

# Women of New France

**Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project  
Booklet Series, No. 1  
Department of Anthropology  
Western Michigan University  
Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5306**



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**Michigan Humanities Council**

*Michigan People, Michigan Places  
Our Stories, Our Lives*

*This project is funded by the Michigan  
Humanities Council, an affiliate of the  
National Endowment for the Humanities.*

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# Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

In 1998 Western Michigan University archaeologists were invited to Niles, Michigan to help locate the site of Fort St. Joseph, an eighteenth-century mission, garrison, and trading post complex established by the French along the St. Joseph River. With the help of documentary sources and the local community, a survey team dug shovel test pits and located material evidence of activities associated with the fort including gunflints, imported ceramics, glass beads, hand-wrought nails, and iron knife blades stamped with the names of French cutlers. Subsequent work identified trash deposits, fireplaces, and building ruins indicating that much of the site remains undisturbed. After more than a century in search of the site, Fort St. Joseph had been found!

The site has become the focus of a community-based research project aimed at examining colonialism and the fur trade in southwest Michigan. An interdisciplinary team of historians, archaeologists, geographers, and geophysicists, in partnership with the City of Niles and community groups like Support the Fort, Inc., are investigating the site to tell the story of life along the frontier of New France in the eighteenth century. This is the first issue in the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project Booklet Series intended to summarize our findings and make them available to a wider audience in an effort to bring the history and culture of Fort St. Joseph back to life.



# 4 What Was New France?



Fig. 1 The pays d'en haut or "upper country" was a vast territory west of Montreal, covering the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi River valley regions.

For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, France claimed and effectively controlled vast regions of North America. At its peak in the eighteenth century, the territory of New France extended from Newfoundland to the Rocky Mountains and from Hudson Bay to the Gulf of Mexico. French speakers had established settlements in the St. Lawrence River valley at Quebec (1608) and Montreal (1642); in the western Great Lakes at Green Bay (1670), Michilimackinac (1684), Fort St. Joseph (1691), and Detroit (1701); throughout the Mississippi River valley and its tributaries from Peoria (1682) to Natchez (1716); and along the Gulf Coast at Old Mobile (1702) and New Orleans (1718).

By 1763 some 70,000 French speakers based primarily in what is now the province of Quebec were scattered over more than 1,000,000 square miles in an effort to keep well over 1,000,000 British subjects confined to the Atlantic seaboard from southern Maine to northern Florida. France claimed land that included no fewer than 15 current states, including all of Michigan.



Fig. 2 New France in 1719. By the mid-eighteenth century, the French colony that once stretched along the St. Lawrence River had expanded throughout the Mississippi valley and included Louisiana, Acadia, and Newfoundland.







Fig. 3 The locations of Native American language families in New France, at point of first contact.

## Struggle for a Continent

The early history of North America is the story of struggles by European powers for control of land, resources, and human subjects. The United States and Canada were shaped by conflict and negotiation among the French in *Nouvelle France* (New France), the English in the Thirteen Colonies, and the Native peoples who already lived in the areas that Europeans eyed with desire. We know much of this history through written sources that emphasize the actions of sometimes gallant and, other times, greedy men who explored the territory and claimed it for their God and country. The archaeology of French colonial America can also provide insights into this story by shining a light on the activities of people who were often written out of history such as women. However, a close reading of the documentary and material records of their lives demonstrates that women played an integral role in Indian and colonial societies as they worked to maintain and adapt their culture to new economic, social, and political conditions.

Recreating the lives of women in New France is a difficult process. Most women—Native and Euroamerican—like most men, could not read or write. Thus, few documents describe women's lives in their own words. Instead, to get a sense of women's lives we need to rely on personal and legal documents—letters, wills, trial records, notarial records—which, when read carefully, reveal much about life for women in New France. The archaeological record is also vital to understanding women's activities. Uncovering buildings and the artifacts they contain shed light on the occupants and the daily practices associated with those places.

The purpose of this booklet is to reveal some of what we know about women of New France. It draws on a range of historical sources such as words from seventeenth and eighteenth-century Frenchmen and women, images, and artifacts recovered from archaeological sites like Fort St. Joseph to convey part of the story of New France that needs to be better understood.

# Intercolonial Relations

New France was the meeting ground for Native American and French peoples. Their cultures of origin influenced to a large degree the roles they played in society. Archaeological evidence, oral accounts, and early writings by European visitors indicate that while considerable variation existed among Indian societies, most Native women lived more independent lives than did their European counterparts. For example, in addition to the usual child rearing and other domestic economic practices, Native women had real political power in some societies and could elect village and tribal leaders. Native women generally served complementary roles that seldom mirrored the division of labor in European societies. Responsibility for agricultural production fell to women in some Native societies, whereas the French typically saw farming as a male activity.

## Algonquian Society

There were scores of cultural groups and languages spoken in Native North America when Europeans arrived in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Potawatomi, Miami, Ottawa, and Ojibwa were among the groups that resided in the western Great Lakes region when the French first settled there. These Algonquian groups spoke related languages and were patrilineal—that is, they traced descent through the male line. They practiced a mixed horticultural economy that included limited farming. In 1718, one of Detroit's commandants described the activities of women of several different Native nations, noting that Potawatomi women cultivated corn, squash, beans, peas, and melons, and exploited wild plants and animals for their subsistence.

In Algonquian societies of the western Great Lakes women had limited say in political decisions. Labor was organized by age and gender. Raising children fell mostly to the women. Women and younger children gathered the various fruits, nuts, and tubers that were part of the Algonquian diet. Women made the clothing, cooking and storage vessels, needles for sewing, hoes for digging in the fields, and woven mats. They gathered their children and accompanied their husbands on hunting trips during the winter.

Men assisted the women during the busy berry-harvesting season. Men made spears, bows and arrows, scraping and cutting tools, fishhooks, and the pipes for smoking the little tobacco they grew or acquired through trade. Men did most of the fishing and all of the hunting, whereas women cleaned, prepared, and cooked what was caught.



*Fig. 4 This illustration of an Iroquois woman pounding corn with a mortar and pestle emphasizes the importance of Native American women in agriculture.*

## Iroquoian Society

Iroquoian women conducted similar activities, as in child rearing, but there were also significant differences. Iroquoians lived in matrilineal societies and traced descent through the female line. Indeed, rather than nuclear or extended nuclear families based around a male, the basic Iroquoian kinship unit was the clan with the woman at its head. Longhouses, which could hold 45 to 60 people, represented the family of a woman, her sisters and daughters, and their children. Men lived in their mother's longhouse, and not in that of their wives. Iroquoians were also horticulturalists and relied to a great extent on corn, beans, and squash. Men cleared the fields and helped with harvest, but women planted and tended the fields. In contrast to their Algonquian neighbors, Iroquoian women had real and acknowledged political power. They could hold their own councils; initiate and seek to end wars; choose men who would serve as village, tribal, and even confederacy leaders; and depose them from those offices.

Women in both Iroquoian and Algonquian societies shared certain freedoms. Both Algonquian and Iroquoian women were free to pick their marriage partners. If the marriage did not work out, women could divorce their husbands. Such decisions were not, of course, taken lightly, but they happened regularly enough. Indian women had, in fact, a good deal of freedom in major life decisions and could even engage in premarital sex without public disapproval.



# A Fur Trade Marriage in Detroit

One Native woman, Marguerite Ouabankikoué, lived for a time at Detroit. She was a member of the Miami nation and was related to an important Miami chief named Wisekaukautshe, whom the French also knew as *Pied Froid* (meaning Cold Foot). The Miami nation was divided into several smaller social groups known as bands. Marguerite and Cold Foot came from the Atchatchakangouen band known in French as the *Grue* band (meaning the large bird referred to as a crane). Some members of the *Grue* band had lived near Fort St. Joseph before coming to Detroit. Marguerite married the *voyageur* Pierre Roy in 1703 and they had their children baptized at Detroit. Their children's godparents were other members of fur trade and *voyageur* families. Three of Pierre's brothers also came to Detroit and became traders and *voyageurs*, benefitting from Pierre's marriage to Marguerite and close ties to the Miami.

Marguerite and Pierre's daughters married men who were active in the fur trade. In May of 1728 one of their daughters, Marie Magdelene, married Pierre Chesne *dit* LaButte at the Miami village of Kekionga near Fort Wayne, Indiana. The record of the marriage was entered into the church register at Detroit, where the couple would live for the rest of their lives. The commandant at nearby Fort St. Philippe, Nicolas-Joseph Noyelles de Fleurimont, signed the marriage record as one of many witnesses. The marriage took place one day after Noyelles de Fleurimont signed a contract with Pierre Roy to share in the profits of trading at Kekionga. The timing of the wedding and the signing of the contract in such quick succession show that business and family matters were closely related in fur trade communities and among Native groups. It is easy to imagine that wedding festivities held the day after the contract was signed "cemented" the partnership in good feelings and intentions. The marriage was an advantageous match for LaButte who later went on to become a wealthy merchant and the leading interpreter at Detroit during the transition between French and British rule.



## Métis Society

This personal freedom to choose a spouse helped create a class of women and men, known in French as *métis* and, less accurately and with hint of prejudice, in English as half-breed. The French term *métis* carries no racial prejudice and simply means one of mixed ancestry and, as used in New France, of Indian-French ancestry. Indian women could choose to marry French men. This gave them connections to providers and provisions since most French men in Indian country were traders with access to imported goods, and even could elevate their status in their villages by their connections to the French who were both economic and military allies.

Some *métis* women came to act as "go-betweens" or intermediaries between French and Native cultures. They served as translators, business associates, and diplomats in interactions between Native and French societies. Their unique language skills and familiarity with the values and practices of the two or more cultures in which they lived, allowed them this unique role. Most *métis* women, however, continued to live like their wholly Indian relatives and raised any children from the marriage according to the customs of their respective nation. Some such marriages were short lived, while others endured for a lifetime.

# The Diversity of Women's Roles

European women's lives, like those of their Native American counterparts, were shaped by the legal, cultural, and religious values of their society. Still, French women's lives in North America, and the roles they played in society, did not merely replicate those in France. The colony of New France generally had trouble attracting immigrants from the homeland and women in particular were in short supply. As a result, women in New France acquired an importance that they generally lacked in France. A woman in New France did not remain single for long unless she so chose. Indeed, men longed for suitable wives and often had trouble finding one.

## Finding a Wife in the Illinois Country

In 1722, a French official stationed in North America pondered thoughts of marriage. French-born Nicolas Chassin was the Royal Storekeeper in the Illinois Country, an area with a fort and a few colonial settlements and missions surrounded by Indian villages. Addressing a letter to a priest that he knew back in Paris, Chassin wrote in the hopes of finding a wife:

*You see, Sir, that the only thing that I now lack in order to make a strong establishment in Louisiana is a certain article of furniture that one often repents having got and which I shall do without like the others (...) If by chance there should be some girl [in France] with whom you are acquainted, who would be willing to make this long journey for love of me, I should be very much obliged to her and I should certainly do my best to give her evidence of my gratitude for it. I think that if my sister had come she would have looked after me as much as I had looked after her, but I am beginning to fear that my hopes may have gone up in smoke.*

Needless to say, the reference to love in this passage seems a bit odd, since the girl in question would be “mak[ing] this long journey for love of [him],” without ever having set eyes on her future husband. In fact, in 1722 it was still the case that marriage was not so much the romantic, love-induced relationship promoted today, but one that served as a key building block for organizing a society and for establishing one's place and securing kinship ties. Chassin himself recognized this when he linked a wife with the potential to realize “a strong establishment in Louisiana.”

Leaving Chassin aside for a moment, let us consider what a woman (or girl) might expect from married life. In the Illinois Country, girls were first married at age thirteen or fourteen, much earlier than in France, as a direct result of demographic imbalance between males and females. Her husband was at least ten years older on average and infant mortality was high. A wife was also likely to outlive her husband. If she was widowed, a woman in the Illinois Country seldom stayed single for very long.

In part this was because of a widow's right to inherit from her husband. French America observed the “Custom of Paris”—a community property law. This meant in essence that a wife would have far greater claim on the household's assets than in the English colonies. Upon the death of a spouse, the household's assets (whether land, buildings, crops, furniture, etc.) were itemized, appraised, and added up. If a woman was left widowed, she was entitled to her bed, clothing, and other personal effects, before expenses and debts were paid. Half of the remainder went to the widow with the other half shared equally among the male and female children. In other words, a widow usually stood to gain more than her children, thereby making her a sought-after marriage partner.

During her marriage, however, she fell under her husband's jurisdiction, since legally he was the head of the household. A husband had wide-ranging authority over his wife and members of his household. For example, he



Fig. 5 Iroquois woman farming.





had physical control over his wife, potentially to the extent of sexual coercion and physical abuse. One case of abuse concerned Margueritte Faffart, a French-Canadian woman who repeatedly left her French-Canadian husband for a series of Indian men. She eventually escaped to New England where she apparently married an Indian. In 1741, several witnesses testified to the fact that her (French) husband, Jean-Baptiste Turpin, had physically abused her. Amongst other things, while they were at Detroit, he had cut off her hair when in a violent rage and had then attacked her with an axe. Turpin was never prosecuted for his abuse. As seen in cases elsewhere in New France, the only possible legal exit strategy for an abused wife was proving that her husband was squandering her assets. Then the court might grant her “separation of body and goods.” In other words, the court granted separation not on the basis of the abuse (which was perfectly legal), but on the basis of tampering with the property that a wife had brought into the marriage.

Similarly, documentation only exists about the Faffart-Turpin abuse case (which was never prosecuted) because property was at stake. Upon the death of Turpin, the question of inheritance came into play. His family claimed that Margueritte Faffart had given up her rights to her inheritance when she had left him; her family claimed that she remained his heir as she had only left her husband because of his abuse. In other words, both families stood to gain financially from the outcome. The court in New Orleans took a neutral position and divided the estate between the Turpin and Faffart family members. In the eyes of the law, and of those who upheld the law, marriage was about property, not the “love” to which Chassin had alluded in his letter back to Paris.

Let us return to Nicolas Chassin, our Royal Storekeeper who had been pining for a wife. While he had written back to France for help finding a wife, Chassin must also have informed local inhabitants of his desire. Just four months after his letter to the priest, in November 1722, he secured his own “piece of furniture,” though one procured locally and who

would no doubt have seemed unusual in the eyes of a Parisian priest. Chassin married a *métis* woman, Agnes Philippe. She was the daughter of celebrated Illinois Indian convert Marie Rouensa-8cate8a, and granddaughter of Kaskaskia Illinois Chief Rouensa. Her father, a fur trader, later became a prominent and wealthy member of the colonial settlement. Chassin and Philippe had three daughters before the Storekeeper was recalled to New Orleans in 1725 for “bad conduct” in the way he kept the storehouse’s accounts.

In the Illinois Country, Chassin was not alone in taking an Indian or mixed-Indian wife. And here we should pause to make an important point. These “marriages” in the Illinois Country were not Indian-style marriages familiar throughout French America. Rather, these couples had married in the Church and/or according to French law; they had their children baptized; wives and children were identified in official records like the census as French, not Indian; and they were in essence granted the same legal rights as French men and women.

So, though Chassin had not married a girl from France, his wife and others like her were deemed worthy marriage partners for *habitants* and even nobles in the Illinois Country. Chassin’s bride was especially prominent given her maternal lineage. Her father’s rise in prosperity had owed much to his Indian wife’s status and connections. The marriage contract between Chassin and Agnes Philippe does not survive, but three years after her marriage she inherited a large sum from her mother’s estate alone; she would have inherited other assets upon the death of her father. Although short lived, Agnes’ marriage to Chassin laid the groundwork for the further amelioration of that household’s financial situation and social standing.

Clearly, there were financial benefits to intermarriage with Indian widows and their daughters. Many of the marriages were financially and socially advantageous for French male spouses, especially for outsiders needing to establish themselves in the new colonial settlements. Nicolas Chassin may have framed the role of a wife merely as “a certain article of furniture” and spoken of love. In reality, in a colonial settlement, a wife, especially an Indian or part-Indian one with important local connections, constituted an invaluable asset in “making a strong establishment.”





## Women Merchants and Their Other Business Ventures

Women of all classes participated in business activities. They often helped their husbands run a shop or assumed control over a business upon a husband's death, but notarial records also indicate that hundreds of women actively participated in a women's network of business, most of it related to the fur trade. In 1683, Simonne Costé, a forty-seven year old *habitant*, and resident of Montreal, was called as a witness in a case about stolen furs. After swearing to tell the truth, she identified herself as "a merchant residing in this town." In 1703, La Dame de La Forest, also known as La Dame Pachot, petitioned the king for damages because, she claimed, "*sieur de Champigny had a bark [a type of boat] that she owned taken on his own authority for His Majesty's service and that the bark was lost during this service. She has received no damages for it and she is requesting them as something which she says is legitimately due to her.*" Royal officials in New France were told by the King: "*His Majesty...desires that they investigate with sieur Champigny what this affair is and that they do her the justice that they judge is due her.*"

Women regularly provided food and merchandise to support soldiers and other occupants of Fort St. Joseph. For example, Commandant Blainville signed a bill of sale in the amount of 480 *livres* for “one fat pig, a heifer, an ox, 4 pairs of snowshoes, a bark canoe, and another fat pig” provided by the widow Larche in 1746. Later that year (and again in 1747), Blainville signed two vouchers to repay Madame La Perriere for eleven ells of red ribbon and two pigs.

In short, legal restrictions could be circumvented with the signature of the husband or by claiming to be working with the approval of a husband (and showing a letter to that effect if needed). Women were actively involved in a wide range of business activities unrelated to the “domestic” economy and this was accepted practice. Certainly when the King of France does not bat an eye at a woman’s request to be reimbursed for a boat she claims to have owned, we can assume that it was not out of the ordinary for women to own property in their own right and use it for economic advantage.

Historical studies have shown that women in New France had a greater range of accepted activities outside the home than was true in the English colonies and even in France. They suggest that we cannot view seventeenth and eighteenth-century actions through the prism of the nineteenth century when women's roles and activities became far more restricted to the domestic sphere. In France and New France, the French legal system protected women's property rights and the situation of New France (a small population and reliance on the fur trade for much of its wealth) required the widest possible latitude in interpreting women's legal rights in order to sustain the colony's economy. Everyone, it seems, had a vested interest in seeing a stable economy and welcomed into it whoever could help generate wealth. This is not an image we normally associate with a patriarchal, aristocratic society where law and religion privilege men, but it was, nonetheless, the reality in New France.

# Women Fur Traders

The same pattern of women in business is also evident in relation to trade activities at various forts in and around Michigan. In the 1710s Marie Anne La Marque, second wife to Detroit Commandant Alphonse de Tonty, acted as her husband's commissar acquiring goods for use and trade at the fort. She used her personal fortune to pay for goods and we know this because of records of her attempts to be reimbursed. In 1742, the widow Monfort travelled from Fort St. Joseph to Quebec to purchase some 11,000 *livres*' worth of cloth, guns and shot, kettles and axes to take back to the fort. In the 1740s and 1750s Marie Réaume's name showed up in the records when Fort St. Joseph commanders ordered that she be reimbursed for provisions she sold them.



*Fig. 6 A list of trade goods belonging to Marie du Bocq.*



## Diplomacy

Native American and European cultural mediators known as “go-betweens” traveled the woods to carry messages and negotiate compromises as representatives of their respective cultures. While much of the literature focuses on the contributions of men as intercultural diplomats, recent scholarship points to the presence of several women in New France who shaped indigenous and colonial interactions. Women did in fact translate documents and carry messages to help maintain peace and build diplomatic bridges between cultures. Madame Montour, a woman of Native and European descent, was one such fur-trade era translator and frontier diplomat.

Born Isabelle Couc in Quebec in 1667, Madame Montour was a *métis* who grew up multilingual. She spoke her mother’s central Algonquian and her father’s French and in the course of her life she learned additional languages. She left Quebec in the 1690s to live with family in Michigan where she began serving as an interpreter. In 1706, she joined her brother Louis Couc Montour, a *voyageur*, in New York. From 1709 to 1719, Madame Montour served as interpreter for New York Governor Robert Hunter, emerging as one of the most visible Native women in colonial New York and later Pennsylvania.

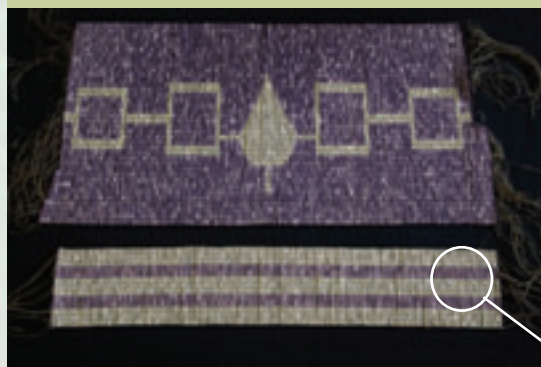
There are numerous archives that report on the various meetings she attended, the expeditions she went on, the wampum belts that she was commissioned to acquire, and the payments she received. In New York, she interpreted during various political negotiations between delegates of the Five Nations Iroquois and the Governor of New York. After the Governor’s departure from the colony in 1719, Madame Montour traveled to Pennsylvania and by 1727 she attended meetings between Pennsylvania’s Provincial Council and a variety of multinational Indian delegations.

Multilingual go-betweens such as Madame Montour thus played an indispensable role in Indian-white relations.



*Fig. 7 Born in 1667, Madame Montour was a métis mediator, interpreter, and negotiator whose skills aided in frontier diplomacy.*

*Fig. 8 Wampum belts were used at councils and recorded significant events in Native history. When no longer needed as a record, belts were commonly unraveled and the beads reused. The exchange of wampum became an important part of diplomatic protocol between Native Americans and Europeans.*

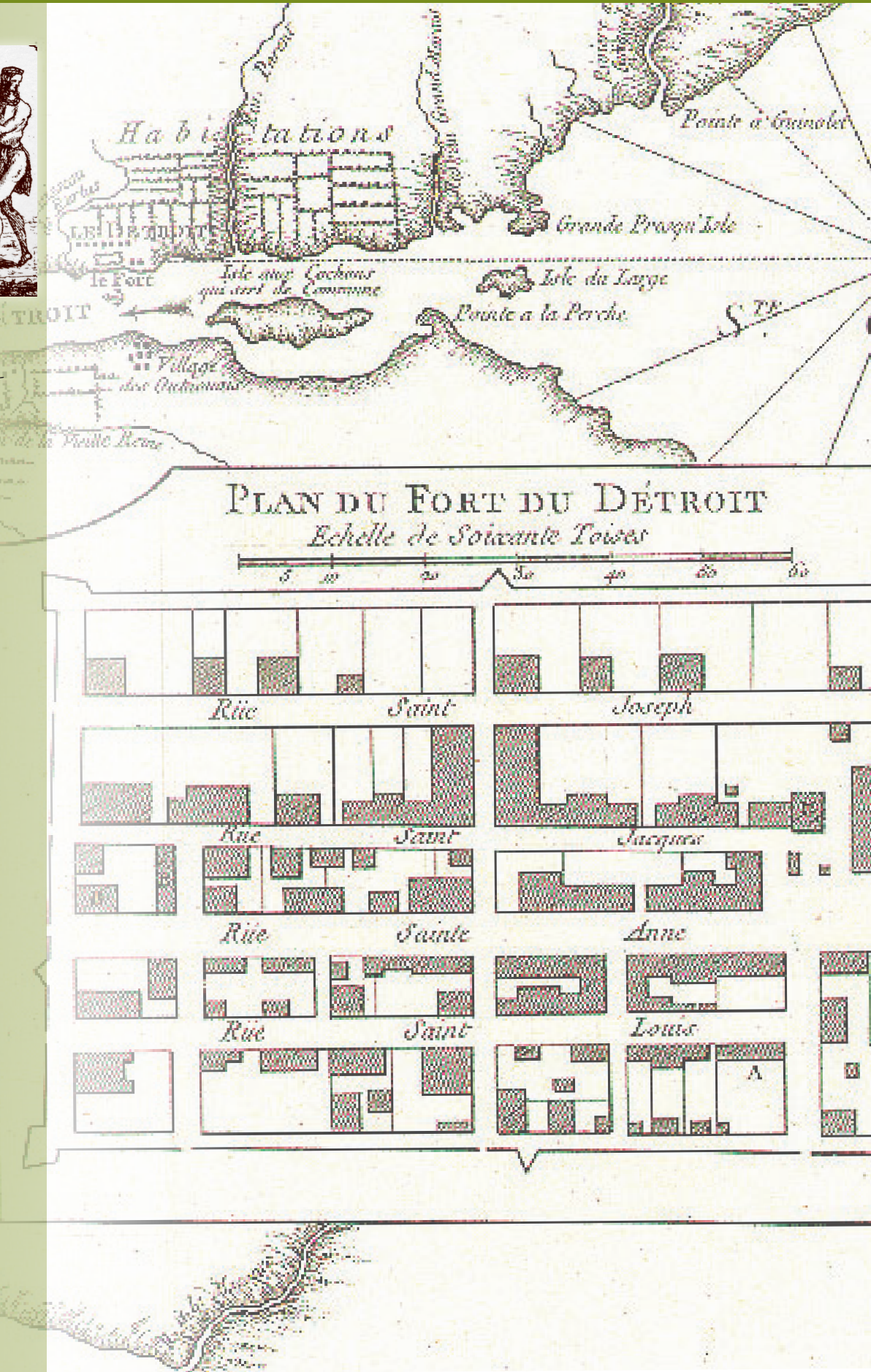


*Fig. 9 A close-up of the small, tubular shell beads (wampum) originally made by Native Americans and strung into strings or woven into belts.*

# 12 The Diversity of Women's Roles



Fig. 10 Gifts were exchanged to signify peace, rewards, tribute, social distinctions, bribery, friendship, and declarations of war. Iroquois women, in particular, held real power by giving and receiving gifts.







## The Benefits of a Good Wife

When the British arrived at Detroit and in the Great Lakes in 1760, after their victory in the French and Indian War (Seven Years War), they had to fit themselves into a French and Native world in order to succeed politically and economically. Marrying local women from wealthy merchant families helped them do so. Marie Angelique Cuillerier was one of these rich young women. She was the niece of the last French commandant of Detroit and her father had a close relationship with local Native groups. Within a few years after the British had taken control of the fort at Detroit, Marie Angelique's father Antoine had helped the Ottawa leader Pontiac make plans to take the fort back from the British. Pontiac's plan to lay siege to the fort was foiled in advance, but it was rumored that if he had succeeded, Antoine Cuillerier would have become Detroit's commandant.

In 1761, Superintendent of Northern Indian Affairs William Johnson came to Detroit to assess the attitude of the Native nations of the Upper Country to the British and to hold conferences with them. He kept a diary of his trip as he traveled from his home among the Mohawk in New York to Detroit and recorded his activities and impressions. He participated in the round of social events at Detroit and at a ball held in his honor, he met and danced with Marie Angelique Cuillerier. William was so taken with her that he later began a correspondence with Marie Angelique. However, William Johnson would not be the only man who would express an interest in Marie Angelique.

That same year, the merchant James Sterling arrived in Detroit to engage in the Indian trade. He had left a profitable business at Niagara and expected to enjoy immediate success at Detroit, but soon met with disappointment. Sterling spent his first few years at Detroit trying to gauge the tastes of his French and Native clientele. The wife of one of his business partners back East sent down her used clothing, thinking the local French women at Detroit would eagerly buy them. Sterling sent the clothes back each time, saying the French women viewed them as unfashionable. Sterling lacked the family contacts that the French merchants had, which stretched across the Upper Country into other French and Native communities, and this cost him dearly. Although he could speak and write French, Sterling was forced to pay for an Indian language interpreter—a Mohawk man who could speak English, French, and other Native languages. Sterling also needed extra money to buy a furnished home on a street in the fort that was in a desirable location for trade. When purchasing the house proved too expensive, he rented instead, and had to pay what he considered an exorbitant rate.

After Sterling married Marie Angelique Cuillerier his luck suddenly changed and he began to succeed in trade at Detroit. He no longer competed with the rich French families for trade because he had joined them! In a letter to a friend written after his marriage, he reported that Marie Angelique's skills and talents led to his success in the Indian trade. He described Marie Angelique as prudent, smart, an experienced businesswoman, and the best interpreter of Indian languages at Detroit. Moreover, the Indians greatly respected her family. Once they were married, Marie Angelique's father Antoine offered to take James Sterling to the different posts in the Great Lakes to sell his goods.

Antoine also gave his new son-in-law houses at Fort Detroit, money, and furs. The Indians flocked to Sterling's house and told him that they did not want to trade with anyone else but him. His marriage to Marie Angelique allowed Sterling to eliminate the costs of an interpreter, the rent on his house in the fort, and the need to hire agents to transport his goods to the other posts in the Great Lakes. His marriage partner was also his trade partner, and she was very knowledgeable about the local economy at Detroit. Marie Angelique's skills and experience in the fur trade and her family connections made the difference between failure and success for her British husband.

## Maids and Matrons

There were several classes of women in New France: the nobility (a rarity in New France, and then only near the end of the colony's life); upper class (based upon wealth); and lower class (farmer's wives, servants, etc.), usually called *habitants*, or settlers. Gradations of rank and status existed within each class and these are, of course, very broad categories. Moreover, fairly fluid criteria determined to which class one belonged. The nobility had rules for determining who could be included. Social status was inherited and reinforced through occupation, dress, and daily practice. Thus, women of different classes played different roles and performed different activities. Marriages typically occurred within classes, which served to reproduce a system of stratification.

Women's legal status was relatively uniform across all classes—except among the enslaved—but the complexity of women's legal affairs, and extent of contact with the legal system, varied by class and wealth. New France was divided into various jurisdictions for the administration of justice and each jurisdiction had a royal court to judge both civil and criminal cases. A judge, deputy judge (sometimes called the king's attorney), a clerk and bailiff comprised the staff at each court. Private and civil law in New France was based on the Custom of Paris, which reflected Roman Catholic values and notions of justice and punishment. Laws were modified, at times, by local regulations drafted by the Sovereign Council and the Intendant, who was in charge of judicial affairs.

Women had limited legal rights and could not, in principle, make contracts or alienate (sell or give away) property without consent of their husbands or their fathers if they were single.



*Fig. 11 Elite women in New France who married were among the wealthiest subjects of the colony. They typically sent their children away to be cared for by a wet nurse. This practice was in part to maintain their social life free from the burdens of childcare, and because they believed that a rural environment was healthier.*

## Wives and Widows

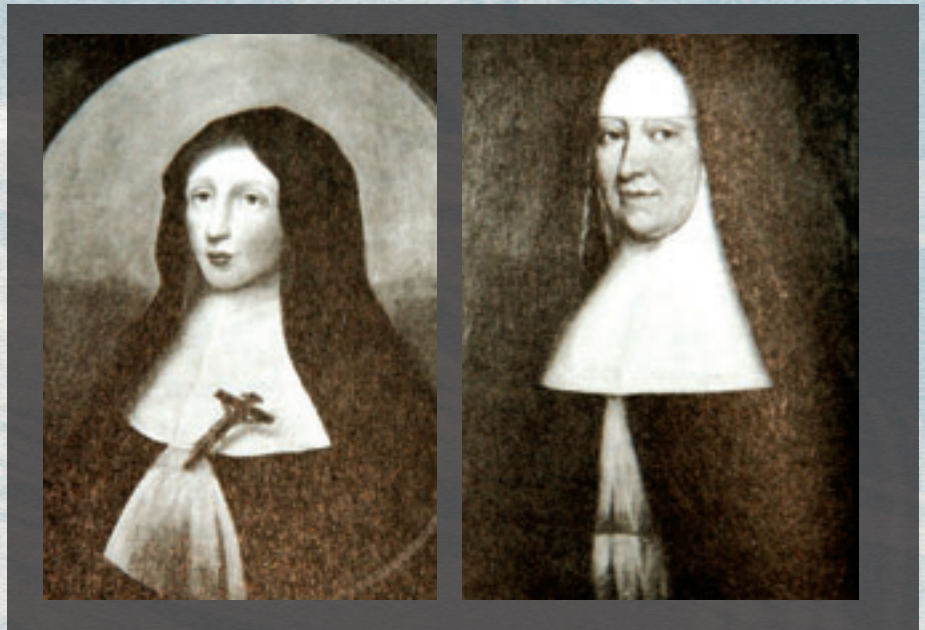
Most women of marriageable age in New France were married—early and often—and so were under male authority for most of their lives. Yet women maintained a right to the property and goods they brought to the marriage. French law recognized marriage as creating a community of goods that were equally shared between a husband and wife, though the husband exercised ultimate managerial control over the disposition of the goods. The most important aspect of this legal situation came upon the death of the husband because it entitled the woman to half of the marriage estate, not just what she brought into the marriage, and the rest went to the heirs. This left the widow some property and wealth of her own to survive upon or to bring into another marriage—a fairly regular occurrence because men in New France had a lower life expectancy than did women. Moreover, a woman could sue to recover her property rights if she could prove that her husband was an unfit manager of their property.

Women who married sequentially could accumulate significant wealth. Women with wealth led lives of relative leisure, and had servants or enslaved people to carry out household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Nursemaids, drawn from the *habitant* class, were paid to nurse newborns under the supervision of elite women who mostly tried to keep busy organizing and hosting dinner parties, literary readings, or outings of various sorts. Upper class women frequently had some education to make them suitable mates for men of their class. They often learned to read and write from their mothers and would pass these skills along to their young children, especially daughters. Boys generally went to school or had tutors—often priests—but some girls also received formal education from women in religious orders. Still, women were not expected to participate in debates with men and reading was limited to “edifying” works of history, of a religious nature, or which taught some lesson about appropriate moral behavior.



## Religious Vocation

As an alternative to marriage and trade, French women in the homeland could join a religious order. In New France, nuns represented a far more important source of educational training and involved themselves more deeply in the larger community than their counterparts in France because of the greater need for their services. Their hospitals represented not only centers of healing, but often made up a significant part of the built environment of towns like Montreal and Quebec.



*Fig. 12 The Ursuline Sisters arrived in Quebec City in 1639, where they founded the first school for girls in North America. From the beginning, children of the French colonists flocked to the Ursuline Seminary of New France where they were taught reading and writing as well as needlework, embroidery, drawing and other domestic arts. Eventually, the Sisters learned to teach Indian children in Algonquian, Montagnais, and Iroquoian.*



*Fig. 13 Habitant women engaged in a wide variety of productive activities, including dairying that provided much of the family's fat and protein, planting and harvesting, making clothes, and preparing goods for sale.*

The majority of women were *habitants*, whose lives consisted of marrying a suitable partner and raising a family. French women in New France gave birth about every two years until menopause prevented further pregnancies. Low rates of immigration to the colony (and thus the need for self-generated farm help) and Catholic regulations against birth control (such as existed at the time) led to efforts to populate the colony from natural increase. Childbirth was carried out with the assistance of a midwife, when one could be found. Midwifery was an important role for women attained by experience, positive results, and appropriate personality for that sort of work. Midwives needed to have unquestionable moral character. Local priests selected them and swore them into office. A midwife could also baptize a child that might not survive long enough to be baptized by a priest.



# Women's Domestic Lives



*Fig. 14 Before the invention of cooking stoves and ranges, food was cooked in large cauldrons suspended over the fire or on the hearth. Bread and other kinds of baking were done in a cast-iron Dutch oven.*

As in most societies, French women were socialized as girls by their parents and in the schools, churches, and other institutions that they frequented. Of course, New France provided new opportunities for women who adapted to unfamiliar social, economic, and political conditions to which they were unaccustomed. For example, women's activities were by no means confined to the domestic sphere, even though they played an important role in child rearing, education, food preparation, clothing repair, and other arenas of daily life. Women needed to master these arts and crafts to ensure themselves a productive role in society and a suitable marriage partner.

With marriage came the responsibility for tending to the family garden, cooking, cleaning, making and mending clothes, and looking after the children. Most women had no formal education and could neither read nor write. This image of women's activities and role in the domestic sphere tends to best fit our conception of "frontier" life in a colony. Still, it is worth recalling that in seventeenth and eighteenth-century New France, most of the economic activity—male and female—centered on the household. Unless a person worked in the distant fur trade, subsistence was generated by farming, craft activities, and small-scale exchange of goods and services that took place at home. Women were integral to that economic activity.



*Fig. 15 Archaeological evidence for the importation of cloth has been recovered throughout New France in the form of lead cloth seals, which were affixed to bolts of cloth and marked with symbols that conveyed quality-control information about the type of textile, its origin or ownership, and sometimes its length.*



*Fig. 16 Finger weaving was firmly established among Eastern Woodlands Indians. The technique employed plant fibers to create tumplines, garters, and other useful household articles and items of clothing. Europeans introduced wool and the sash, as an article of clothing, to the Eastern Woodlands people. The Iroquois, Potawatomi and other Indian groups blended the two traditions to create the finger-woven sash.*

## Weaving

Both the English and French governments restricted the development of commercial weaving in the New World, so nearly all fabrics were imported from Europe. Women wove cloth at home on a limited basis. The spinning of wool and flax remained important for the yarns they produced, though in Louisiana (including the Illinois Country) there was a prohibition on flax growing and virtually no colonists owned sheep.

Women in New France knit yarn hats, mitts, and stockings and braided them into the finger-woven sashes and garters that distinguished the residents of New France by class and ethnicity.

## Sewing

Girls in the eighteenth century learned to sew at a young age. Hemming pillowcases and sheets served as easy and practical first tasks. Later on, girls learned the skills of embroidery, quilting, and perhaps even lace making. Only natural fibers were available in the eighteenth century. Linen and wool were the most common cloths, but cotton and silk were also available. Archaeologists have found straight pins, needles, thimbles, awls, scissors, beads, and lead cloth seals at Fort St. Joseph and many other sites throughout New France. Needles, while probably common, were usually made of iron and are seldom present in archaeological sites.





Fig. 17 When the habitants first settled the land they had to build simple cabins. An average farmhouse measured 8 x 6 m in size, and usually had a thatch or cedar-shingle roof. The roof was steep so snow could easily slide off. A central wood fireplace heated the home.

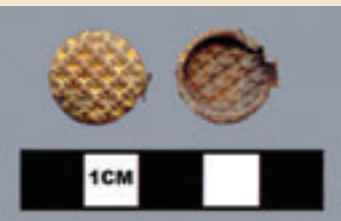


Fig. 19-21 Objects associated with sewing and clothing such as (top to bottom) an awl, scissors, straight pins, buttons, and glass beads, have been recovered from Fort St. Joseph.



Fig. 18 Clothing was almost wholly made at home. It was warm and durable, as well as somewhat distinctive and picturesque. Every parish had spinning wheels and handlooms in some of its homes.

## Fiber Arts

Women of all classes in New France had to master sewing and the needle arts. People ordered many garments “ready made” from Europe or from tailors in the cities of Montreal and Quebec, but these items required fitting and finishing. Women usually made household linens, undergarments, and children’s clothing at home and embellished clothing with embroidery, beading, and quilting. Common people owned only a few articles of clothing because of the high cost of both clothes and fabric, so they often needed to repair what clothing they owned. While they remade garments to reflect the latest European fashions, women also adopted Native styles that were more in keeping with the new roles they played.

*“The women in general are . . . very fond of adorning their heads. Their hair is always curled, powdered and ornamented with glittering bodkins and aigrettes [arrangements of feathers]. Every day but Sunday they wear a little neat jacket, and a short skirt which hardly reaches halfway down the leg, and sometime not that far. And in this particular they seem to imitate the Indian women”*  
*Peter Kalm 1750 (Benson 1937:525).*



# Dressing Up in the Colony

## Form and Function

Eighteenth-century women of European descent all wore the same basic garments. Fashion and regional tastes influenced their look. The women of New France desired to dress as fashionably as they could, especially on Sundays. The latest European fashions—even silk gowns—reached the furthest frontier regions. Catholic priests often decried the women's immodesty and expensive clothing in styles beyond their social status. Many observers also commented on the short skirts (mid-calf!) and utilitarian jackets (rather than more expensive gowns) that the *habitant* women wore.



Fig. 22 Made from linen, cotton, silk, or even lace, a woman's cap style often indicated the origin of her French ancestors. As the eighteenth century progressed, caps became more of a fashion statement. A woman might own several caps of different styles.

All women wore a simple chemise (shift), usually made of linen as an undergarment and a nightgown. Over it a woman wore at least two *jupon* (petticoats) tied about her waist. Whalebone stays provided the foundation for the gown or jacket, gave the rounded fashionable shape, and provided an erect posture. While at home in a state of *déshabillé* (less formal dress), a woman might wear a quilted vest or jumps rather than the stays. Pockets were tied about the waist rather than sewn into women's clothing—usually under the top petticoat, which had slits to allow access to the pockets. A jacket or gown went over the stays. Around the shoulders a woman wore a *fichu* (neckerchief) tucked into the front of her gown.

A *coiffe* (cap) covered her hair at all times unless her hair was elaborately styled and adorned. When she went outdoors a wide-brimmed hat kept the sun from her face. In the cities or on Sundays she wore fine leather or brocade shoes over thigh-high stockings. *Habitant* women often wore moccasins and/or sabots (wooden shoes) while working and in the summer they might go barefoot.

Readily available European cloth and clothing were also distributed or sold to Native and *métis* women who often modified them in accordance with local styles of dress. Imported cloth freed women from the labor-intensive activities associated with the use of traditional raw materials such as hides and fibers for clothing. By the eighteenth century women and men were experimenting with clothing styles of different cultural origins to express new social identities, particularly on the frontier of New France.



Fig. 24 Eighteenth-century undergarments.

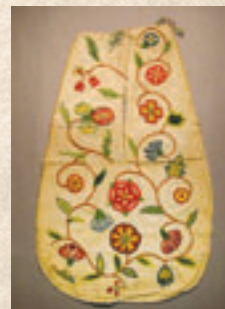


Fig. 25 Pockets, like the one shown here, were separate from the skirts or gowns and were tied about the waist.



Fig. 26 Shoes were made of leather or fabric. Other features included a closed toe, and preferably a buckle-type closure.



Fig. 23 Wide-brimmed straw hats protected a woman's skin from the sun.



Fig. 27 Reproduction of a religious medallion recovered from Fort St. Joseph.



“Good cheer is supplied, if its provision leaves means enough to be well clothed; if not, one cuts down on the table in order to be well dressed.”

~ Father Charlevoix, 1740s (from Eccles 1983:100).

## Adorning the Body

Women of both France and New France wore crosses, crucifixes, or medallions on ribbons around their necks. These types of artifacts have been frequently found at Fort St. Joseph and other archaeological sites in New France, including Native American cemeteries. Most appear to have been imported from France.

While religious paraphernalia may have been worn for ornamental purposes, documentary sources suggest that they often indicate religious devotion and adherence to Catholic beliefs. Marriages were regularly officiated by a priest and Native women marrying French men were required to be baptized. Of course, more secular adornment was also employed to enhance one's appearance and mark one's gender and ethnic identity.

French men copied Indians who used pigments, like vermilion, to paint their faces and bodies. Vermilion appears in various lists of trade goods that were imported into the region and in archaeological sites, along with buckles, brooches, beads, and finger rings that were used to adorn the body. Other decorative objects were likely made in New France. Tinkling cones, made of scrap sheet copper cut from old kettles, and shaped into small conical forms, were dangled from garments, moccasins and bags. Although tinkling cones were not confined to women's dress, women probably employed them in their work of embellishing clothing.



Fig. 28 A crucifix recovered from Fort St. Joseph.

Ledger Entries for Goods Shipped from Montreal to Detroit (Kent 2001: 1059, 1070)

September 10, 1715

4 dozen finger rings  
5 lbs. agate glass beads  
5 lbs. milky-white glass beads  
1 dozen tin plate mirrors  
1 lb. vermilion  
1 dozen wooden combs

June 9, 1732

2 lbs. 3 oz. very small glass beads  
8 pearl necklaces  
6 dressing-table mirrors painted red  
4 lbs. vermilion  
1 dozen large wooden combs  
1 dozen small wooden combs



Fig. 29-32 Objects of personal adornment recovered from Fort St. Joseph include (clockwise, from upper left): tinkling cones; iconographic and glass inset finger rings; buckles and brooches. Bottom left: Tinkling cones often were attached to knife sheaths, pouches, moccasins, and clothing.



Fig. 33 A cross recovered from Fort St. Joseph.

“With them, luxury is pushed to the extreme. Female peasants wear silk dressing gowns and casaqueens, as well as lace coiffes and damask shoes.”

~ Jean-Baptiste d'Alelyrac

# 20 Culture and Cuisine

Archaeologists and historians often refer to the practice of food acquisition, preparation, cooking, and serving as the foodways of a culture. People came to New France with their own cuisine, yet they often had to modify it in response to the availability of resources. Domesticated plants like wheat, barley, and oats could not be immediately established in some areas of the colony and it took several decades before *habitants* in the Illinois Country began producing crops to sustain themselves and surpluses to ship to New Orleans and the Caribbean.

The French also brought along Old World animals with them to North America, including cows, pigs, horses, and chickens. While these animals dominated subsistence practices in many settled towns in the St. Lawrence and Mississippi river valleys, frontier settlements with Native populations and involvement in the fur trade often relied to an equal or greater extent on wild species like deer, bear, raccoon, beaver, turkey, and others that were plentiful in the Eastern Woodlands.

It is clear that both men and women participated in activities associated with foodways and that the division of labor that characterized the Old World was significantly altered when the French encountered new economic opportunities and challenges.



Fig. 34 Stone fireplace uncovered at Fort St. Joseph.



Fig. 35 All types of cooking involved the direct use of fire. Stoves did not appear until the late eighteenth century, and women had to know how to cook directly over an open fire. Almost all cooking was done in simple stewpots, since this was the most efficient use of firewood and did not waste precious cooking juices, making potages and stews the most common dishes.

**“Squashes are a kind of pumpkin which the Europeans got from the Indians . . . they are eaten boiled, either with meat or by themselves.”**

**~ Peter Kalm, 1748 (Benson 1937:183)**

## Open Fire Cooking

People cooked meals in the eighteenth century over a fire or hot coals. Fireplaces were usually placed inside the home. They varied substantially depending on whether they were equipped with dampers and other hardware to assist with cooking. Most fireplaces in frontier areas were small and did not include dampers; some may have had a crane, to move pots in and out of the fire. Baking occurred in a cast iron oven (Dutch oven) on the hearth, or outdoors in a brick or mud oven.



Fig. 36 Eighteenth-century brass kettle from the vicinity of Fort St. Joseph.



## On the Table

Unlike in Europe, laws did not restrict hunting and fishing, so the men of New France became excellent marksmen. The habitants quickly adopted North American foods such as corn, squash, and maple sugar into their diets.

Native women were well acquainted with these resources. They passed on knowledge regarding their preparation and use to the French and adapted them to the Old World tastes of their French-Canadian husbands. While it may seem logical to cast women in the roles of homemaker, unmarried men including soldiers were required to cook much of their own food and clean the dishes. Just as women engaged in new activities, necessity required the same of men.



*Fig. 37 Carbonized corn cobs recovered from Fort St. Joseph. This type of corn was raised by the Indians for hundreds of years before they met the French.*



*Fig. 38 Iron knife with an engraved bone handle recovered from Fort St. Joseph.*

**“I have seldom seen any people shoot with such dexterity as these. . . .**

**There was scarcely one of them who was not a clever marksman and who did not own a rifle.”**

**~ Peter Kalm, 1749 (Benson 1937:250)**



*Fig. 39 These small ceramic sherds of faience were made in France and imported to Fort St. Joseph where they were recovered.*



*Fig. 40 Unglazed red ware ceramic vessel recovered from Fort St. Joseph.*

# Music, Dancing, and Diversions

As in cultures everywhere, people looked for diversions from the mundane activities of daily life. *Habitants* were integrated into larger social networks that extended beyond the household; they certainly were not socially isolated. People in New France gathered regularly to celebrate marriages, births, and other events that marked rites of passage and life cycles. Food, in addition to music, dancing, and games, often accompanied these times of merriment.

This was especially true in the winter. When chores were less pressing and travel over the fields and the frozen rivers was easier, people gathered to celebrate weddings, New Year's Eve, and the festivals of local patron saints. With formal community institutions largely lacking, the parish was the main focus of local community life.

The common top-down view of the parish as an instrument of control and revenue extraction is quite misleading. It is true that the *habitants* dutifully provided a local church and rectory, as required by the clergy, but their attitude toward these buildings was far from deferential. In defiance of the view propounded by priests and bishops, rural lay people tended to regard the church and rectory as community halls built for the use of local residents. For most *habitants*, the church was not exclusively a sacred space, and Sunday Mass was a time of socializing as well as worship.

Priests often complained of parishioners chatting in the pews, wandering outside for a smoke during the sermon, bringing their dogs along to Mass, and generally making themselves altogether too comfortable. And the rectory was never entirely the private residence of the priest. A French military engineer, recounting a visit in 1752 to a country priest, remarked: "his house contains a large room where, as is the custom in this country, the principal residents meet, before or after the mass, to discuss the affairs of the parish."

Fig. 41 Dancing was a popular diversion for both men and women in eighteenth-century New France.





## Music

Music was an important part of a young woman's education in the eighteenth century. Society frowned on wind instruments for ladies—they looked too disagreeable with puffed out cheeks—but approved of string instruments and vocal music. If a young woman's family had the financial resources she would learn to play the harpsichord. Guitars and violins or fiddles were far more common. Mouth harps have frequently been recovered from archaeological sites throughout New France indicating the prevalence of this form of entertainment.



Fig. 42 Objects of leisure: mouth harps similar to this one (above on left) from Fort St. Joseph allowed just about anyone to make music; (above on right) bone gaming pieces decorated on one side, like these two specimens recovered from Fort St. Joseph, lent themselves to games of chance played by Algonquian women throughout New France.

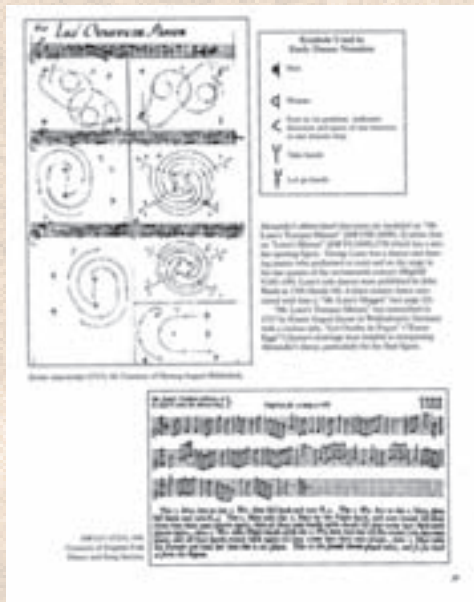


Fig. 43 Music was critical to the favorite pastime of the colonists—dancing. There was a huge repertory of dance tunes such as reels, hornpipes, jigs, and minuets. A single violin usually accompanied dancing, but for special occasions there may have been four or five musicians. Whatever instruments and players could be gathered was fine for the dancers.

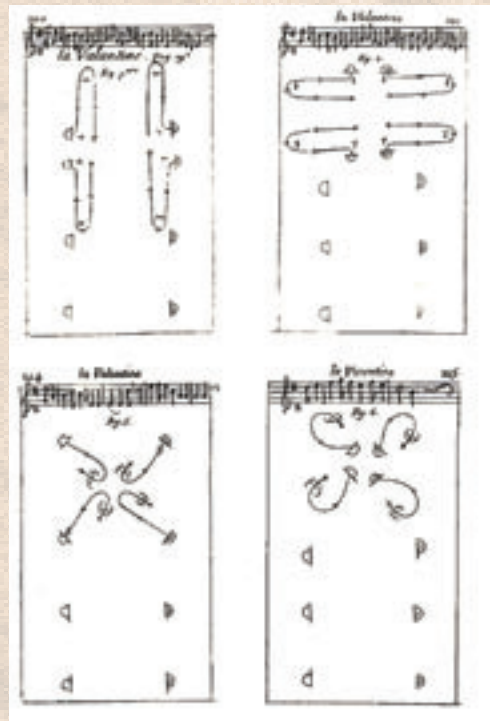


Fig. 44 Dance techniques throughout the eighteenth century changed frequently as new fashions and fads swept across the land. Usually described as “the latest,” “with the newest methods,” or “the most fashionable,” dancing was an expression of social values. The upper classes used dance to express their status through grace of body and display of fine clothing and jewels. Among the lower classes, it could become competitive, enhancing ones reputation in the community. Personal ability, sophistication of taste, and availability of new material as well as social standing, region, and environment all affected dance interpretation and performance.

## Dancing

Dancing was very popular in New France. Even at frontier posts, like Fort St. Joseph, the *habitants* wanted to learn the latest European dance steps. In Europe and larger New World towns, wealthy people hired dancing masters to teach themselves and their children the proper dance steps. On the frontier, settlers acquired books detailing the latest dances and how to perform them.

For example, the *habitants* at Fort Michilimackinac held dances at least once a week. Priests throughout New France railed against the French love of dancing, all to no avail.





Fig. 45 The Augustine Sisters arrived in Quebec City in 1639, to take over the operation of Hôtel Dieu de Québec. The initial goal of the hospital was to provide care for ill Natives of the area. Later, the hospital became a safe haven against Iroquois attackers and provided care for civilians and military.



Fig. 46 Almost immediately after French arrival, the hospital beds were filled from a devastating outbreak of smallpox among the Indians. Many people did not survive the harsh conditions.

Fig. 47 Marie Guenet Saint-Ignace, Mother Superior of the Augustinians of Dieppe, was a member of the missionary Religieuses Hospitalières that arrived in Quebec in 1639.



## Religious Life

Women often joined religious orders in France where they were involved in education and treating the sick. In New France their services were especially valued. About four percent of women in New France were part of a religious order. None of these groups in the colony were contemplative orders. Religion was at the core of their lives and their days included the specific rounds of praying, at the set times determined by the rules of their organization, but they all also had a mission specific to their order.

The Ursulines ran schools for girls and offered religious education, and taught art, music, foreign languages, and needle arts—mostly to the elites in the colony. The Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame offered basic instruction for girls of the lower classes. The Augustines of the Mercy of Jesus (sometimes called the Sisters of Mercy) ran hospitals in Montreal and Quebec. The Sisters of Charity tended an asylum for the destitute, permanently crippled, and/or insane in Quebec.

The lives of these women differed from those of their secular sisters. Many were from the nobility or elites in society who did not want to marry and remain under the direct authority, if not control, of men. Sometimes their families encouraged them to take religious vows in order not to have to pay large marriage dowries. Such considerations, and an affinity for a life of worship, drew women to become nuns. They swore vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in the name of Christ. What would have been their dowries, or smaller versions thereof, were given over to the

## Literacy

Literacy rates were lower than in the English colonies, but many Canadians possessed libraries including those living in Detroit and Michilimackinac. Writing connected Fort St. Joseph with the outside world. Many aspects of life at Fort St. Joseph depended on writing skills, including military orders, fur trade business contracts, and the priests' baptismal register.

It is a common misconception that the women of New France were "better educated" than the men, and it may well be that the mother's duty to impart religious instruction to her children encouraged a larger proportion of women to develop their reading skills. Yet research in the parish registers of the French regime reveals that grooms were always more likely than brides to sign their names. The reason is that reading and writing were quite separate skills in this period—reading was associated with religion, whereas writing was linked to business, and therefore with the male sphere. It would be misleading to assert that women were better educated than men, though it is certainly true to say that they were educated differently.



Fig. 48 A map showing religious structures, in Quebec, in 1642.



order and they were supported from such collective funds, alms, and annual subventions from the government in return for their services to society. Most nuns, and certainly those who rose to positions of authority in any order, were well educated.

We know much about the care of the sick, education of Native and French girls and young women, and the religious temperament in New France from the letters and other writings of these literate women. Those in religious orders aimed at helping the sick were trained in the arts of healing both the body and soul, although doctors and surgeons also worked in the hospitals run by nuns. The superiors of the orders were, in effect, managers who ran complex organizations: they needed to organize the educational and religious activities of the women of the order, order supplies for them and the patients, oversee construction and/or maintenance of the order's buildings and so on. Above all, they needed to generate income and manage those resources so that they could continue in the service of God and society. They indeed functioned as women in business.

Nuns' lives, however, if free of a certain sort of routine and hard work, were not free of either entirely. While the rule of being cloistered—confined to their monastery—was not strictly enforced, or adhered to by female orders in New France, nuns were expected to live most austere lives within the walls of their convents, schools, and hospitals. In such places their day began around 4:30 in the morning with an hour of contemplation and prayer, tending to the sick, more set daily prayers and, by 8 a.m., daily mass. Afterwards they continued to assist the sick, teach, and pray until early night. In time, servants were hired to take care of the menial tasks of laundry and food preparation, but if needed the members of the order were expected to help out with those tasks. Nor was patient care a light burden. The Augustines had thousands of patients stay with them during any given year. Patients were housed in a large hall, one each for men and women, with a chapel at the end of the women's chamber. Still, for the relative autonomy it provided from the rule of the secular world, and for its ability to allow them to practice and develop their faith while serving society, it was a choice many women in New France were prepared to make.

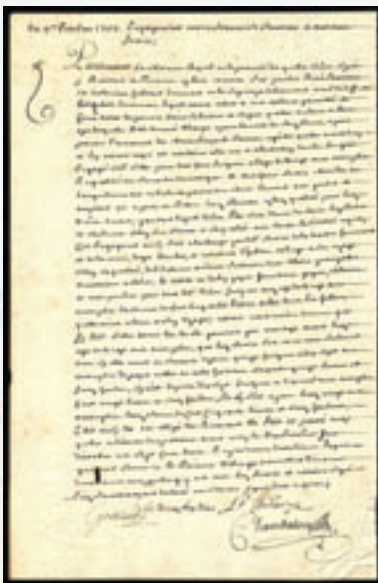


Fig. 49 Reading and writing were quite separate skills in this period. Reading was associated with religion and taught primarily to women, whereas writing was associated with business, and therefore taught to men.

## Education

Mothers had primary responsibility for the education of young children. However, few mothers in New France would have had the time or the knowledge to offer an education beyond teaching the catechism and basic reading. In 1639 three Ursuline nuns sailed from France to Quebec to establish a school for the education of Native and French girls. At their head was Mother Marie de l'Incarnation who learned the Huron, Algonquian, Montagnais and Iroquois tongues. She composed a dictionary, grammars, and books of Christian doctrine in the Native languages.

In 1697, a second Ursuline school opened in Three Rivers, where girls of elite families were schooled in art, music, and foreign languages. The Sisters of the Congregation de Notre-Dame founded a school in Montreal in 1670 and by 1731 maintained twelve schools for the education of *habitant* girls. Some frontier area families sent their daughters (including *métis* daughters) back to Montreal for their education.

**“I show her anything she wants to learn: sometimes history of France, sometimes Roman history, geography, rudiments of reading in French and Latin, writing, poetry, stories, any way she likes in order to give her a taste for writing and learning.”**  
~ Madame Begon, 1704 (Greer 2003:66).



# 26 Degrees of Freedom

## Slavery

Some women in New France were enslaved and lived lives of servitude. Their numbers are hard to determine, but a conservative estimate is that about 1,100 slaves—men and women—lived in New France. Of these, about 55 percent were Indians captured by Native allies of the colony and sold to the French. Indian slaves were known as *panis*, the French word for Pawnee and from which nation most such captives came at first. Purchased from the far west, their presence in eighteenth-century Montreal reflected economic connections between that city and the French settlements on the Mississippi. The term *panis* is used almost interchangeably with *esclave* (slave) in New France's records. Enslaved African females also served as domestics in the homes of the wealthier members of society in Montreal and Quebec and came from French possessions in the Caribbean. *Panis* more often served as domestics in frontier settlements and were sometimes married to French inhabitants of the posts. The baptismal registers for Fort St. Joseph indicate that a number of *panis* lived at the post.

### The Predicament of the Enslaved

The trade in Native and African captives in New France flourished for most of the eighteenth century, with the British continuing it after 1760. The number of captives expanded dramatically in the 1740s and 1750s due in large part to their increased presence at Detroit as French settlers there began acquiring them in much larger numbers than ever before. Of all of the forts located in the Great Lakes, Detroit had the largest number of enslaved people by far, approaching the numbers in the much larger cities of Montreal and Quebec.

In 1752, a *panis* woman by the name of Marie-Marguerite married an enslaved African man named Charles and had a daughter named Catherine. In the church records, the priest listed the newborn Catherine as being black, like her father. In the eyes of the church, Catherine inherited her father's racial status, rather than that of her mother, who was Native American. After their marriage, Marie-Marguerite and her husband Charles became the property of Charles's owner, Marie-Suzanne Richard, who also owned their baby, since Marie-Marguerite's legal status was passed on to any children she bore. The enslaver, Marie-Suzanne Richard, was *métis*. She was the daughter of a mixed-blood Miami-French woman and a French man.

It was not uncommon for women of New France to own human property because when women and men of New France married, according to the legal system of the colony, the couple formed a *communauté de biens*, literally a "community of goods" or "marital community" that gave them joint ownership of all property. This was quite different from the English colonies, which oper-



Fig. 50 Fewer people of African descent were enslaved in New France, than in the English colonies.

ated according to Common Law, a system that proscribed coverture, wherein the wife and all of her goods became the property of her husband upon marriage.

Marie-Marguerite would have spent her life, from a very young age, working as either a domestic in the home or in the fields. This means she could have been expected to clean, sew, cook, serve at the table and take care of children, as well as participate in planting and harvesting corn that was sold to soldiers, traders, and visiting Indians. Her husband Charles would have carried wood, tended to domesticated animals, and run errands, among other chores. Enslaved Africans, such as Charles, were more difficult to acquire in New France. Consequently, there were fewer of them and they were worth twice as much as Native captives.

Relatively few enslaved people worked in the fur trade. They were used to supplement a scarce labor pool in New France, but they were also status symbols. By owning human property in New France, enslavers were able to demonstrate that they had enough wealth to be freed from manual labor. Ideas surrounding the peculiar institution of enslavement associated with the nineteenth-century American South are not very useful for understanding this earlier practice of servitude in New France where there was no simple dichotomy between free and white, on the one hand, and bound and black, on the other. Instead, there were degrees and varieties of freedom, with many French people (*servants* and *engagés*) subject to the authority of a master in almost the same way as a captive. There was no firm color line and a racial hierarchy was not yet well established. Thus, close relations—marked by love, hate, friendship—between an enslaved African woman and the white people around her were not out of the question. Yet, slavery was a permanent condition that entailed a diminished personal identity more severe than that inflicted on subordinate whites. Enslaved women had no last names: in the records they are simply '*la negresse*' and '*la panise*'.



## Servitude

Young women in New France also served as servants, many of them indentured. This means they were contracted to work for a family for a period of time often for little more than room and board. This labor arrangement relieved their families of the burden of providing for them and gave them an opportunity, if they were lucky, to become educated by associating with more affluent and knowledgeable members of colonial society. Most servants, however, show up in the records due to complaints about harsh treatment and even physical and sexual abuse. The following extract from a court case from 1705 reveals a good deal about the lives and work of such women.

*Marie Lesueur [age 17] ...work[ed] at the home of Laurent Renaud for the amount of four livres per month, and left it...because...the sieur de Beaujeu, a lieutenant in the Troupes de la Marine who was living in the home of the said Renaud, constantly asked her to go to bed with him, going to find her everywhere her housework took her, whether in the garret or the cellar or in the upstairs rooms and especially during the night when she was asleep because she slept in a single room where she did the cooking for the household. She declares that one night the said Beaujeu among other nights during the first two weeks or so of the said month of last November had come to find her as she was sleeping wanting to possess her carnally. She awakened and tried to prevent him from doing it by crying out, he threatened to put his sword through her body if she cried out which he did three separate times, and he had her carnally on three different nights (Testimony of Marie Lesueur, Montreal, 1705).*

The outcome of this case points to yet another type of women on the margin. Despite her testimony, and her master's belief in her story, young Marie Lesueur was banished from Montreal and charged with prostitution. The extent of prostitution in New France is, by the secretive nature of the activity, difficult to determine. Surely there were women who rented their bodies for short periods of time for material gain. Notarial records indicate that many were charged with the crime. Still, Catholic, patriarchal New France had little room for sexual activity that did not fit the standard conception of sex within the confines of marriage and for purposes defined by the Church. Any sexual activity outside this narrow perspective threatened social order and could neither be understood nor tolerated. Thus, charges of prostitution, such as that against Marie Lesueur, must be read with caution and a skeptical eye.



Fig. 51 The citizens of New France received enslaved people as gifts from their Native allies.



Fig. 52 Settlers recruited French women as domestic servants. At times, the King would pay their transportation costs to the colony provided the women would stay and marry.



# 28 Concluding Thoughts

The women of New France—French, Native, and *métis*—were active agents in a global process of colonization that led to interaction, conflict, and cooperation among peoples who participated in different cultural traditions, social institutions, and daily practices.

In the course of migration from the Old World across the Atlantic, women helped to create the social, economic, and political conditions that fostered a French presence over a vast region for nearly two centuries. Documentary and material evidence clearly indicate the roles they played in forming and sustaining communities in the settler society of New France, none of which were exact replicas of the places that nurtured them in their homeland. Native women were selective in the choices they made as they sometimes embraced, often rejected, and frequently reinterpreted all that French culture had to offer.

As the Empire expanded, women of all ethnic backgrounds and social categories took advantage of the opportunities that New France provided as they struggled, traded, formed alliances, married, and raised children in the process of making history and producing a material world that shaped the future of North America.

The outcome for both Natives and newcomers was truly a new world and a blending of cultures that demonstrated the human potential for change, persistence, and accommodation, while underscoring women's contributions as mothers, sisters, daughters, and so much more.

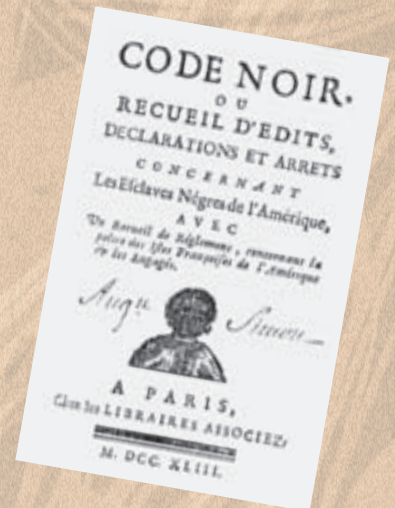


Fig. 53 The Code Noir evolved from Louis XIV's Edict of 1685.





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"The Washerwoman," 1733.
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## About the Contributors

The production of this booklet was a collaborative effort.

The subject, "Women of New France," was the theme of the Second Annual Summer Lecture Series in Archaeology and the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project's 2010 Open House.

The initial research led to the creation of a series of eight informational panels that were displayed at the open house in conjunction with living history re-enactments of women's activities and on-going excavations. The text of those panels has been supplemented and edited by the lecture series presenters and others associated with the project.

The final form of this booklet would not have been possible without the contributions of the following: Cheri Bales, booklet designer, College of Arts and Sciences, Western Michigan University; José Antônio Brandão, Ph.D., Professor of History, Western Michigan University and Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project ethnohistorian; Mary Ann Levine, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Anthropology, Franklin and Marshall College, 2010 Lecture Series presenter, and 2010 Open House Public Scholar; Karen Marrero, Ph.D. candidate in History, Yale University and 2010 Lecture Series presenter; Robert Meyers, Berrien County Historical Museum and 2010 Open House co-coordinator; Stacey L. Moore, doctoral student, Department of History, Western Michigan University; Michael Nassaney, Ph.D., Professor of Anthropology, Western Michigan University and Principal Investigator of the Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project; Barbara Schwaderer, historical interpreter and 2010 Open House co-coordinator; and Sophie White, Ph.D., Associate Professor of American Studies, University of Notre Dame, and 2010 Lecture Series presenter.

Finally, thank you to the Michigan Humanities Council, Western Michigan University, City of Niles, Fort St. Joseph Archaeology Advisory Committee, and all the individuals and community groups who support the project through their generous donations of time and financial resources.

Visit the FSJ website to learn more about the project and to lend your support.

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# Women of New France

