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Storming Normandy: A Recovery Mission to the French Archives of Rouen and Caen

By James Spirek

Recently, Chester DePratter and I received a Robert L. Stephenson Archaeological Research Fund (RLSARF) grant to continue our quest to learn more about *Le Prince*, a French ship that sank off Port Royal Sound in early 1577. The RLSARF monetary award of \$4,059 allowed us to contract with Dr. Bernard Allaire, a French researcher specializing in 16th-century French maritime endeavors, to conduct research in Normandy archives for documents related to the ship. He was, as readers may remember, also responsible for locating the first five French documents related to the corsair and detailed in previous *Legacy* articles (See *Legacy* Vol. 3, No. 3, 1998, pp. 10-13 and Vol. 4, Nos. 1-3, 1999, p. 27). Allaire's mission was to spend three weeks looking for documents in the notarial archives of the Normandy port cities of Le Havre, Rouen, and Honfleur. The notarial archives of Le Havre and Rouen are located at the Archives départementales de la Seine-Maritime (ADSM) in Rouen and the Honfleur records are housed at the Archives départementales du Calvados (ADC) in Caen. Our research strategy was based on information drawn from the previous five documents that pertain to business conducted at Le Havre and surrounding towns in 1575 and 1576. In addition, Allaire was to seek out materials related to privateering and other seafaring activities, such as earlier and contemporary voyages, outfitting, and ordnance.

Before launching into the results of our research project, an explanation of the adversary that Allaire was up against—the notarial archive, or

tabellionage—is in order. In 16th-century France, many commercial contracts and transactions were drawn up by notaries, or *tabellions*, employed by the king. These transactions were prepared in a volume, folio style, written one transaction after the other in chronological order to fill a page (see figure). These volumes were classified based on the nature of the transactions as either *héritages* or *meubles*. The *héritages* volumes consist of contracts related to possessions transmitted by inheritance, bill of sales for houses or land, and mortgage loans. The *meubles* volumes consist of all other types of documents, and most importantly, commercial transactions involving seafaring ventures. Some volumes, however, contain a mixed bag of documents. The Rouen *tabellionage* consists of 10 to 15 volumes per year, Le Havre four volumes per year, and Honfleur one or two volumes a year. For the most part, the archives are complete for the time period under study and have survived wars and Acts of God, except for a critical loss of four Rouen *meubles* volumes dating from January to June 1575, which of course leads one to suspect that they may have contained information relevant to the corsair, among other valuable information.

Results of the *Le Prince* document search included the identification of 25 additional documents related to the corsair, all from the ADSM, to add to the five documents previously found there. A total of 168 documents relevant to contemporary Normandy seafaring ventures were also identified from the ADSM and

ADC. The funds also permitted the transcription of three documents and their translation into modern French and English. The newly found documents relate to the 1575 voyage to the Cape Verde Islands or the adjacent African coast, to Sierra Leone on the west coast of Africa, and then to Peru (West Indies) as described in the *Le Prince* Charter-Party document already obtained by Allaire. Based on these new documents, the 1575 voyage occurred during a three-month period with a departure from Le Havre in mid-May or early June with a return in late August or early September. Another important aspect of these documents is the mention of other notaries and cities in France where notarized transactions occurred, most notably in Paris. Therefore, these documents point Allaire, for instance, to the Paris *tabellionage* to retrieve the *meubles* volumes written by these specific notaries rather than search, perhaps fruitlessly, through countless volumes of Paris notaries looking for *Le Prince* related documents. Unfortunately, no additional 1576 documents were found that relate to the final voyage of the ship. The absence of 1576 documents at Le Havre suggests that most of the major business transactions were occurring in Brest where the ship was at port based on information from the two 1576 documents already in our possession. Therefore, the hunt must continue at the Brest archives in search of materials related to the final voyage.

The majority of the new documents revolve around the efforts of the noblemen Mathe Fapoco, owner

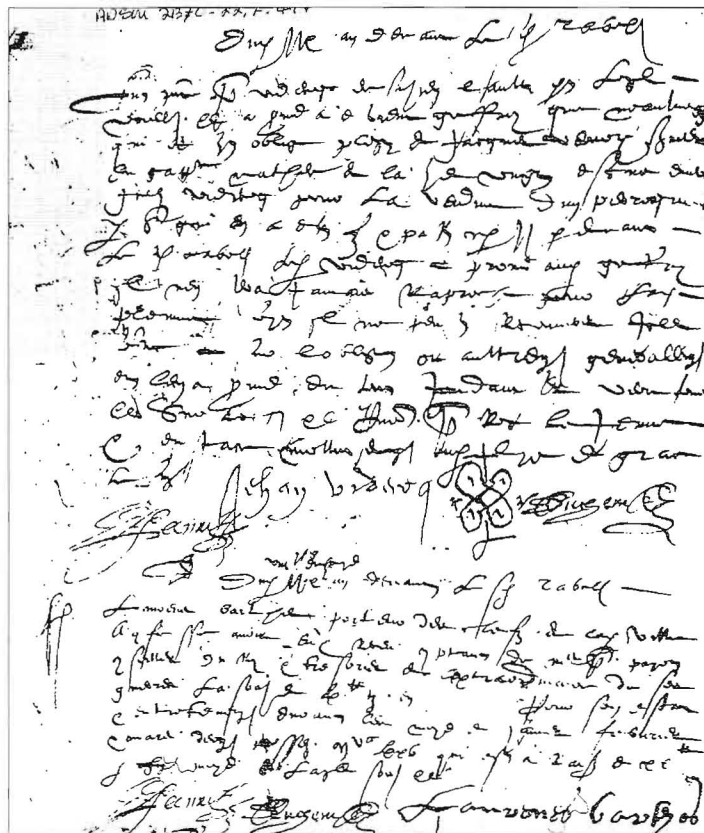
of *Le Prince*, and Oratio Rosso, captain of the ship, to secure investors to finance the voyage. Investors included two royal officials, merchants, innkeepers, a carter, a butcher, and members of the ship's crew. These investors bought shares in the voyage that were used to buy victuals for the ship and merchandise to trade and barter during the voyage. The return on their investment depended on

the interest they secured, while acknowledging that profits depended on "...the risks and fortunes of the sea, in the said ship." Several of the documents relate to the outfitting and victualling of the vessel. Some of the documents detail the purchase of two kinds of casks hooped with iron and chestnut, and subsequent payment for them. Other transactions concern the sale of parts of the rigging associated with the artillery and to secure funds for repairs and other

necessities for the ship. Two other documents deal with the purchase of *clairret* [claret] wine and biscuits for drink and food aboard the ship. Another pair of documents unrelated to the voyage itself concern the purchase of a parrot by Rosso from a Rouen merchant, however, these documents do provide confirmation that the ship was out to sea during the month of June.

In addition to looking solely for

Le Prince documents, Allaire also noted relevant transactions regarding corsairing and seafaring endeavors during this period. These documents describe the organization and financing of similar triangular voyages undertaken by *Le Prince* to Africa, to the West Indies, and then back to France, the sale of merchandise from these voyages, ordnance, privateering, and other miscella-



Top document relates to a *Le Prince* transaction concerning the captain Oratio Rosso. (SCIAA photo)

neous materials. The documents also note the involvement of people associated with the 1575 *Le Prince* voyage financing similar voyages. Other documents are of archaeological importance, specifically those dealing with naval ordnance and coopery. Some of the transactions describe in great detail the types and markings on the artillery, and the variety of woods used to construct the gun carriages and wheels.

Documents about coopery mention the use of chestnut hoops, along with iron ones, to bind the cask staves together. This type of specific information will help to distinguish the remains of a ship hailing from France rather than those from Spain, England, or elsewhere in Europe.

In conclusion, the research to uncover documents related to *Le Prince* and similar ventures was

successful from both a historical and archaeological viewpoint. The documents have expanded our knowledge about the finances, people, and outfitting surrounding the genesis of a voyage to Africa and the West Indies by the French in the 1570s. Importantly, they have revealed other avenues to travel in France to gather more information about *Le Prince*. All of this information should help in our upcoming survey to look for *Le Prince* and other casualties on the shoals and sandbars at the entrance to Port Royal Sound. Chester and I wish to thank the trustees of the RLSARF grant for the funds to conduct this research. If you would like to help sponsor additional archival

research, the translation of documents, or fieldwork activities for the continuing investigation into the saga of *Le Prince*, please consider a tax-deductible contribution to the Archaeological Research Trust earmarked for this project. For additional information about the project, contact Jim Spirek (spirek@sc.edu), Chester DePratter (depratter@sc.edu), or reach us by phone at (803) 777-8170.