Women of New France 1: Introduction

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Introducing New France

Today it may be hard to imagine that vast regions of the North American continent were once claimed, and effectively controlled, by France. By 1763 some 70,000 French speakers based primarily in what is now the province of Quebec, managed to keep well over 1,000,000 British subjects confined to the Atlantic seaboard from Maine to Florida. France claimed land that included 15 current states, including all of Michigan. The early history of North America is a story of struggle for control of land and resources by French settlers in Nouvelle France (New France in English), English settlers in the Thirteen Colonies, and Native peoples who already lived in the areas that became the US and Canada.

Women in New France

We know very little about the everyday lives of people in what was New France, particularly the women. Native women, from a wide range of nations along the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes river system, had lived in North America for thousands of years before the arrival of French explorers. While there was a good deal of variety among Indian societies, most Native women lived more independent lives than did their European counterparts. In some societies, in addition to the usual child-rearing and household economy practices, Native women had real political power and could elect village and tribal leaders.

European 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, were not mere replicas of those in France. There were, for example, far too few women in New France and as a result they acquired an importance unknown in France. A woman in New France was not unmarried for long unless she chose to be so. Women joined religious orders in France and tended to the sick and were involved in education. But in New France groups of nuns represented a far more significant source of educational training and were more involved in the larger community than in France because there was a greater need for their services. Their hospitals represented not only centers of healing, but often made up a significant part of the architectural landscape of towns like Montreal and Québec.

Recreating Women’s Lives

Recreating the lives of women in New France is a difficult process. Most women—Native and Euroamerican—like most men, did not read or write. Thus, few documents tell of women’s lives in their own words. Instead, a careful study of legal documents such as wills, trial records, and notarial records can reveal much about what life was like for women in New France. The archaeological record is also vital to understanding women’s lives. Uncovering remnants of homes, hospital structures, other buildings, and the artifacts they contain all shed light on the occupants and activities of those places.

Exhibit Goals

This exhibit seeks to reveal some of the complexity of the lives of mostly Euroamerican women in New France. It uses a written narrative, words from seventeenth and eighteenth-century Frenchmen and women, images of them and artifacts of their lives, and living re-enactors demonstrating aspects of women’s work and lives to tell a part of the story that has long been ignored.