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Women of New France 7: Women in Trade and Diplomacy

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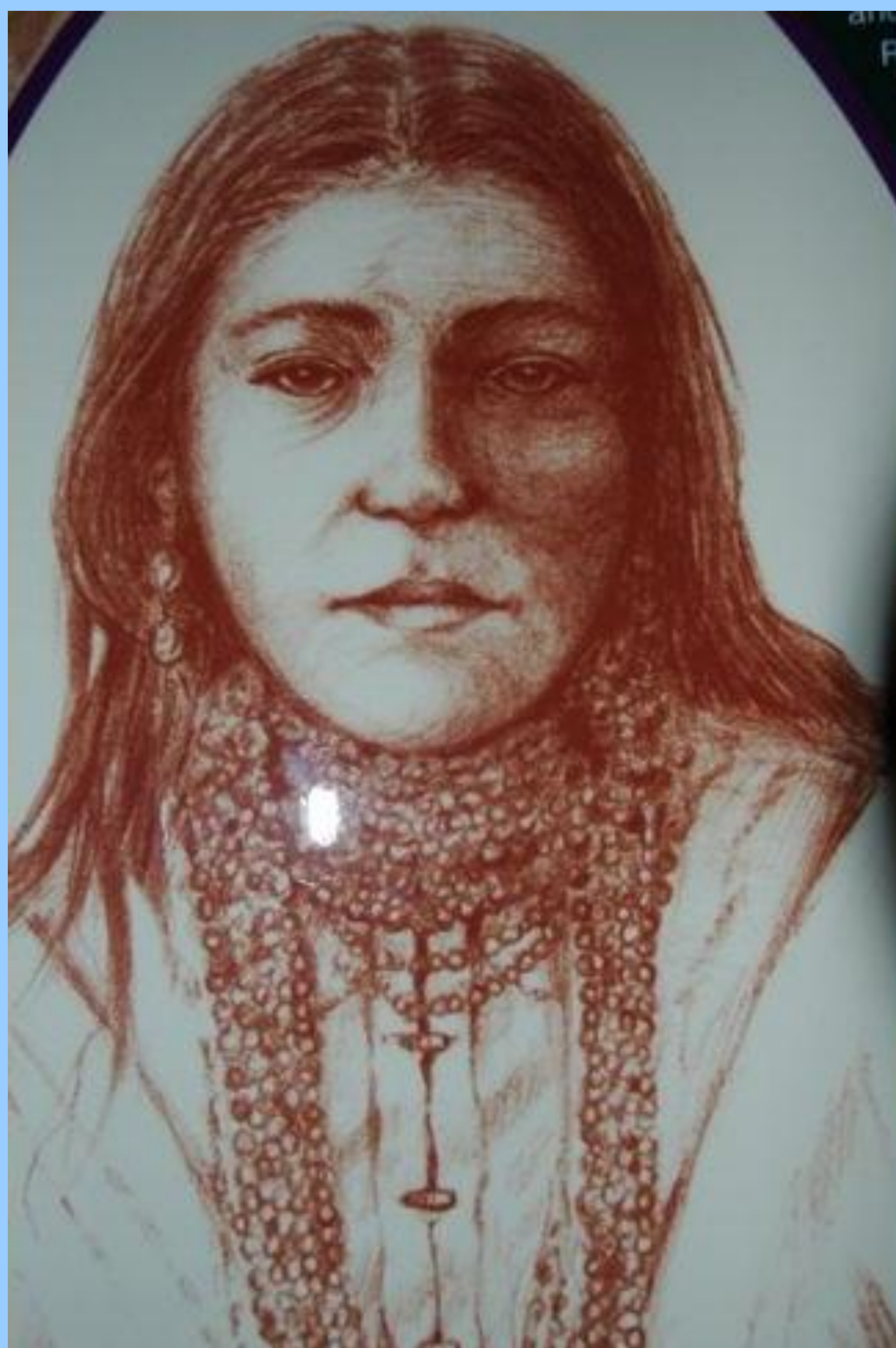
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Women in Trade and Diplomacy

“Go-betweenes”

Native American and European cultural mediators known as “go-betweenes” 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-colonial interactions. Women did in fact translate documents and carry messages to help maintain peace and build diplomatic bridges between cultures.



Modern artist's conception of Madame Montour

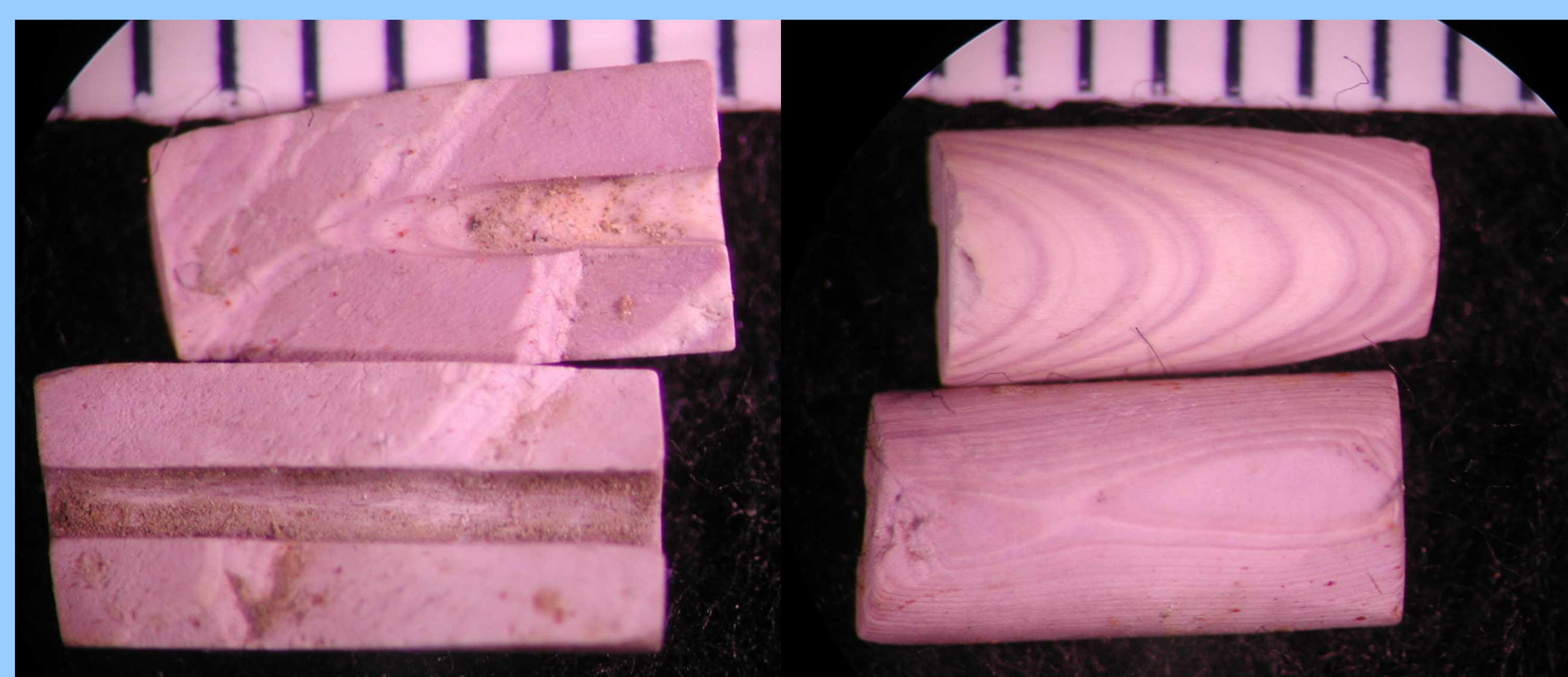


Native Americans trading, from a 1657 map of New France

"Three women came here from the Sinnekens [Iroquois] with some dried and fresh salmon...They sold each salmon for one guilder or two hands of sewant [wampum]. They also brought much green tobacco to sell" ~ Van den Bogaert, 1635

Madame Montour, *métis* diplomat

Madame Montour, a woman of Native and European descent, was one such fur-trade era translator and frontier diplomat. Madame Montour, a *métis*, was born Isabelle Couc in Québec in 1667 and grew up multilingual. She left Québec in the 1690s to join 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 accounts of 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. Later in Pennsylvania she attended meetings between Pennsylvania's Provincial Council and a variety of multinational Indian delegations. Multilingual go-betweenes such as Madame Montour clearly played an indispensable role in Indian-white relations.



Wampum beads used for trade found at Fort St Joseph.
Photo courtesy of LisaMarie Malischke



Iroquois wampum belts