give quite complete listings of cloth and clothing. The thoroughness of Canadian inventories in this respect is again striking in comparison with similar documents from British North America. Whereas English colonial inventories typically summarize and value all clothing in a word or two (e.g., “purse and apparell”), a large number of their counterparts in New France record garments, often in great detail (e.g., “6 men’s shirts of coarse gray linen in rather good condition, each valued at 2 livres, total 12 livres”). Cloth, too, is carefully described. So for both textiles and garments we can discern not only types, quantities, and prices, but also colors, qualities, patterns, and finishes, and even, in the case of clothes, sizes and whether they were lined or ornamented. As for accuracy of values, examination of instances when actual sales were recorded along with appraisers’ assessments shows that significant errors were actually rare; estimates and auction prices usually differed by just a small percentage. Finally, while the goods found in inventories surely reflect the results of consumption rather than the process, the frequent use in New France documents of descriptive adjectives such as “old,” “very old,” “used,” “half-used,” “very used,” “little used,” and “new,” among others, does allow us to get a sense of accumulation over time as well as of the characteristics of the goods with which people surrounded themselves.

Let us begin with inventories of individuals’ estates. The group inventoried in the second half of the seventeenth century comprised 88 individuals. They were predominantly male and young, were mostly farmers, and had accumulated relatively little wealth over their lifetimes. (For exact counts and percentages, see Appendix 1A.) Women, a minority in every wealth category,
were disproportionately represented among both the most well-to-do and those of middling wealth, forming two-fifths of each group, but just a third of all those inventoried; women comprised only a fourth of those with lowest wealth. Less surprising, habitants, half of all the inventoried, were more likely to be found among the poor (60 percent), and less likely among those of middling (not quite 40 percent) or high wealth (one individual, a bare 3 percent), than their numbers alone would warrant. Similarly, the young decedents who comprised two-thirds of the total inventoried were over represented among the less affluent (forming three-quarters) and were sparse among the most well-to-do (just a third).

Four significant changes in the demographic profile of the inventoried occurred over the 1651–1700 period. First, gender ratios became more equal: only 2 usable women’s inventories survived from the 1650s and 1660s, as against 26 from men, but in the 1680s-90s the figures were 23 and 31 respectively. Second, age ratios also became more balanced: whereas during the 1650s, 1660s, and 1670s, only a sixth of inventories were for men and women over 40, by the 1680s-90s, this older group accounted for half of the inventories. Third, habitants and merchants became more numerous: from about a quarter and less than a tenth respectively of the inventoried during the 1650s and 1660s, they had reached nearly three-fifths (habitants) and one-sixth (merchants) during the 1690s. Fourth, the level of inventoried wealth rose. Whereas in the 1650s-60s four-fifths of all inventories fell into the low-wealth category with just 14 percent in the middle category and 7 percent in the high, in the 1680s-90s, only 46 percent of all estates were at the lowest wealth level, compared with 37 percent in the middle and 17 percent at the top.

These trends indicate that our sample is a representative one, for each reflects wider demographic and socio-economic trends: New France’s increasingly even sex ratio as the seventeenth century wore on; the slowing of immigration from the later 1670s and the expansion of farm settlements which raised the average age of the population;\(^\text{15}\) both the growing proportion of settlers in Montreal and its area who took up farming and the expansion of the merchant community thanks to the growing fur trade and the rising settler population; and the rising amount of wealth gained from farming and from trade. Whereas the residents of seventeenth-century Montreal generated 88 inventories in the 20 years from 1651 to 1670, at the beginning of the last quarter of the eighteenth century they generated a similar number, 80, in only five years, between 1770 and 1774.

A total of 80 inventories survive for the years 1770–74. As against those of a century earlier, these decedents were more likely to be women and,
whether male or female, to practice farming or to belong to a family of *habitants*. Fewer were merchants or came from high-status households. As before, however, two-thirds were aged 40 or below at the time of their deaths.\(^{16}\) Once again, the characteristics of the inventoried group suggest that it is representative of the larger population, for across the eighteenth-century rural areas around Montreal with a primarily agricultural vocation had become increasingly preponderant.

In terms of wealth, the women and men were about evenly matched among the poorest (men, 46 percent of all inventoried decedents, accounted for 49 percent of the low-wealth category, whereas women, 54 percent of the overall group, were 51 percent of the least affluent), but women predominated among those of middling assets (64 percent compared to 36 percent of the total), and men among the richest (64 percent to 36 percent of the total). Compared to a century earlier, these figures represented a levelling downward of inventoried women's wealth, and a relative increase in men's. Some of this change is to be explained by the greater representation of women among the inventoried. But the wealth levelling can also be traced to the more settled agricultural nature of the Montreal area: unlike the 1650s and 1660s, when the overwhelmingly male inventoried group contained a large number of poor single young men consisting of soldiers and individuals just beginning to establish farms, in the 1770s the great majority of the inventoried were women and men living in households on established farms. The same transformation becomes evident when we examine the estates of *habitants* irrespective of gender: by the 1770s they were much more equally distributed across wealth levels than in 1651–1700. *Habitants* now comprised 73 percent of the inventoried and 82 percent of those in the low-wealth category, but they were also 59 percent of those with middling assets, and half of the most affluent. By 1770–74 the wealth of young decedents (those aged 40 and under) had increased compared to the first period: still two-thirds of the total inventoried, they constituted about the same proportion, precisely 70 percent, of the least propertied, four-fifths of those with middling estates, and two-fifths of the richest. This finding, too, bespeaks the maturation of the region's agrarian economy: after a century of property accumulation and its bequeathal across generations, households started out with more material assets than their ancestors had.

With one seventeenth-century exception, all the merchandise inventories (12 from 1651–1700, 8 for the early 1770s) belonged to male decedents, and all but one lived in Montreal. (The exception was a man who resided in La Chesnaye). Although they all list items of clothing, both the individual and aggregate numbers of garments are too small to yield significant results. In contrast, they enumerate large quantities of cloth: a total of 13,401 ells for the

---

\(^{16}\) This is consistent with other studies of the period, which show that men were more likely to die young due to the demands of farming and the risks of war, while women were more likely to survive into old age and contribute to the family's economic well-being. The levelling of wealth distribution among the inventoried group suggests a decrease in the economic disparity between men and women, which may be attributed to the more settled agricultural nature of the Montreal area. The greater representation of women among the inventoried group also indicates a shift in the gender dynamics of the region's economy, with women playing a more significant role in the provision of material goods and the transmission of wealth across generations.

---

\(^{16}\) This content downloaded from 130.58.65.11 on Tue, 08 Nov 2016 21:32:30 UTC All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms
1651–1700 period, 9,036 ells in 1770–74 or, in both periods, an average of slightly more than 1,100 ells per inventory.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the colonists in what was still a frontier area dressed overwhelmingly in linen and woolen. About 60 percent of all garments listed in inventories were made of linen, whether flaxen or hempen, far and away the fabric leader thanks to its use in shirts and blouses, of which the average inventory listed nearly 9 (one individual boasted 59!). Woolens accounted for another 25 percent, and linen-woolen mixtures comprised a substantial proportion of all mixed fabrics, at 6.5 percent of the total, the third largest category. Little wonder: all were durable fabrics that well resisted cold and the elements. Linen garments were also cheap, comprising 81 percent of all clothing considered inexpensive. In contrast, woolen fabrics were disproportionately used for middling and expensive garments (they were respectively 40 and 50 percent of each total), but were used to make up only 10 percent of all inexpensive clothes.

Colonists had clothing appropriate to their environment and occupations. Did they have much of it? One might imagine that a frontier was isolated and poor, peopled by hardy folk supplied with a couple of garments that they wore out or until they died. Now, we do not know what textiles settlers arrived with, only what they had at the time of their deaths. But it is clear that they were not bereft of garments, having on average 13.8 pieces at their decease. Unsurprisingly, decedents with high levels of wealth had proportionately the most clothes and the most expensive ones. Yet even habitants (disproportionately numerous among those with the least wealth) were pretty well provided with clothing, having 10.4 separate pieces of clothing each; one especially flush habitant left 73 items. Moreover, those with the smallest estates bought proportionally more garments made of wool (53 percent of the total, as compared with 41 percent of the linen) than of any other material, even though such items were, on average, among the most expensive.

Some clothing was in poor condition: appraisers listed about 15 percent as "old," "very old," "very used," "bad," or "very bad." Such garments belonged to all sorts of decedents—men and women, well-off and nearly destitute. Nearly balancing them, moreover, was the 9 percent described as "new," "good," "little worn," or "little used"—"good" clothes, again, found across the social order. Woolen and linen garments were not the only ones in seventeenth-century colonists' wardrobes. They also wore some cotton (5 percent) and silk (4 percent) garments. Even a relatively poor farmer might have a silk kerchief or a cotton shirt, though most of the cloth items made of these fabrics were found in the possession of townspeople, particularly the affluent. Even among them, however,
cloth consumption was differentiated, with women much more likely to own something made of silk, whereas men owned more of the items made of cotton.\textsuperscript{22}

Cotton and silk garments could be expensive. But the great majority of cotton clothing was cheap (30 percent) or of middling price (59 percent), as were two-thirds of all silk articles. The well-to-do mainly owned clothing fashioned from cotton and silk, it appears, because they were merchants, administrators, surgeons, notaries—occupations that did not require them to be in the elements as much as farmers or artisans and, thus, favor durability over fashion. Or they were the spouses of such individuals and, as such, shared a style of life in which decorative shawls, ties, scarves, kerchiefs, and shirts were regularly worn. Farmers or artisans, and their spouses who worked alongside them, on the otherhand, needed strong, warm, protective garment, somtimes made of expensive fabrics.

In the seventeenth century local producers provided few of the early settlers' textiles in New France. Although hemp and flax seem to have been cultivated from the colony's earliest days, and most habitants kept at least a few sheep, some seigneurs even developing larger herds, none of the fabrics listed in the seventeenth-century inventories is specified as being locally woven (du pays), even though the provenance of imported cloth is often cited. To be sure, many fabrics are listed without any information about origin. Yet even assuming that cloth that could have been made in the colony, mainly druggets and coarse linen, was in fact made there, garments made of these materials would account for only a very small percentage of the total. The scarcity of locally-made textiles is not hard to explain. Even when not fully occupied with cultivating crops, habitants, those most likely to engage in cottage clothmaking, were fully occupied in clearing land or, in the winter, gathering wood for fuel and other uses leaving little time for spinning and weaving.

Inventories of merchant stocks reinforce the image of settler textile consumption obtained from individuals' inventories. Linens and woolens comprised 83 percent of total ellage, with mixed fabrics a further 8 percent.\textsuperscript{23} Again, linen, 77 percent, predominated among cheap fabrics, and woolens, 96 percent, were far in the lead among middling and expensive textiles.\textsuperscript{24} In contrast to the situation obtaining for garments, however, more woolen fabrics (53 percent of the total) was available than linen (30 percent). Many of the woolens were probably destined for the trade with the natives, in which nearly all the inventoried merchants were involved.

In many respects consumption habits changed little over the next century. By the early 1770s, colonists in and around Montreal still wore much linen and woolen clothing, very likely because neither the climate nor the kinds of work...
Was There a Consumer Revolution In Eighteenth-Century New France? 151

that most people did had changed appreciably. (Remember, too, that these later inventories were more heavily dominated by *habitants* and artisans.) The residents of Montreal by the third quarter of eighteenth century also boasted a great deal more cottons than before. In the late seventeenth century, cotton had composed only about 5 percent of cloth and clothing; now it was 23 percent of the material available in merchant shops and was tailored into 18 percent of clothes. Settlers in New France not only owned cotton kerchiefs, ties, and the occasional shirt, as before; now they wore cotton skirts, vests, jackets, breeches, as cotton changed from being a novelty to a product in regular and wide use. Linen was the great loser here, mainly because cotton shirts had become more desirable.25 Wool also lost popularity; although it was used in a greater proportion of basic garments like jackets, trousers, and skirts, it gave way to cotton which by 1770-1774 had taken a sizable chunk out of wool’s former near-monopoly of outer garments.26

Besides its quantitative and functional increases, cotton had increased its social range. No longer was it just for the affluent male. Now people of both sexes and of middling and especially less wealth wore cotton clothing on a fairly equal basis with the rich: the material had lost much of its position as a gender, wealth, and status marker.27 Yet woolen fabrics still held on among artisans and *habitants* and among men, for whom long durability despite relatively high cost continued to be the crucial consideration.28

Silk could boast no similar quantitative conquest. Whereas the number of cotton garments had quintupled and the amount of cotton in shops had quadrupled, silk tailored into garments had barely increased (from 4 to 5 percent of the total), while in terms of ellage in merchants’ storehouses silk actually dropped from 4 percent to less than 2. Silk, however, did share in some of the social expansion that so marked cotton. Admittedly, silk remained disproportionately represented in the armoires of the well-to-do.29 But people of middling wealth also began to display more silk kerchiefs, cravats, and other accessories and a few basic articles of silk articles of clothing. Indeed, even some of the poorer colonists, including one of every two artisans and *habitants*, could boast an item made from a cheaper grade of silken fabric.30 For all that, silk kept a pronounced gender and age identity; unlike cotton, it did not transgress those boundaries very much, being more often in the possession of women and the young than of men and those over 40.31

In the 1770s, woolens, blends, and cottons (replacing linens and coming to have a more equal social distribution) were preeminently the clothing fabrics of the less well-off. But in sharp contrast with the seventeenth century, some locally-made fabrics—a few druggets and especially linens—were now enumerated.32 Constituting about 8 percent of all garments, the appearance of
clothing made of these fabrics in individuals' inventories, although not in merchant stock listings, suggests not only that textile crafts had become firmly rooted in New France, but also that its products largely circulated outside of regular commercial channels. Not all the poor accepted these fabrics, however. Instead, these materials had acquired a strong gender, class, and status association, used primarily for the garments of poorer rural women, the wives and daughters of marginal farmers—often probably the very same women who spun the flax and wool that ended up in these clothes. Their husbands and fathers themselves avoided such stuffs as much as possible; they used for their clothing, imported linens and woolens, like middle-class and even rich men.

The amount of clothing deceased owned also increased by about 50 percent in 100 years. Whereas the average estate inventoried between 1651 and 1700 contained 13.8 articles of clothing wardrobes in the early 1770s held 21.35; habitants, with 10.4 in the earlier period, boasted 16.75 in the later. (The highest number for any individual in 1770-4 was 82, but for a habitant 49.) Although it might be thought that the spread of inexpensive cotton shirts caused the overall rise, this is only partly true: the mean of 8.86 shirts per inventory in 1651–1700 had become 12.88 in the 1770s, a slightly lower rate of increase than among garments in general. The growth in wardrobe size was due to an increase in the number of items but also to an increase in the types of clothes owned by the men and women of New France, including some newly popular ones such as jupons and redingotes.

Finally, the proportion of clothing listed as old or in poor condition increased to about 19 percent. More dramatic was the sharp decline in garments described as new or in good shape, which now barely reached 3 percent. These changes, which affected all wealth levels, suggest two interpretations. On the one hand, they could indicate that the population in general was becoming poorer, particularly because the negative citations were found in three-quarters of all inventories, whereas positive mentions were found in just a fifth. On the other, they might show that all sectors of the populace had benefited from inheritance to augment their stocks of consumer goods.

European cloth and clothing furnished the needs of those in New France—and necessarily so, because the colony did not provide much of its own. In view of the numbers of items held by seventeenth-century colonists, whether rich merchant or poor laborer, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that a form of mass consumption already existed before the eighteenth century, much less factory industrialization.
Some aspects of textile consumption did change, however, as we have seen. Did these changes add up to a revolution? Not if one's definition of revolution mandates a fundamental and rapid alteration of existing modes of attitude and action. The continuities between the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries—across, that is, the purported watershed moment—were too many and too strong to justify using such a sweeping term. Still, we might speak of a "cotton revolution." Not only was much more cotton cloth imported and sold to the elite that had first acquired it, but new groups bought it and it was used in new ways, becoming fundamental to the textile culture of New France.36

So change was quite specific.37 What were its implications? To begin with, it is hard to locate conditions within New France that account for the rise of cottons: changes in supply rather than demand would appear to have been crucial. Still, whatever the causes of their growth, cottons were the textile motor of early factory industrialization, so it is worthy of notice that the eighteenth-century transformation that contributed so centrally to the Industrial Revolution was occurring not only in Britain and its empire but also in the French colonies as well, and, we know, in metropolitan France.38 Canada's cotton cloth consumption could help promote industrialization, not only in Britain but also in France before the regime changed.

Nevertheless, this increase in the consumption of cotton in New France is far from the whole story. For alongside cottons there was another rising star, local cloth. Expansion of woolens and linens du pays, once cheap and handmade, would tend to reduce consumption of cottons and thus lessen the colony's contribution to industrialization. Continued attachment to textiles like expensive woolens led in the same direction. So insofar as the cotton revolution was accompanied by the rise of local cottage manufacturing and the persistence of skilled handicraft production, the positive effects of changes in consumption upon factory industrialization were blunted. Or, to put the same point more generally, evidence from New France suggests that eighteenth-century changes in consumption did not necessarily promote an industrial revolution in Europe.

Equally complex were the effects of the changes we have observed in self-representation. The wider use of cotton fabrics and of the goods made from it was likely a force promoting cultural standardization, even homogenization, based on these material goods, as Breen, for example, has proposed. Yet other trends in textile consumption were laying the material bases of specific, exclusive identities, as certain fabrics and clothing served to demarcate and denote the boundaries between genders, ranks, and age groups. Woolen and
linen garments became increasingly identified with males and their activities, silk with urban women. Just as locally woven cloth was worn by low status, poorer, rural folk, so silk and the more expensive varieties of woolens turned into markers of well-to-do town dwellers. Thus the "common language of consumption" founded on standardization that Breen postulates for British North America would seem to have been overlain by a good deal of heteroglossia in New France. Richard Bushman's argument that eighteenth-century clothing patterns reinforced the traditional hierarchy therefore seems more compelling than Breen's view that they challenged it.

Some of the developments we have traced were specific to New France, dependent upon its specific configuration of age and status groups, economic structure, and gender ratio composition. But New France also exhibited changes occurring across the Atlantic world, in particular a shift to lighter cloth, cotton, a change also documented for Britain and British America. New France participated as well in trends manifest in the mother country. In France, too, consumers gave up linens and heavy woolens for lighter cottons and, to a greater extent than their colonial counterparts, silks. At the same time, despite the spread of cotton, the garb of rich and poor and town and country was increasingly differentiated in the metropole as well as in periphery. To judge from some evidence, wool became the fabric of choice for men whereas women tended to prefer cotton and thus to display more of the changes that did occur. The rising importance of "populuxe" goods, to borrow Cissie Fairchild's label, in metropolitan France likewise suggests that new consumption patterns in the francophone world were not those that would promote rapid, factory-based industrialization but would issue in a slower, more handicraft-based type of economic change.

So to answer the question in the title of this essay: no, eighteenth-century New France did not experience a consumer revolution. The evidence suggests instead a more evolutionary development. From this perspective, the history of consumption rejoins, as it should, the history of production, for in place of "Industrial Revolution," an event, many historians now refer to "industrialization," a process. The notion of an eighteenth-century consumer evolution is less dramatic than that of an eighteenth-century consumer revolution; but at least for New France, it is, to my mind, more accurate.
## APPENDIX 1

### A. INVENTORY DATA BASE: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, 1651–1700a (TOTAL = 88)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (N=88)</th>
<th>Age (N=83)</th>
<th>WealthCategory\textsuperscript{b} (N=82)</th>
<th>Status\textsuperscript{c} (N=79)</th>
<th>Occupation\textsuperscript{d} (N=79)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{b} Based on total inventory value. High = 2000 and more livres. Middle = 1000–1999.9 livres. Low = 0–999.9 livres.

\textsuperscript{c} 1 = habitant or artisan; 2 = merchant, professional, military officer, administrator, landowner. If not identifiable from the inventory, a wife’s status was assumed to be that of her husband.

\textsuperscript{d} Unless otherwise specified in the inventories, a wife was attributed her husband’s occupation.

\textsuperscript{e} Information not available for all 88 inventories.

### B. INVENTORY DATA BASE: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS, 1700–1774 (TOTAL = 80)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (N=80)</th>
<th>Age (N=78)</th>
<th>Wealth Category\textsuperscript{a} (N=79)</th>
<th>Status\textsuperscript{b} (N=75)</th>
<th>Occupation\textsuperscript{c} (N=75)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{a} Based on total inventory value. High = 2040 and more livres. Middle = 1050–2039.9 livres. Low = 0–1049.9 livres.

\textsuperscript{b} 1 = habitant or artisan; 2 = merchant, professional, military officer, administrator, landowner. If not identifiable from the inventory, a wife’s status was assumed to be that of her husband.

\textsuperscript{c} Unless otherwise specified in the inventories, a wife was attributed her husband’s occupation.

\textsuperscript{d} Information not available for all 80 inventories.
APPENDIX 2

Notaries in the ANQM Whose Records Provided Usable Inventories
1651–1700: A. Adhémar, Basset, Bourgine, Closse, De Saint-Pere, Gastineau-DuPlessis, Mauge, Moreau, Pottier.

NOTES


5. Cf. Louise Dechêne, Habituants et marchands de Montréal au XVIIe siècle (Paris: Plon, 1974), Table 16, 151: cloth and clothing constituted 30 percent of merchant stocks in Montreal before 1664 and more than half between 1680 and 1720.


10. For an example of an appraisal, the inaccuracy of which becomes apparent when the inventory is compared with prices received at the subsequent public auction, see the inventory of Paul Boyer of Ste. Geneviève parish on the île Bayard: numerous items were appraised at just half their sale price, while overall, goods estimated to total about 490 livres sold just three days later for some 785 livres. Archives nationales du Québec, dépôt de Montréal [hereafter cited as ANQM], Not. Louis-Joseph Soupras, microfilm 2443, #17, 23 July 1762 (inventory); #18, 26 July 1762 (sale).

11. Space prohibits discussion of most of these last two characteristics here.


13. For a list of the notaries whose records yielded inventories, see Appendix 2.

14. Age at death was determined using information in the inventories; the vital statistics cardfiles at the ANQM; Dictionnaire national des Canadiens Français, 1608–1760, (Montréal: Institut Généalogique, 1977); Drouin and Cyprien Tanguy, Dictionnaire généalogique des familles canadiennes depuis la fondation de la colonie jusqu'à nos jours, 7 vols. (Montréal: E. Senécal, 1871–90).

15. For these phenomena, see Hubert Charbonneau et al., The First French Canadians: Pioneers in the St. Lawrence Valley (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1993).

16. Precise figures are given in Appendix 1B. To maintain a focus on consumption in New France, I have only examined inventories of adult French Canadians born or arrived in the colony before 1760. So as not to distort results, I have maintained equal proportions of low, middle, and high wealth inventories. I have excluded kerchiefs (mouchoirs) from the calculations of average total items of clothes because a few people had large numbers of them, which would skew the results.

18. Only 15 percent of the inventoried, they owned a third of all garments. One-quarter of the cheap clothes were theirs, half the middling-priced ones and 43 percent of the most expensive. Decedents of medium wealth, 28 percent of the inventoried, held a quarter of all clothing. They also had a third of the cheap clothes, a fifth of the medium-priced ones, and 31 percent of the dearest.

19. Overall, inventoried decedents in the group with the lowest estate levels, who comprised 57 percent of the inventoried in the seventeenth century, held just below 40 percent of
garments. As might be expected, they owned proportionally more cheap clothes (42 percent of the total) than middling (30 percent) or expensive ones (27 percent).

20. The total number of inventories for 1651–70 was 88. Of the 12 in the high wealth category, 5 were cited as having clothing in poor condition but 7 in good shape; of the middling group, the figures were respectively 11 and 2 of 23; of the 47 inventories in the lowest group, 33 had bad or very worn clothing and 18 had good or new garments. (Four of the six inventories of unknown wealth were cited for bad clothing, and two for good.) Finally, 22 of 38 habitants held clothes in poor condition, 10 in good.

21. The well-off owned 38 percent of the cotton garments, 57 percent of the silk; those of middling wealth 26 and 32 percent respectively. High-status decedents and those aged 40 and younger possessed about four-fifths of both cotton and silk clothing.

22. Women had 68 percent of the silk garments; men owned 89 percent of the cotton.

23. The remainder consisted of cottons (5 percent) and silks (4 percent).

24. Overall, cheap fabrics were 62 percent of the total, middling ones 33 percent, the most expensive 5 percent.

25. Linen was now 40 percent of both total ellage and garments.

26. Woolen fabrics comprised 27 percent of total ellage and were made into 19 percent of the garments. Whereas in 1651–1700 woolens had been used for 78 percent of outerwear and cotton in none, in 1770–74 the proportions of woolen and cotton outerwear were 26 and 38 percent respectively.

27. Women, 54 percent of all inventoried decedents, had 63 percent of the cotton clothing, men (46 percent of the total) owning the remaining 37 percent; those 40 years old and younger at the time of their deaths (68 percent of the total) had 66 percent of the cottons, the old (32 percent) had 34 percent. Cotton's indicative role remained strongest in terms of status: those of low status, mostly habitants and artisans, 84 percent of the inventoried, had 63 percent of the cotton garments, whereas those of high status, just 16 percent of the entire group, owned 37 percent of all cotton clothes. The explanation of the difference is most likely the mirror image of that for woolen garments.

28. Of all woolen garments, habitants and artisans bought 77 percent; men, 62 percent. Woolens made up 45 percent of expensive garments, as against 19 percent of all clothing.

29. Decedents in the high wealth category (15 percent of the total inventoried) bought 29 percent of total silk clothes.

30. Of all silk garments, 29 percent (the same amount as the rich held) was acquired by those in the lowest wealth category (57 percent of all inventoried decedents), the remaining 42 percent by the middling (28 percent). Habitants and artisans possessed just over half of all silk items, less than their proportion in the decedent group, and the lowest proportion of all types of cloth out of which their clothes were made. Possession of so much clothing made of silk by habitants and artisans is nonetheless evidence of silk's loss of exclusivity.

31. In 1770–74, 78 percent of silk garments belonged to women decedents as against 68 percent in 1651–1700; it must be remembered, of course, the percentage of women inventoried had risen from 32 to 54. Whereas the proportion of 40 and younger decedents had
WAS THERE A CONSUMER REVOLUTION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW FRANCE?

gone up slightly (from 64 to 68 percent), the share of silk garments they held had remained essentially stable (82 percent in the first period, 83 in the second).

32. Locally-made fabrics were bought by well-to-do (17 percent of the total garments made from these textiles) and middling consumers (24 percent). But they were far and away identified with poorer folk (59 percent—more than any other fabric).

33. As noted above, a lot of weaving took place in New France even in the later seventeenth century, and several initiatives to develop the industry followed in the next few decades. But production seems to have remained on a very small-scale for many decades. (See Dechêne, 151–52.) No Canadian textile industry of any size ever got going during the French period. The extensive domestic production often thought characteristic of rural New France actually emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; see David-Thierry Ruddel, "Domestic Textile Production in Colonial Québec, 1608–1840," Material History Bulletin, 31 (1990); nevertheless its early stages are reflected in the 1770s' inventories. These documents also reveal that local linen was commonly used for napkins and tablecloths.

34. Women had 64 percent of garments tailored of locally-made cloth: all habitants and artisans owned clothes sewn from locally-made cloth. Higher status individuals entirely spurned them.

35. In this period, of 12 inventories in the high wealth category, 10 were cited as having clothing in poor condition, just 1 in good shape; of the middling group, the figures were respectively 17 and 5 of 22; of the 45 inventories in the lowest group, 32 had bad or very worn clothing, whereas only 9 had good or new garments. (The one inventory of unknown wealth had both good and bad clothes.) And of 55 habitants, 40 held clothes in poor condition, 12 in good.

36. Space does not permit discussion of trends in Native American or western frontier consumption, but evidence presented in the larger study, of which the present essay forms a part, shows strong similarities with trends around Montreal.

37. It was also virtually unaffected by the change in political regime: comparisons with inventories made in the early 1760s show no changes that can be attributed to the British conquest but only a steady rise of cottons.


42. See Roche, Culture des apparences, and the many references therein.