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Women of New France 6: Education and Literacy

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Fort St. Joseph Archaeological Project

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Education and Literacy

Education

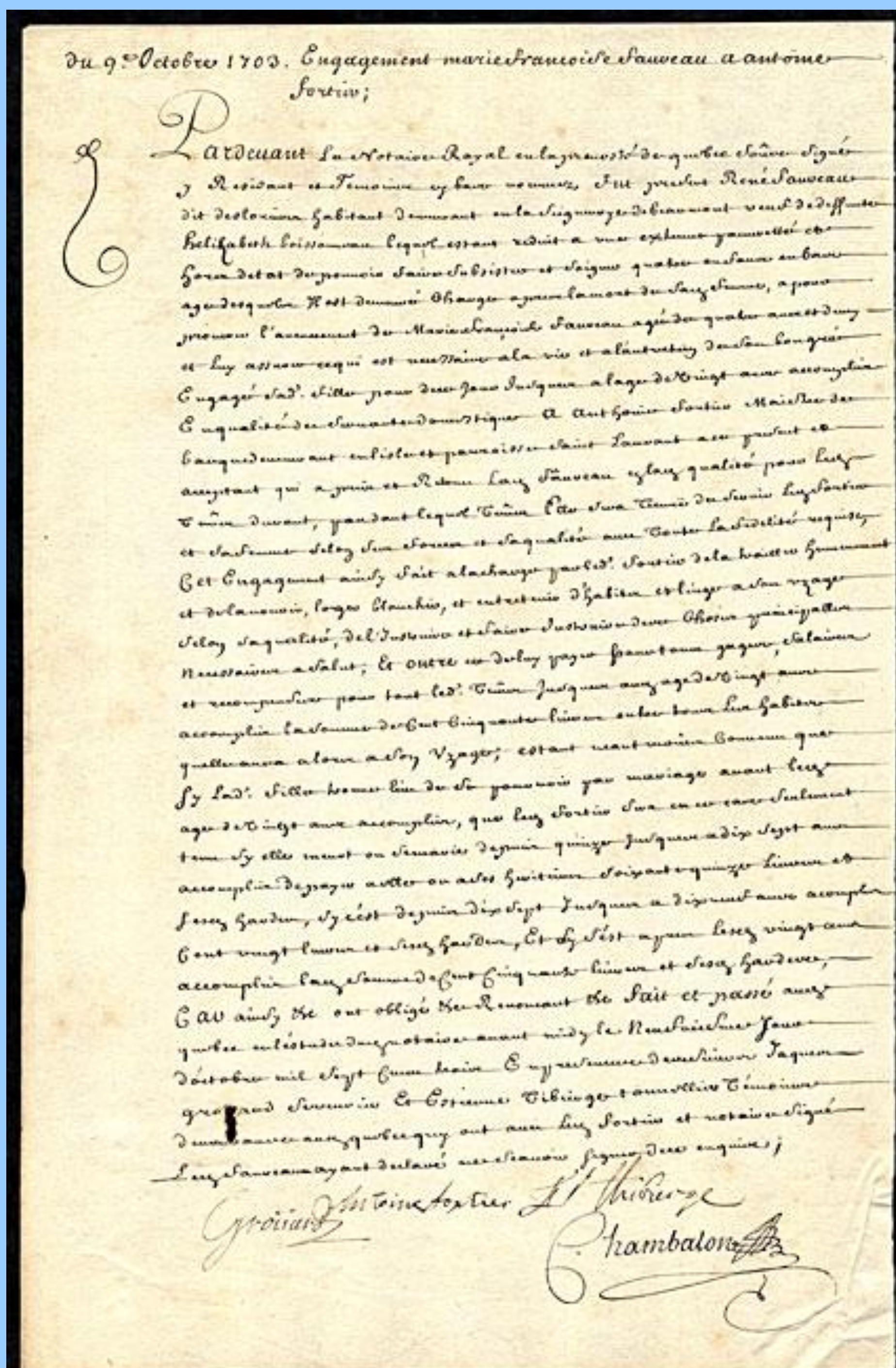
In 1639 three Ursuline nuns sailed from France to Québec to establish a school to educate Native and French girls. At their head was Mother Marie de l'Incarnation who learned the Huron, Algonquian, Montagnais and Iroquois tongues. She composed a dictionary, grammars, and books of Christian doctrine in the Native languages. In 1697 a second Ursuline school opened in Trois Rivières. 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.



Ursuline nuns



Ursuline Superior



Most documents were produced by government officials; most women, except nuns, were illiterate.

Literacy

Literacy rates in New France were quite low, but some Canadians came to possess substantial libraries including those living at Detroit and Michilimackinac. Written communications connected Fort St. Joseph residents with the outside world. Military orders, fur trade business letters, and the priests' baptismal register required writing skills. Very few people at the fort could sign their names, let alone write letters. The exceptions were the commandants who produced, as far as we know, only business related correspondence.



Re-enactor writing with a goose quill



Artist's conception of a nun teaching girls

"The Sisters will only take girls between the ages of eleven and twelve, in order to make them able to receive communion within the first year, after which, they can be dismissed to make room for others. Those who remain in school longer are to learn the basics, then to acquire manual skills: sewing, spinning, knitting and even fine embroidery" ~ Monseigneur de Saint-Vallier, 1689