

DAUGHTERS OF THE KING AND FOUNDERS OF A NATION:

*LES FILLES DU ROI* IN NEW FRANCE

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The late seventeenth century was a crucial era in establishing territorial claims on the North American continent. In order to strengthen France's hold on the Quebec colony, Louis XIV sent 770 women across the Atlantic at royal expense in order to populate New France. Since that time, these women known as the *filles du roi*, have often been reduced to a footnote in history books, or else mistakenly slandered as women of questionable morals. This work seeks to clearly identify the *filles du roi* through a study of their socioeconomic status, educational background, and various demographic factors, and compare the living conditions they had in France with those that awaited them in Canada. The aim of this undertaking is to better understand these pioneer women and their reasons for leaving France, as well as to identify the lasting contributions they made to French-Canadian culture and society.

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## INTRODUCTION:

### WOMEN FOR NEW FRANCE

*“Oh mother of a mighty race,  
Yet lovely in thy youthful grace!  
The elder dames, thy haughty peers,  
Admire and hate thy blooming years.  
With words of shame  
And taunts of scorn they join thy name.”*

From "Oh Mother of a Mighty Race"  
~William Cullen Bryant~

Though Bryant’s words refer to the brave women who settled the American West, they are an equally fitting tribute to the sometimes-slandered women who played a vital role in creating a French settlement in the New World. History remembers the seventeenth century as a time of expansion and discovery. The major power players of Europe, notably France, England and Spain, fought to carve the New World into colonies that would provide fertile land and raw materials to benefit the mother country. While Spain and Portugal fought for control of South America, France and England fought bitterly over the territories to the north. The discovery and conquering of these new lands were decidedly the province of men, but Louis XIV found himself calling upon the women of his kingdom to help keep the newly-acquired Quebec under French control.

The men who had braved the perilous journey across the Atlantic to make a home in New France found the climate harsh for agriculture, and most preferred to make a



living in fur trapping. This nomadic lifestyle did not lend itself to the settlers making physical and emotional ties to the land as farming would have done. Moreover, the lack of French women in the colony meant that newborn settlers were few and far between. In an effort to populate the colony and to entice the settlers to create roots in the area, the king's and his ministers commissioned 770 young women to travel to New France for the sole purpose of marrying the settlers. The women received a trousseau containing a generous quantity of practical household items. The king also endowed a percentage of these emigrants with a gift of fifty or more gold Louis to serve as a dowry. These contributions from the Crown led to the adoption of the term "*filles du roi*" (which loosely translates to "daughters of the king") toward the end of the seventeenth century to refer to these young women.

The *filles du roi* represented approximately eight percent of the total immigration under the French regime, which at first glance may appear to be a very slight number. Yves Landry points out, however, that while the total percentage may appear low, these 770 women represent a full half of all the female immigrants to French Canada between 1663 and 1674 (Landry 14). Furthermore, a full two-thirds of all French-Canadians can trace their ancestry back to one or more *fille du roi* (Charbonneau et al. 124). Clearly, these women had an incredible genetic impact on the Quebec region, but their influence on the colony spans even further. The work and sacrifices of the *filles du roi* shaped the French Canadian landscape both physically and spiritually. It is the goal of this work to illustrate the lives these women led in France, the hardships and challenges that

motivated them to leave for the New World, the living conditions they experienced in Canada, and the legacy they left behind.

CHAPTER I  
WHO WERE THE *FILLES DU ROI*?: BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND  
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

I.1 The Term “*Fille du Roi*”

Marguerite Bourgeoys first employed the term “*filles du roi*” in her autobiographical writings. The term coined by the founder of the Congregation of Notre Dame has some far-reaching implications. To dub these young women “daughters of the king” suggests a generous subsidy by King Louis XIV for all 770 of them. While it is true that the majority of women who traveled to Canada between the years 1663 and 1673 received aid from the Crown, the form and quantity of this support varied greatly from immigrant to immigrant. These women were certainly not of royal lineage: indeed, only a small minority had any claim to nobility of any kind, but their undeniable strategic importance in the colony made them worthy of this royal designation. It is important to note that in current research, the modern spelling *roi* appears along with the archaic spelling *roy* in the term, but both appellations refer to this group of delegates from the Crown.

Mother Bourgeoys opened the doors of her convent to these secular women as they had come “for the purpose of making families” (Bourgeoys 257, my translation). Though it was surely a disruption to her spiritual community, the Congregation of Notre Dame in Montreal and the Ursulines of Quebec City, led by Marie de l’Incarnation, were

the primary hosts of these young women upon their arrival in the New World. Their willingness to welcome these young women into their charge, often at great inconvenience to the sisters, indicates that all involved readily saw the vital importance of this project.

## I.2 Definition of the *Filles du Roi*

Every historian who seeks to delineate exactly who these *filles du roi* were constrains the search to a time span of ten years; from 1663 to 1673. This is not a convenient and arbitrary choice by scholars; rather, these dates mark two important historical events that dictated the feasibility of royal involvement in Canada on a major scale. In 1663, the Crown resumed direct governance over the Canadian colony from the private *Compagnie des Cent-Associés* and invested a great deal more in the managing of the colony than it had done in the past. The great Intendant of Quebec, Jean Talon, was responsible for much of the direct governance in the colony. He was in direct contact with the king's Minister of Finance and key adviser, Jean-Baptiste Colbert. It can be said that these two men were the chief organizers of the *filles du roi* initiative. Colbert was responsible for the financing and recruitment of the young women in France, while Talon ensured their safety with the sisters or good families upon their arrival in Canada, and then their swift marriages to the settlers.

Talon was recalled to France in 1672, but according to Peter J. Gagné, author of *King's Daughters and Founding Mothers: The Filles du Roi, 1663-1673*, Talon still "met with the directors of the *Hôpital Général* to select girls to send to Canada" (Gagné 37-38) showing the Intendant's devotion to strengthening France's hold on the colony through

increased population. Despite this, Talon's efforts continued for only one year after his return to France. The transport, dowry, and trousseaux were expensive to the Crown, as the marriages were expensive for the colonial government. After ten years of considerable, if not steady, support of the *filles du roi* initiative, the French involvement in conflicts in Holland in 1673 required the king's attention and resources. The program was discontinued, deemed too costly and increasingly unnecessary.

There is discord among historians about who among the female immigrants from 1663 to 1673 should bear the designation *fille du roi*. In the work *Orphelines en France, pionnières au Canada: Les Filles du roi au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, possibly the definitive study on the *filles du roi*, author Yves Landry outlines the criteria for using the designation "*fille du roi*" used by several notable historians who have done in-depth research on the subject. Gustave Lanctôt opens his work *Filles de joie ou filles du roi: Étude sur l'immigration féminine en Nouvelle-France* by asserting that "female immigration to Canada in the seventeenth century is automatically divided in two periods, that from 1634 to 1662 under the *Compagnie des Cent-Associés*, and that from 1663 to 1673, under the royal administration." (Lanctôt 9, my translation). He continues to say that the women before 1662 traveled at their own expense, sometimes inspired by initiatives in France or Canada. The group of women who traveled from 1663 to 1673, according to Lanctôt, was uniquely comprised of potential wives recruited and subsidized by the Crown.

Landry quickly points out the major flaws in Lanctôt's sweeping claims. Though not considered *filles du roi*, there were a handful of women sent to Canada by the Crown in the mid-1650s while New France was largely governed by the *Compagnie des Cent-*

*Associés*, just as there were a number of women between the years 1663 and 1673 who traveled without any form of royal assistance. Landry argues that Lanctôt's definition of female immigration is not nearly supple enough to deal with the historical realities of the era.

One of the definitions most thoroughly critiqued by Landry was that of Marcel Trudel, another eminent specialist in the history of New France. Trudel states in the third volume of *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France* that to be considered a *fille du roi*, the young lady had to meet the following criteria: she must have been orphaned by at least one parent, been of urban origin, of noble or upper-middle class birth, and must have received a dowry from the king. After consulting the marriage licenses and other documents from 1663 to 1673, Landry calculates that only eight women would have qualified for the designation *fille du roi* under this narrow definition.

The most troublesome part of Trudel's picture of the *filles du roi* in the third volume of his work is the claim that many or most of the young women in question were of the lesser nobility or upper bourgeoisie. Trudel asserts that the majority of these young women came from orphan-houses where "one raised 'girls from families' [that is to say, girls of elevated social rank]" (Trudel 1983, 43, my translation). Landry's work shows that this was far from accurate, causing Trudel to make some major revision to his position in the fourth volume of *Histoire de la Nouvelle-France*. Trudel writes "in the collective mental spirit, this designation [*fille du roi*] enshrouded these immigrants in a mysterious halo, which sets them apart, which embellishes them . . ." (Trudel 1997, 259, my translation). He concedes that his previous definition was inaccurate; as evidence

shows conclusively, the young women sent under the protection of the king were generally of modest upbringing. Trudel admits his definition was far too strict to be a realistic measure, and adopts Landry's more flexible "guidelines" for defining who exactly should be considered a *fille du roi* in the fourth volume of his work.

Landry defines *filles du roi* as "being immigrants, young girls or widows, coming to Canada from 1663 to 1673 inclusively and having presumably benefited from royal support in their transport or their establishment, or one and the other" (Landry 24, my translation). Landry considers his criteria similar to the definitions proposed by Lanctôt as well as by Paul-André Leclerc and Silvio Dumas. Landry differs from other historians in that he does not make the royal dowry a requirement for consideration. As we will see later, the dowry was not an automatic gift from the Crown as was once thought. Other historians have not counted widows in the number, but as Landry found, several women who had lost their first husbands would qualify as *filles du roi* under his definition. Landry and most other modern historians do not put a geographical stipulation in his definition. We will soon see that while the vast majority of the young women sent to Canada with royal assistance were from Paris, Rouen, and the outlying regions of those cities, the women sponsored by the king came from nearly every corner of France. Indeed, several of the women considered to be *filles du roi* were not even of French birth.

For the purposes of this study, we will accept Landry's criteria for defining who may and may not be considered a *fille du roi*. The material point in establishing a suitable definition of who may be considered a *fille du roi* is that it allows us in turn to delineate our corpus of study. Using the definition set forth in his study, Landry claims that

approximately 770 women traveled to Canada under the auspices of Louis XIV, in some form or other. The women who meet these criteria set forth by Landry will be the primary focus of this work.

### I.3 Geographic Origins of the *Filles du Roi*

For many years, it was supposed that all but a handful of the *filles du roi* were from the Salpêtrière orphan hospital in Paris. While the number of the king's charges who came from Paris was significant, nearly every region of France can claim at least one of these young women. Indeed the origins of the *filles du roi* are not as challenging to determine, for the place of birth of these brides is present on all but eight percent of the marriage certificates, according to Landry. Due to the differences in their definitions of the *filles du roi*, the precise geographic distribution of these young ladies varies from historian to historian. Lanctôt and Dumas agree that the principal regions that produced these immigrants were Île-de-France, Normandy, Aunis, Champagne, and Poitou. The table below illustrates the distributions of the *filles du roi* by region according to Lanctôt and Dumas.



Table I. Geographic distribution of the *filles du roi* according to Lanctôt and Dumas

| Region           | Lanctôt | Dumas | Region        | Lanctôt | Dumas |
|------------------|---------|-------|---------------|---------|-------|
| Île-de-France    | 314     | 279   | Angoumois     | 3       | 5     |
| Normandy         | 153     | 120   | Provence      | 3       | 1     |
| Aunis            | 86      | 53    | Savoy         | 3       | 1     |
| Champagne        | 43      | 32    | Franche-Comté | 2       | 1     |
| Poitou           | 38      | 33    | Gascogne      | 2       | 3     |
| Anjou            | 22      | 5     | Perche        | 2       | 1     |
| Beauce           | 22      | 19    | Guyenne       | 2       | 2     |
| Maine            | 19      | 6     | Nivernais     | N/A     | 2     |
| Orleans          | 19      | 24    | Artois        | 1       | 2     |
| Saintonge        | 18      | 9     | Bourbonnais   | 1       | N/A   |
| Bourgogne        | 18      | 13    | Périgord      | 1       | N/A   |
| Picardy          | 16      | 25    | Dauphiné      | 1       | N/A   |
| Brittany         | 15      | 13    | Languedoc     | 1       | N/A   |
| Lorraine         | 10      | 5     | Lyonnais      | N/A     | 1     |
| Touraine         | 8       | 7     | Unknown       | 190     | 82    |
| Flandre-Hainault | 7       | 4     | Germany       | 1       | 1     |
| Brie             | 5       | 17    | England       | 1       | 1     |
| Berry            | 5       | 5     | Portugal      | 1       | 1     |
| Auvergne         | 5       | 1     |               |         |       |
| Limousin         | 4       | N/A   | <b>Total</b>  | 961     | 774   |

Sources: (a) Lanctôt, Gustave. *Filles De Joie Ou Filles Du Roi : Étude Sur l'immigration Féminine En Nouvelle-France*. Montréal: Les éditions Chantcler Ltée., 1952, p. 125-126.

(b) Dumas, Silvio. *Les Filles Du Roi En Nouvelle-France*. Québec: La Société Historique de Québec, 1972, p. 44.

While the two historians may have slight differences in the geographic distribution of these young women's places of birth, there are very few major discrepancies between Lanctôt and Dumas' findings. We do see that Lanctôt has more than four times the immigrants originating from Anjou than does Dumas, and more than three times the immigrants coming from Maine. In his turn, Dumas asserts that three times more immigrants were born in the Brie region than does Lanctôt. Despite these variations, their findings are nearly the same: the *filles du roi* came overwhelmingly from Paris and Normandy.

Landry's geographic distribution is not as detailed as those of Lanctôt and Dumas, but his numbers do not contradict those of the other two historians. The table below illustrates his findings:

Table II. Geographic distribution of the *filles du roi* according to Landry

| <b>Region</b>          | <b>Number of Immigrants</b> |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Paris</b>           | 327                         |
| <b>Normandy</b>        | 127                         |
| <b>West</b>            | 102                         |
| <b>Unknown</b>         | 62                          |
| <b>East</b>            | 59                          |
| <b>Loire</b>           | 43                          |
| <b>North</b>           | 20                          |
| <b>Brittany</b>        | 13                          |
| <b>Center</b>          | 7                           |
| <b>South</b>           | 4                           |
| <b>Other Countries</b> | 6                           |
| <b>Total</b>           | 770                         |

Source: Landry, Yves. *Les Filles Du Roi Au XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle : Orphelines En France, Pionnières Au Canada. Suivi d'Un Répertoire Biographique Des Filles Du Roi*. Ottawa: Leméac, 1992, p. 54.

That the preponderance of the *filles du roi* was native to the Paris and Norman regions of France is not at all unexpected. The recruitment of these young women, which we will examine in greater detail in Chapter IV, was centered mainly in the areas near Paris and Rouen. The proximity of the two ports, La Rochelle and Dieppe, where the women embarked on their journey, also played a major factor in the geographical distribution of the *filles du roi*. In the era before mass communication and extensive literacy, hearing of this program would not have been commonplace far outside of Paris and Rouen. Add to this the difficulty of a journey across France during the seventeenth

century, and it is only logical that very few of the women who immigrated under the aid of the Crown came from the south and east of France.

Furthermore, these women were considered excellent candidates for marriage. In their work *La Vie Quotidienne en Nouvelle-France*, Raymond Douville and Jacques-Donat Casanova assert that:

...even in France, it is custom that the poor young girls and orphans from charity hospitals be sought after in marriage by people of status, the bourgeoisie, and well-off artisans. They are 'in demand' because one knows that they were raised with a discipline that made good housekeepers out of them (Douville and Casanova 36, my translation).

Few would argue that the early Canadian settlers were not a practical people.

Housekeeping skills, stamina, and work ethic would have been the attributes most prized in a potential bride. Recruiting from the charity hospitals seemed good practice all around. The male settlers gained hard-working spouses, the Crown was able to give an active employment to a good number of dependents, and the young immigrants gained independence in the colonies that they would never have enjoyed in the Parisian charity hospitals.

It is interesting that in the findings of Lanctôt, Dumas, and Landry, we see included in the repertoire of *filles du roi* several women of non-French origin. Lanctôt and Dumas each include one woman from Germany, England, and Portugal in their study, while Landry indicates the presence of two women from Belgium, and one each from Germany, England, Brazil (likely the Portuguese woman mentioned by Lanctôt and Dumas), and Switzerland. Dumas devotes some time to describing these three women who are unusual additions to the collective of *filles du roi*.

Espérance Du Rosaire was born in Brazil and later baptized in Portugal. Dumas speculates that this young woman was likely adopted by a French family, and was with the contingent of 1668. According to Dumas, she was the first of the recruits in that group to secure a husband. He is unsure if she had come from the Salpêtrière or elsewhere. The information in Landry's repertoire states that she did not bear children and was unable to write her name. Both Landry and Gagné mention that Marie de l'Incarnation referred to Espérance as "*la Moresque*" or "the moor", and Dumas' catalogue of the *filles du roi* mentions that the notary Becquet describes her in the marriage certificate as a "savage woman of the Brazilian nation of Gaul" (Dumas 236), perhaps intimating that she was not readily accepted by Canadian society. According to Gagné's repertoire, she and her husband returned to France after their marriage.

Catherine de Lalore, or Lawlot, was born in London to an English father and a French mother. Her father had died when she left for Canada in 1671, according to Dumas. Landry's repertoire indicates that she married and had eight children, and was able to sign her name. Notably, Landry's catalogue also indicates that she received a 50-pound dowry from the king upon her marriage to Louis Badaillac. Later in this chapter, we will take a closer look at who received this gift from the Crown, but it is indeed curious that the king would choose to bestow a dowry on a foreign-born woman.

The third foreign *fille du roi* given special mention by Dumas is German-born Marie-Anne Phansèque, known in the Gagné and Landry repertoires as Anne-Marie Vanzègue. Anne-Marie's father was a captain of the Calvary in the Imperial troops, deceased at her time of departure. She was unable to sign her name at the time of her

marriage to her first husband, Hubert Leroux in 1673. Before her marriage, she was the charge of Marguerite Bourgeoys in the *Maison St. Gabriel* that held a great many of the young women who were sent to settle in the region near Montreal. Anne-Marie had three children with Leroux who died in 1681.

Like so many of the other widows, Anne-Marie remarried quickly. Only seven months after the loss of her first husband, Anne-Marie was married to Gabriel Cardinal, and she bore him one son. According to Gagné's research, the couple separated after ten years of marriage. The reason Cardinal requested the separation from his wife was due to the accusation that his wife was running a house of ill repute, and that she was keeping her fourteen-year-old daughter from her "rascal" husband. Anne-Marie had consistent legal troubles, including illegal sale of alcohol to the Native Americans, until her death in 1722. Her exploits even became the subject of a historical biography, *L'Allemande*, by Rémi Tougas.

The presence of these foreign-born *filles du roi* shatters the image that had been held for many years. It was thought for so long that the king's charges were a homogenous group of orphans, sent from Paris to be of use to the Crown, rather than a burden. We have seen the geographical distribution of the immigrants, but a closer examination of those data is warranted to determine which of these *filles du roi* were already accustomed to country living, and which were more acclimated to city life.

According to Landry's data, the women were decidedly of rural origin, thanks largely to the recruitment for the *filles du roi* in the Salpêtrière and other orphan hospitals in Paris and Rouen. Landry asserts that of the 770 *filles du roi*, 486 were from cities, 215

were from the countryside, and 69 were of indeterminate origin (Landry 54). This statistic is important in distinguishing these women from the immigrants who did not bear the title “*fille du roi*”. Under the *Compagnie des Cent-Associés*, only twenty percent of the women who traveled were from the region of Paris. This contrasts even more sharply with the male immigrants of the time, only nine percent of whom came from the capital. Landry offers a very plausible reason for the disproportionate immigration of these women from the cities. He states, “Especially in the cities we find a greater concentration of people ill-suited to their environment, thus more likely to emigrate, and where communication offering the hope of a better life is more accessible” (Landry 62-63, my translation).

This situation was not exactly ideal according to the chief personages of the time. Talon wrote to Colbert to request that more farm-girls would be sent, rather than the sickly, city-raised orphans that had been sent in previous voyages. As Talon requested in his correspondence to Colbert, “It would be good to recommend strongly that those who are destined for this country are in no way disgraced in nature, that they are not repulsive on the exterior, and that they are healthy and strong for farm work or at least have some ability for handiwork” (*Rapport de l'Archiviste de la Province de Québec* 1925, hereafter RAPQ, my translation). Marie de l'Incarnation also wrote of her concern for the city girls and their ability to adjust to life in Quebec. In her correspondence to her son, she writes, “we no longer wish to ask for any girls except those from villages, suited for men's work. Experience has led us to see those who were not raised up for it, who were not suited for

[life] here, being in a misery out from which they cannot pull themselves.”(832, my translation)

Marie de l’Incarnation was realistic in her views, for two-thirds of the *filles du roi* were destined for country life. In his study *La Population du Canada en 1663*, Marcel Trudel indicates that while movement between the cities and the countryside was common in New France, most colonists resided primarily in rural areas. The table below illustrates the rural to urban population distribution during the first year of the *filles du roi* program.

Table III. Distribution of the population between rural and urban areas in 1663

| <b>Residence</b>                                       | <b>Number</b> | <b>% of the population</b> |
|--------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|
| Urban base (no rural residence)                        | 996           | 32.8%                      |
| Rural base (with or without urban secondary residence) | 2,039         | 67.2%                      |

Source: Trudel, Marcel. *La Population Du Canada En 1663*. Montreal: FIDES, 1973c, p. 21.

It is logical that those chiefly responsible for the well-being and happiness of the king’s charges would favor rural stock for this program. Women from the farm would be better able to work alongside their husbands in agricultural pursuits and make the ties to the land that were so vital to France’s claim on Quebec. Furthermore, these hardy women from the country were better equipped to withstand the bitter Canadian winters and would feel less isolated on the remote farms than their counterparts from bustling Rouen and Paris. Indeed it was in no one’s interest to send young women who would be physically, emotionally, and mentally unable to adapt to a climate and region that were radically different from the sphere of their youth.

#### I.4 Socioeconomic Backgrounds of the *Filles du Roi*

Trudel had asserted in his 1973 work that the *filles du roi* were generally from the lower nobility or upper bourgeoisie. Other historians claim that the *filles du roi* were a degenerate band of orphans from the poorhouses of Paris. In order to determine the socioeconomic realities of the king's charges, we must cast off the contrasting images of the friendless young noblewoman and the desperate orphan, and delve deeper. Landry states that a precise study of the socioeconomic background of the girls is difficult because only twenty-three percent declared their father's profession before a priest or a notary. The table below shows the distribution of the *filles du roi* according to their fathers' declared professions.

Table IV. Distribution of the *filles du roi* according to their father's declared profession

| <b>Profession</b>                | <b>Number of <i>filles du roi</i></b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------|
| "Notable" (nobles and bourgeois) | 96                                    | 12.5%             |
| Skilled tradesmen                | 59                                    | 7.7%              |
| "Humble" trades                  | 13                                    | 1.7%              |
| Farmers                          | 8                                     | 1.0%              |
| Subtotal                         | 176                                   | 22.9%             |
| Undetermined                     | 594                                   | 77.1%             |
| Total                            | 770                                   | 100.0%            |

Source: Landry, Yves. *Les Filles Du Roi Au XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle : Orphelines En France, Pionnières Au Canada. Suivi d'Un Répertoire Biographique Des Filles Du Roi*. Ottawa: Leméac, 1992, p. 69.

Landry explains the reason for this omission of information is that this was not an obligatory entry on marriage certificates until 1703. It is not surprising that the daughters of nobles and skilled tradesmen would divulge this information before their marriage. It would be of nothing but benefit to them in their marriage negotiations.



Despite the lack of complete data, Lanctôt, Dumas, and Landry are able to give us a picture of the socioeconomic background of many of the *filles du roi*. Lanctôt divides the *filles du roi* into three groups: *demoiselles*, the orphans from the charity hospitals, and the daughters of farmers and lesser tradesmen. Landry's research shows, unsurprisingly, that "the '*demoiselles*' were only a small minority of the recruits, and that the mass of the girls belonged to the most modest classes of society" (Landry 23). Lanctôt estimates the number of the women belonging to the lesser nobility and the upper middle class to be at a minimum of 60, or approximately 6 percent of his repertoire. Landry's percentage is higher, estimating that 96 of the immigrants were from notable families, comprising twelve percent of his final inventory.

These women, though far from comprising a majority, were a very important part of this social program. Women of "quality" were needed as wives for the officers and other men of rank. The king wished his officers to marry in Canada and make lasting ties to the land. It was often the promise of a royal dowry that encouraged these women to leave behind their roots in France. Sometimes these girls of the upper classes were the younger siblings of a large family, and the king's gift enabled them to marry better than they might have done in France. Other times, these noblewomen were orphaned and left without dowries. Their rank was left intact, but they were without the resources to make a good match. As we will soon see, these "*demoiselles*" were often the most likely to be favored by royal generosity when receiving their dowries.

Lanctôt points out that these women of high status were not in short supply. Colbert, like the king, "wished, through ties of marriage, to retain his officers, and have

them acclimate to the country” (*RAPQ* 1931, 45, my translation). To this end, he sent between fifteen to twenty girls from “good families” as potential spouses for the officers and other high-ranking citizens, and continued to do so on occasion during the ten years of the *filles du roi* program. In 1670, Colbert sent fifteen *demoiselles* after receiving a request from Talon for three or four highborn girls for some single officers. In response, Talon responded, stating, “...it was no longer necessary to send other people of this quality” (*RAPQ* 1926, 161, my translation). Finding suitable husbands for women of social importance was not always an easy task. Governor Frontenac asserted that it was a challenge to find husbands of suitable rank for the young ladies of social distinction, saying that in one particular convoy there were “five or six ladies for whom it was difficult to find a suitable partner” (*RAPQ* 1931 44, my translation), but Lanctôt points out that only two of those ladies were still unwed just a few months later.

The orphans from the various charity hospitals comprised a very important element of the female immigration during this era. There are not many records to give us the precise numbers of girls that originated from these humble circumstances, but testimony and archives lead Lanctôt to believe that one hundred girls were generally sent at a time from these institutions, comprising more than a third of the total immigrants. It was this group of women who generally raised the most concern from Talon, Marguerite Bourgeoys, and Marie de l’Incarnation and others responsible for the settling of these immigrants. They were almost entirely from urban bases and were sometimes of questionable health. The strains of rural life in Canada were the hardest on this group. Furthermore, these young women were often the most troublesome for the sisters to

manage. We will examine in more detail the history of these *filles du roi* and their harsh beginnings in the next chapter.

The largest group of the *filles du roi* is divided by Lanctôt into two major categories. The first category is comprised of girls raised in urban areas, often port cities, who were the daughters of minor artisans, laborers, and servants. The second category is that of the rural girls raised on the provincial farms in nearly every corner of France. About these women, Lanctôt says, “we know precious little, and nothing of certainty” (Lanctôt 122, my translation). This second group was generally well suited for the toil that awaited them in Canada, though occasionally possessing less than refined manners. The material point of this program, however, was to provide strong, brave, and fertile spouses for the colonists, and history has shown that these women proved themselves unequivocally equal to the task.

Landry provides us with data concerning the worth of the goods that each woman brought to her first marriage. He cautions that these data can be misleading, for even an immigrant of some social importance may not have been fortunate enough to bring a large trousseau with her if she came from a large family with many marriageable daughters. The data are also far from complete, but serve as an illustration of the correlation between wealth and social status among the *filles du roi*. While data are missing on the value of goods that the *filles du roi* brought to their first marriages for a strong percentage of the women, we can still see a few important patterns. Only the daughters of the nobles and bourgeois were likely to have more than four hundred pounds worth of goods, but even a few women from the humblest levels of society had as much

as 399 pounds worth of goods. Conversely, we see that several daughters of noblemen, skilled artisans, and tradesmen were categorized as having less than 200 pounds worth of belongings. It is evident by this, as Landry states, that there was little correlation between the value of goods possessed by an immigrant and her social status.

Another important fact that separates the *filles du roi* from other female immigrants of the era is their lack of family connection in the colony. According to Gagné, “While two-thirds of other women who immigrated to New-France before 1700 were related to another colonist, only one out of ten *filles du roi* were related to another immigrant. This shows that while most of the other women chose to go to Canada due to some family connections, for the vast majority of *filles du roi*, it was precisely a lack of family connection back home that caused their immigration” (Gagné 21). The motivations of these women will be the focus of later examination, but to know that only a handful of these immigrants had the comfort of a sister, mother, father, brother, or other relation in the colony is important for understanding one material way in which these women differed from other immigrants of the time.

Of course, many of these women traveled alone because they had no family left. The term *fille du roi* often conjures up the image of a friendless orphan, and this was often the case, though not universally so. In this case, we are able to know the orphan status of 683 of the 770 immigrants in question, which allows a very accurate image of the king’s charges as they left for Canada. According to Landry’s data, nearly 57 percent of the *filles du roi* had lost their fathers, and 19 percent had lost their mothers. Landry compares this figure with those of the rural areas near Paris during the same timeframe.

Only 37 percent of the fathers of those women were deceased at the time of their daughter's wedding, but nearly 25 percent of their mothers had passed away. This shows that being orphaned by a father seemed to have a stronger influence on a woman's likelihood to immigrate to Canada. This seems a logical phenomenon, as most women of the era depended on their fathers for dowries. In the absence of this, women looked to their king to provide that support.

#### I.5 Ages and Matrimonial Status of the *Filles du Roi*

Due to a lack of accurate and complete records, it is only possible to determine the approximate ages of the *filles du roi*. The two pieces of information used by Landry to determine the age of these women were their birth dates and the year of their arrival. Unfortunately, these exact dates are known only for about a quarter of the king's charges. Nonetheless, records of the arrivals of the ships are relatively accurate, and we can give at least an approximation of the ages of most of the women who participated in this program. Talon specifically requested women between the ages of sixteen and thirty years. Landry's data indicates that the *filles du roi*, in actuality, ranged in age from fourteen to—surprisingly—fifty-nine years old. Widows comprised a small minority of the *filles du roi*. According to his information, Landry calculates that 38 members of his repertoire, or slightly less than five percent, had been widowed before their departure from France. Table V shows the approximate ages and matrimonial status of the women at the time of their arrival in Canada.

Table V. Approximate ages and marital status of the *filles du roi* upon arrival in Canada

| Age Group           | Marital Status |              |              | % of <i>Filles</i> |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------|--------------|--------------------|
|                     | Single         | Widow        | Total        |                    |
| <b>14-18</b>        | 89 (99%)       | 1 (1%)       | 90           | 13.7%              |
| <b>19-24</b>        | 285 (99%)      | 3 (1%)       | 288          | 43.8%              |
| <b>25-29</b>        | 158 (96%)      | 7 (4%)       | 165          | 25.1%              |
| <b>30-34</b>        | 73 (90%)       | 8 (10%)      | 81           | 12.3%              |
| <b>35-39</b>        | 16 (73%)       | 6 (27%)      | 22           | 3.3%               |
| <b>40 and older</b> | 7 (58%)        | 5 (42%)      | 12           | 1.8%               |
| <b>Age</b>          | <b>Single</b>  | <b>Widow</b> | <b>Total</b> |                    |
| <b>Age known</b>    | 628            | 30           | 658          |                    |
| <b>Age unknown</b>  | 90             | 8            | 112*         |                    |
| <b>Total</b>        | 718            | 38           | 770*         |                    |
| <b>Average age</b>  | 23.9           | 32.5         | 24.3         |                    |

\*Includes 14 women with undetermined marital status

Source: Landry, Yves. *Les Filles Du Roi Au XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle : Orphelines En France, Pionnières Au Canada. Suivi d'Un Répertoire Biographique Des Filles Du Roi*. Ottawa: Leméac, 1992, p. 69.

The above information from Landry's study allows us to make some important conclusions about the *filles du roi*. Primarily, and not unexpectedly, the *filles du roi* were generally quite young, the average member of this group of immigrants was under twenty-four years of age, and would have been likely married to a settler before the age of twenty-five. The bulk of the girls were between nineteen and twenty-five years, old enough to have learned important household and laboring skills and old enough to bear healthy children, but not so advanced in age that these necessary duties were overly taxing on their health. We see a noticeable decrease in the numbers of *filles du roi* over the age of thirty, with only a handful of these women having reached an age greater than thirty-seven years.

While the exact ages of the *filles du roi* may have been difficult to obtain, their marital status was much easier to attain. The authorities were thorough enough to avoid sending legally married women as potential brides, so records exist for all but fourteen of

the 770 immigrants. An interesting finding is that the number of widows was relatively well dispersed among the age groups. The youngest widow was a mere eighteen years old, while the eldest had attained the age of forty-eight. The average age for widows was slightly over thirty-two years, ten years older than the average single immigrant.

#### I.6 Literacy Rates of the *Filles du Roi*

Aside from the basic demographic information of the *filles du roi*, it is important for us to examine the educational level of these immigrants, specifically their ability to read and write. Landry is one of the few historians to provide information about the literacy of the king's charges, yet he is able to give an accurate picture of the literacy rates of these women at only the most basic level. He uses the ability of each woman to sign her marriage contract as his baseline data. As these documents are available for all but eight percent of the women, the data Landry was able to collect are relatively complete.

Landry's data shows us that urban *filles du roi* were at least two times more likely to be able to read and write than their counterparts in the countryside. The urban women of Paris and the east had the highest literacy rates, while the immigrants from rural Brittany, southern, and central France were universally unable to read. It makes sense that urban women would be more literate than those in the remote farms and villages would be, for instructors and books were present, if not readily available in those areas. In the most literate of regions, only one in three women could read which is not unsurprising for the time. Overall, it can be said that one in four *filles du roi* could sign her name.

Universal education was not, as Landry states, “encouraged or even desired” (Landry 87) during the era of the *filles du roi*. Many believed that a man should be educated enough to fulfill the demands of his profession well, but no further. The ruling class saw overeducating the common man as a threat to peace and even to the basic happiness of the peasantry. The reasoning was that “any man who looks above his sad profession will never work with courage and patience” (Brunot 137, my translation, as cited by Landry, 87). It is therefore not unexpected that the literacy rates of these women were not exceedingly high. The sexual politics of the time, as one might speculate, did lead to a higher literacy rate among men. According to Michel Chouinard’s study *Instruction et comportement démographique en Nouvelle-France au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, approximately 30 percent of the male settlers were literate, as opposed to only 21 percent of female settlers, including those women not sent to Canada under the auspices of the king.

### I.7 Royal Support and Dowries

To be considered a *fille du roi*, the young woman in question must have received aid from the Crown in some form or another. Each woman, in fact, did receive considerable financial support from the king. The French West India Company 1664-1674 was accorded one hundred pounds for each woman transported. Ten pounds were allocated to a recruiter for his fee, thirty were used for the purchase of clothing and household goods, and sixty pounds were retained for the expense of the trans-Atlantic crossing. Among the household goods bestowed on the future brides of Canada, Lanctôt lists the following items as being the base of their trousseaux: “the household goods



ought to include, other than clothing, the following articles: 1 case, 1 wimple, 1 taffeta handkerchief, ribbon, 100 needles, 1 hairbrush, white thread, 1 pair of stockings, 1 pair of gloves, 1 pair of scissors, 2 knives, 1000 pins, 1 bonnet, 4 laces, and two pounds sterling” (Lanctôt 103, my translation).

These items gave each young woman the basic tools needed to establish herself in the colony with at least a minimal level of personal independence. Some of the immigrants, especially those from the Parisian charity hospitals, might not otherwise have had the means to provide themselves with adequate clothing to protect themselves from the glacial Canadian winter, nor the tools to keep the garments in suitable repair.

According to Lanctôt, it had become rumor in France that the king’s charges would receive enormous dowries and other social advantages. In reality, a common girl might receive fifty pounds in Canadian money and a girl of higher pedigree could possibly expect 100 pounds. In one remarkable circumstance mentioned by Lanctôt, the Intendant’s budget indicates that in 1669, two young ladies of noble birth received 600 pounds each. Landry disputes the veracity of this claim, asserting that only a few women received as much as 200 pounds. A royal dowry, however, was not as automatic as once thought. Though many historians in the past have considered a royal dowry a major criterion for being considered a *fille du roi*, further study evinces that less than half of the women who engaged in an eligible marriage actually received the king’s gift at all.

Landry asserts that approximately 250 of the 606 *filles du roi* who entered into an eligible marriage in Canada had any mention of a royal dowry on their marriage

certificate. The table below shows how those 250 dowries were distributed among the immigrants based on the declared profession of their fathers.

Table VI. Distribution of dowries according to the bride's father's profession

| Socio-professional category      | Amount of royal dowry (in pounds) |                  |                 | Overall    |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------|
|                                  | 50                                | 100              | 200             |            |
| "Notable" (nobles and bourgeois) | 17 (73.9%)                        | 5 (21.7%)        | 1 (4.3%)        | 23         |
| Skilled tradesmen                | 15 (93.8%)                        | 0 (0.0%)         | 1 (6.3%)        | 16         |
| Farmers                          | 2 (100%)                          | 0 (0.0%)         | 0 (0.0%)        | 2          |
| "Humble" trades                  | 4 (100%)                          | 0 (0.0%)         | 0 (0.0%)        | 4          |
| <b>Subtotal</b>                  | <b>38 (84.4%)</b>                 | <b>5 (11.1%)</b> | <b>2 (4.4%)</b> | <b>45</b>  |
| Undetermined                     | 205 (100%)                        | 0 (0.0%)         | 0 (0.0%)        | 205        |
| <b>Grand total</b>               | <b>243 (97.2%)</b>                | <b>5 (2.0%)</b>  | <b>0 (0.0%)</b> | <b>250</b> |

Source: Landry, Yves. *Les Filles Du Roi Au XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle : Orphelines En France, Pionnières Au Canada. Suivi d'Un Répertoire Biographique Des Filles Du Roi*. Ottawa: Leméac, 1992, p.76.

The data beg the question: who were the immigrants who were granted this financial generosity by the king, and what made them worthy of such attention? If we analyze the above data, we can tell conclusively that any dowry over fifty pounds would have gone to a woman who was relatively highborn. It seems logical that the women of notable background would be those to benefit from more liberal financial support from the Crown. As these women came from the higher social strata in France, their families may have had connections to the Crown that might have elicited the king's favor. Even if this were not the case, these women were destined to marry the settlers of the highest rank, and these marriages often required substantial dowries to become a reality. For the standard dowries of fifty pounds, it appears that women of "respectable" parentage were probably more likely to be granted this financial boon from the Crown, but without

knowing the social position of 205 of the 243 women who received a dowry, any claim is perfunctory at best.

It is important to note that, according to Landry's study, dowries were given between 1667 and 1672; the period from 1669 to 1671 being the era when Talon bestowed the greatest number of dowries. During those three years, two-thirds of the *filles du roi* were endowed with the king's gift, a proportion much higher than at any other period during the ten-year span. Landry concludes that while there is no connection between social status and the dowries, there is a strong correlation with the geographic origin of the immigrant and her chances of receiving this financial assistance from the State. Landry states "the girls native to the city of Paris, thus from its *Hôpital Général*, were favored by the king at a much higher proportion than all the others (forty-two percent compared to thirty-two percent), whereas the inverse phenomenon affected the immigrants coming from the western region (seven percent as compared to forty percent)" (Landry 77, my translation).

#### I.8 The Moral Qualities of the *Filles du Roi*

No discussion of the *filles du roi* would be complete without examining the speculations over the past four centuries concerning the morality and virtue of the king's charges. Gustave Lanctôt's wonderfully detailed study focuses centrally on this question. Were the young women a group of morally bankrupt prostitutes sent by the Crown to rid Paris of their bad influence and disease, or were these honest orphans and poor girls looking for a new life in the New World? The writings of the baron de La Hontan first raised the question of the quality of the women sent from France to be the first mothers of

Quebec. His scandalous pamphlet, published in 1703 paints a very seedy picture of the first inhabitants of French Canada:

The majority of these inhabitants are free people who came here from France with little money to set up their establishments. Others, who after having resigned their careers as soldiers thirty or forty years ago . . . embraced the career of farmer. After the reform of the troops, [the king] sent from France several vessels filled with girls of middling virtue, under the direction of a few old Beguine nuns who divided them into three classes. These Vestals then crammed people one on top of the other into three different rooms where husbands chose their wives in the same manner as a butcher goes to choose sheep from amidst the herd . . . everyone found the shoe to fit his foot. . . There was not a single one left after fifteen days. I have been told that the fat ones were chosen first because they thought that they were less active and that they would have more trouble leaving their homes, and that they would better withstand the great cold of winter, but these assumptions fooled many. (La Hontan, Louis Armand de Lom d'Arce, baron de 10-12, my translation)

While La Hontan's crude description of early Canadian courtship is repugnant, and will be discussed in later chapters, the most damaging aspect of his reports has to do with his description of the *filles du roi* as women of questionable morals. Lanctôt states, La Hontan's widely read writings " . . . did not stop for two-and-a-half centuries to propagate the world over, the fable of an impure immigration to the shores of the St. Lawrence" (Lanctôt 158). Historians took La Hontan's word as truth for nearly 300 years, perhaps wanting to believe his fantastic stories of the rough-and-tumble world in early Canada. Lanctôt was one of the first modern historians to challenge these sordid images and was a key figure in reclaiming the reputation of the king's wards.

There is a great deal of reputable source material from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that depicts the *filles du roi* as being worthy of such an honorable title. In an October 1669 letter to her son, Mother Marie de l'Incarnation gives what is likely a succinct and accurate image of the moral realities of the era: "...along with the

honest people comes a great deal of rabble of both sexes, who cause a great deal of scandal” (Incarnation 863, my translation). While there is sometimes a tendency to embellish history to establish our forebears as paragons of moral virtue, there is no benefit in this extreme either. This said, many historians find that La Hontan wrongly accused these women, and they seek to rebuild this reputation.

Landry summarizes the chief arguments made by historians such as Faillon, Sulte, Roy, Salone, Groulx, Lanctôt, Dumas and many others, against La Hontan’s slanderous remarks. Primarily, La Hontan was a proven liar. Landry provides the example of an immense river he “discovered” in the Mississippi region, which is not at all true. La Hontan also seemed to have confused the vessels destined for the Antilles with those bound for Quebec. The Antilles were thought to have received a number of girls of “easy virtue” at the same time that the *filles du roi* were sent to Canada. One of the most damning arguments against La Hontan was that he was not a personal witness to the events he recounts. Landry states that the accounts of other historians of the era contemporary to these immigrants, like Pierre François Xavier de Charlevoix and Pierre Boucher, provide a far less distasteful image of the king’s charges. Their illustrations are, according to Landry, unified and far more credible than La Hontan. Furthermore, these historians had no personal connections to the *filles du roi* like Talon, Marie de l’Incarnation, or Marguerite Bourgeoys, and had no motivation to depict the women any more or less virtuous than they really were.

Landry concludes his refutation of La Hontan’s claims with two more solid arguments. Records show that all the *filles du roi* were required to provide character

witnesses signed by their priest or a judge from their hometown. These public figures were not likely to forge these documents and risk disgracing their word of honor on an untrustworthy young woman. The girls were also closely supervised during their journey and in the colonies until they were married. The virtue of these women was not taken lightly at any stage of the courtship. As the testimony of Pierre Boucher asserts "...before [the *filles du roi*] are boarded on the ships, some one of their friends or relatives needs to assure that they had always been well behaved; if by accident it is found that some of them who arrived had been debauched, or if they had given sign of poor conduct on the journey, they are sent back to France" (Boucher 155-156).

This illustrates that the administration of New France would have been willing to absorb the expense of deporting a *fille du roi* back to France rather than allowing her to stay and potentially cause trouble in the colony. Lastly, Landry shows that only two illegitimate births were recorded in the era prior to 1690. This figure would have certainly been higher if the women sent by the Crown had been of less than acceptable moral quality.

Even without all the evidence against La Hontan's propaganda, another factor makes it unlikely that immoral women comprised more than a small minority of the *filles du roi*. Though it would have rid Paris of a portion of its vagrant population, sending infertile and unmanageable women of shoddy morals as brides for the Canadian settlers would have been counter-productive and a very costly error. Many of the women who engaged in prostitution in France, according to Gagné, were "stricken with some form of venereal disease, which rendered them sterile" (Gagné 22). This would hardly be an

effective population to draw from when the entire purpose of the program was to provide healthy mothers for the new generation of French Canadians.

Furthermore, according to Jean-Pierre Carrez' work *Les femmes opprimées à la Salpêtrière de Paris (1656-1791)*, it was not until 20 April 1684, more than ten years after the last envoy of *filles du roi*, that prostitutes were admitted to the Salpêtrière in any significant numbers. As this charity hospital was a major contributor to the population of the king's charges, this shows rather convincingly that women of easy virtue could not have comprised a major element of this group of pioneers. As the Ursuline sister, Marie-Andrée Regnard Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène wrote in 1702,

It must not be believed that the girls sent from France to marry in Canada were of poor morals. Most of them were ladies of quality without means; others were from good families with too many children. They sent them to this country in the hope that they would be provided for. And lastly, many were taken from the hôpital de la Pitié in Paris where they had been well raised from a young age. (Duplessis de Sainte-Hélène 91, my translation)

The purpose here is not to paint the *filles du roi* as morally impeccable, but to stress that these immigrants were women with the same character flaws that we might see anywhere. They were generally hard-working and honest women who deserve better than the malignant slurs that dominated the chronicles of Canadian history for almost three centuries.

## CHAPTER II

### THE *FILLES DU ROI* IN FRANCE: RECRUITMENT, MOTIVATIONS FOR EMIGRATION, AND THE LIVES THEY LED IN FRANCE

The previous chapter served to provide an illustration of the repertoire of the *filles du roi* as they were upon their arrival in New France. Our first task in this chapter will be to examine the recruitment process used during the era of the *filles du roi* and the motivations these women had for their emigration from France. We will then delve into an examination of the lives these women led in France before their departure. For the purposes of this study, we will divide the women into three essential categories: the residents of the Salpêtrière charity hospital in Paris, the rural women from the various provinces of France, and the women of the noble classes and the upper bourgeoisie. Within each division, we will explore the quality of life for both the poor and wealthy in each geographical region in order to delineate the diverse histories of these young women. With this information, we will be better able to compare the changes these women underwent in their lives and the ramifications of their decision to leave France.

#### II.1 Recruitment of the *Filles du Roi*

The motivations of the Crown to send marriageable women to the colonies are clear, and the benefits of the program to the country were abundant. To hold the colony,



France needed a strong population with ties to the land. Sending these women, while costly, proved an efficient way of providing wives to the colonists and, in some cases, reducing the burden of women who were dependent on the state. The question remains, however, why did these women choose to leave their native France and what methods were used to persuade them to do so? For some of these women, Canada offered freedom and comfort far beyond what they had ever experienced in France. For others, emigration meant bitter sacrifice. As Gagné notes, the population of Québec in the 1660s was little more than 2,500, and found itself surrounded by the menacing forces of the Iroquois and the British. The vast majority of the population was male, and encouraging single women to emigrate was neither easy nor profitable. Male emigrants could work for three years to pay off the cost of their transport and lodging, whereas this was not a suitable option for women in the seventeenth century. The state knew it would have to intervene directly in order to establish any mass-scale feminine emigration.

The idea of sending marriageable women to the colonies was not new, nor was it unique to France. England had a program that resembled the *filles du roi* initiative on a more modest scale. Gagné remarks that between the years 1619 and 1621 England sent over 200 prospective brides for the settlers in Virginia. These women lived with good families until finding a suitable husband. Once married, the husband was responsible for giving the government 120 to 150 pounds of his best tobacco in order to cover the cost of his bride's crossing. Gagné calculates the value of this crop was equivalent to about \$9,196 American dollars in the year 2000. Spain, in contrast, never had a large-scale program to encourage female immigration, largely because it actively encouraged the

emigration of those who were already married. Men who left Spain without their wives faced punishment and were required to send for them within two years if their deceit was uncovered. Unmarried men did not have the same feudal rights or access to power as their married counterparts. As marriage with native women was not common practice, it behooved men to marry before leaving Spain for the colonies.

Colbert desired a strong Quebec, able to stand on its own without financial or military assistance from France. He felt strongly that “it was important in the establishment of a country to sow good seed” (*RAPQ* 1931, 69). Those involved in the program carefully selected the young women, as discussed above, in order to provide mothers for the future generation of French-Canadians. From this philosophy came the plan to send young marriageable women to the colonies, followed by an edict in 1670 in which Colbert required all single men in the colonies to marry, or risk losing hunting rights and other privileges. These measures brought about a number of marriages as well as numerous hasty engagements that were broken off before the wedding was able to take place.

In the first years of the *filles du roi* program, merchants and ship outfitters recruited these women and received ten pounds for their work. In La Rochelle, the Intendant oversaw this duty until 1665, when the French West India Company took over control of the operation. In Dieppe, several important merchants took turns organizing the recruitment of marriageable women for the colonies. As previously mentioned, each woman went through a careful screening process in which she was required to furnish her birth certificate and an affidavit from her priest assuring that she was free to marry.

According to Gagné, several incidences occurred early in the program where it was discovered that a number of the emigrants from France left behind husbands. This was clearly a problematic and costly complication for Intendant Talon that he wished not to see repeated.

Recruitment was heaviest in the Salpêtrière where women would gladly take a chance at the unknown in favor of the harsh conditions in the charity-prison. The *Hôpital Général* was all too eager to supply wives for the settlers from among its residents, for every bed freed was an opportunity for more revenue from another source. Gagné mentions the dealings between the hospital and the organizers of the *filles du roi* program were so steeped in business that at one point tentative plans existed for an exchange of land tracts for the hospital in exchange for the provision of brides from among its inmates. This deal fell through, but it illustrates the importance of this institution to the *filles du roi* initiative. Apart from the Salpêtrière, other charity institutions provided a good number of the prospective brides, and the pastor of the Saint-Suplice parish in Paris was an active recruiter for the program, with forty-six of the *filles du roi* originating from his church community. Once word spread, some women even presented themselves at the docks in Dieppe and La Rochelle, requesting permission to be included in the envoys of recruits. Gagné indicates that authorities granted these women passage as long as they provided the necessary documents and appeared fit for the challenges of life in the colony.

The fact that so many women willingly left their homes and families, if either of those ties remained, speaks highly of the difficulty of their situations. The French did not

look on emigration to Canada with a favorable eye during the era of the *filles du roi*. According to Allan Greer in his work *The People of New France*, “Canada [had] always been regarded as a country at the end of the world,” (Greer 13) by the French of the seventeenth century, and exile to the colony was an abysmal fate. Indeed, a number of the men who emigrated from France were criminals sent to work as part of their punishment. The majority of the rest of the settlers were *engagés* forced to work for three years to repay the government for the cost of their transport to the colony. After the three years were completed, many of the young men chose to return to France rather than continue in Canada. The *filles du roi* program was, in large part, aimed to give these men lasting ties in the colony and encourage their permanent settlement in Quebec.

As we will soon see, emigration was a coveted opportunity for physical freedom for some of the women classified as *filles du roi*. The residents of the Salpêtrière and other charity hospitals were veritable prisoners of those institutions, forced to live in squalor. These inmates often slept with three to five other women in a lice-infested bed and suffocated on putrid air in the confines of their dormitories. Many women would have gladly accepted the uncertain prospects of a harsh life in Canada over the assured misery they endured in France. Even the frigid winters on the St. Lawrence River seemed welcoming compared to the atrocious conditions of the Salpêtrière. While others might have scoffed at the idea of leaving France for the unknown life in the colony, it afforded the residents of the Salpêtrière the chance to marry, raise children, and run a home, which might not have been possible for these women in France.

We must keep in mind that marriage was essential for women to have any sort of social standing during the seventeenth century, and remaining single was uncommon for anyone outside of the clergy. For many, however, marriage was not a certainty in France. In this era before birth control, marriage meant the couple would welcome a baby once every other year until the death of one partner or until the wife reached menopause. This was a serious financial responsibility that the poorest in society could not afford to take on in their teens, or even in their twenties. As Greer explains, the poor farmers often waited until their thirties to marry because of the financial drain of the inevitable brood. The voyage may have permitted a woman to find a husband and settle into a family ten years earlier than she would have done in France. Even the women from wealthier families sometimes had better prospects in Canada. The younger daughters from larger families may have been without dowries, and might not have been able to make an equal alliance (or any at all) in France. Compared to France, marriage was a virtual certainty for any woman in Quebec who desired a husband.

In France, parental control over marriages was far greater than in the colony. Families of consequence often sent their daughters to convents where they would live until the heads of house found suitable husbands for them. As we will see, arranged marriages were also practiced in rural families in order to preserve land holdings and to ensure the future of the family house. Arranged marriages were all but unheard of in Canada, and the fathers of the *filles du roi* were not present to exercise their authority over their daughters. It is unlikely that women anywhere else in the French-speaking world enjoyed so much liberty in their choice of husbands. Men vastly outnumbered

women, and thanks to the edicts of Colbert, they were anxious to take brides. The men of the colony would visit the closely supervised wards of the king, and women were free to choose from among the suitors, rather than the inverse. The women of New France were also known for changing their minds. Many of these women entered into a marriage contract, or even several, before actually marrying one of the Canadian settlers.

The most important motivation for the immigrants to the French colony in Canada was likely the opportunity for social mobility. Gagné indicates that some women left for Canada under the false impression that they would all be granted the title *demoiselle* and receive vast dowries from the king. As mentioned in the previous chapter, large dowries were not the norm for the *filles du roi*, and no titles were bestowed upon them, but the chance for social advancement remained. An orphan girl with no prospects suddenly had her choice of suitors and the means to pursue him. Women from the poorest echelons of society could marry respectable farmers and tradesmen, perhaps even someone more distinguished. The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to an examination of the living conditions of the *filles du roi* in order to understand the changes their lives underwent in the New World.

## II.2 The Residents of the Salpêtrière Charity Hospital

First, it is necessary to point out that the term *hôpital* in the seventeenth century did not uniquely refer to places of medical healing. In reality, the Salpêtrière served as a hospital as well as an orphanage, mental infirmary, and prison. Established by Louis XIV in 1656, the Salpêtrière was located in what is now the 13<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement* of Paris, near the left bank of the Seine. Its purpose was not to heal and rehabilitate these unfortunate

women, but rather to permanently house the vagrant female population in an effort to remove them from the streets of Paris. Sadly, this was not a strategy unique to Louis XIV, but one that was prevalent throughout the larger cities of Europe during this era and before. Indeed, even as early as 1350, the Crown attempted to rid Paris of the poor and the needy.

The vagrant population of Paris did constitute a major problem for the authorities in the seventeenth century. According to his study *Les Femmes opprimées à la Salpêtrière de Paris (1656-1791)*, Jean-Pierre Carrez states that 40,000 of the 300,000 to 400,000 residents of Paris, somewhere between 10 and 13 percent, were indigent. Louis XIV passed an edict on 27 April 1656 that allowed for the captivity of all the homeless population in and around Paris, and the different divisions of the *Hôpital Général* were charged with their care. As Carrez explains, the Salpêtrière was the branch of the *Hôpital Général* reserved almost exclusively for the female population of Paris, with certain children and a handful of couples as the exceptions.

The dormitories became the homes of the poor and sickly of Paris. Only those who suffered from known contagious diseases, such as leprosy, did not find houseroom at the Salpêtrière, but lodged instead at the *Hôtel-Dieu* in an attempt to slow the spread of these terrible maladies. Among the inmates of the Salpêtrière were honest poor women without resources, women afflicted with varying degrees of mental illness, the old and infirm, as well as orphans from a range of social classes. The living conditions inside its walls varied incredibly between the different divisions, the financial means of the

resident, and each woman's general behavior toward the clergy and employees who ran the establishment.

To understand the daily life in the Salpêtrière, we must examine its vast hierarchy. At the top of the echelon was the *Supérieure*, an important state figure who controlled virtually every aspect of the hospital. Madame de Sénarpont was the first to hold this office from the opening of the institution in 1656 until 1681, thus during the epoch of the *filles du roi*. It is important to note that despite the intensely religious atmosphere demanded in the Salpêtrière, the women who held the office of *Supérieure* were laypeople. Carrez states, "...they were not tied by any vow and were only nuns in the title of sister. They were, nevertheless, very attached to the Catholic religion" (Carrez 61, my translation).

The responsibilities of the *Supérieure* were abundant and challenging. She monitored and controlled the numerous inhabitants as well as oversaw the enormous staff the institution required. No one was to enter or leave the Salpêtrière without her knowledge and permission, and she was responsible for running the massive hospital as efficiently as any business. She was there for the residents, as Carrez explains, "... to discipline them, to instruct them, to make them work, and to punish them if needed. She was to battle at every moment against laziness, idleness, impiety, blasphemy, larceny, drunkenness, and debauchery" (Carrez 63). It was a daunting task, but one for which she was well compensated. According to Carrez, she received a salary of 600 pounds per annum, as well as comfortable lodgings and a considerable household staff.



Next in the hierarchy were the thirty-four *officières* who stood as deputies to the *Supérieure*. Like the headmistress, they had no official vow to the Catholic Church. Though one of their most important duties was the religious education of the inhabitants, and they each bore the title ‘sister’, they were not bound to stay through any religious obligation. Carrez asserts that most of the *officières* were between twenty and thirty years of age and either single or widowed with no children. Often the sisters selected these young women from among the prized pupils raised at the Salpêtrière. Carrez states “music, singing, dance, writing, reading, and the catechism were parts of their daily lives” (Carrez 66, my translation) and that often these young *officières* in training were the subject of a good deal of jealousy.

An *officière* in training would go through a trial period of about three months, during which the other sisters judged her on “her dynamism, her authority, and her devotedness” (Carrez 66, my translation). If she were successful, she would raise to the rank of *sous-officière* for a period of two years. After six years of satisfactory service and the blessing of the administration, a lifetime position would be hers. *Officières* were paid 100 pounds a year, and the *sous-officières* received a salary of sixty pounds. These employees enjoyed comfortable quarters and furnishings, but not a great deal of personal liberty. The regulations of the Salpêtrière dictated that these women could have one day per month in Paris with a chaperone to do their personal shopping, and were to return without fail to the Salpêtrière for evening services. The *Supérieure* directly controlled their correspondence in order to ascertain the frequency of the correspondence of her

*officières* with any specific person. Carrez doubts the claim that the *Supérieure* respected the stipulation that the letters should be sent without having been read by her.

Carrez depicts the daily life of an *officière* as laborious and challenging as that of the *Supérieure*. As he describes, "...they must, of course, be responsible for the poor throughout the course of the day, repair their clothing, and instruct them (reading, writing, catechism). They were in constant contact with them from dawn until nightfall" (Carrez 67). In addition to this, they were required to keep detailed inventories in order to help the *Supérieure* with her administrative tasks. There were regular meetings with the *Supérieure* to "expose the problems and needs of the sisters," (Carrez 67) that ensured the peaceful administration of the institution. Above all this, however, were the spiritual duties of the *officières*. Their principal duty was the religious instruction of the inmates. The schedule consecrated a full hour per day for the instruction of basic prayers and catechism both in Latin and French.

In addition to the sisters, there was an immense staff to aid in the running of the Salpêtrière. The staff fell into three main categories; first were those who worked in the immediate vicinity of the inmates such as caretakers for the babies, nurses, and those who directed the women in their work. The next category was comprised of the laundresses who cared for the clothing and linens of the inmates. Lastly, we find those who worked in general service who served in the kitchens, tended the gardens, and performed general maintenance on the buildings. Combined with a few accounting assistants and medical personnel, the total staff of the Salpêtrière was over 1,000 people, according to Carrez.

Add to this over 1,000 archers and guards, and we see the massive workforce needed to run this vast enterprise.

“After the personnel, the prisoners formed the second large category of the population” (Carrez 83, my translation). Carrez’ use of the term “prisoner” is telling. The Salpêtrière was not a voluntary institution where inmates could come and go as they pleased, and certain dormitories, such as *La Force* were indeed outright prisons. According to Gagné, the population of the prisoners of the Salpêtrière numbered near 3,000 in 1680, just after the last contingent of *filles du roi* arrived in Canada. He points out that the Salpêtrière provided a more economical alternative to convents for unfortunate young women.

Though most of Carrez’ demographic information dates from 1721-1791, an examination allows us to get an overview of what the population of the Salpêtrière might have been like during the era of the *filles du roi*. *La Force*, the penal dormitory for criminals, held the largest percentage of the population, approximately 24 percent. Carrez provides the data for the “crimes” committed by the inmates that led to their forced residence in the charity hospital:

Table VII. ‘Crimes’ committed by a sample of the inmates of la Salpêtrière between 1678 and 1712

| <b>Crime Committed</b>           | <b>Number of Convicted Women</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------|
| Debauchery and prostitution      | 133                              | 43.0              |
| Divination and witchcraft        | 27                               | 9.0               |
| Thieving and pillaging           | 17                               | 5.5               |
| Protestantism                    | 13                               | 4.0               |
| Insanity                         | 12                               | 4.0               |
| Blasphemy and immoral speech     | 11                               | 3.5               |
| Vagrancy or begging              | 10                               | 3.0               |
| Imposture or abuse of confidence | 9                                | 3.0               |
| Poisoning and murder             | 7                                | 2.0               |
| Practicing abortions             | 5                                | 2.0               |
| Counterfeiting money             | 3                                | 1.0               |
| Violating banishment             | 2                                | 1.0               |
| Unknown                          | 60                               | 19.0              |
| <b>Total</b>                     | <b>309</b>                       | <b>100.0</b>      |

Source: Carrez, Jean-Pierre. *Les Femmes opprimées à la Salpêtrière de Paris (1656-1791)*. Paris: Connaissances et Savoirs, 2005, p. 98.

In analyzing Carrez’ data, we must look at the largest category, debauchery and prostitution, and remember that the edict allowing for the imprisonment of prostitutes was not passed until 1684. This was, according to Carrez, a likely attempt to slow the spread of syphilis. The chart would include these women in those data, but the percentage of those women who would have been present in the Salpêtrière would have been far lower during the era of the *filles du roi*. Some of these ‘crimes’ such as insanity and Protestantism are not considered crimes by today’s standards, but were punishable offenses at the time. Other crimes, such as murder and thievery were valid infractions, but the authorities saw all these women as equal criminals in the eyes of the law.

Generally, they all suffered the same dreadful living conditions and treatment, regardless of the infraction they committed.

There were multiple methods for imprisoning a woman in the Salpêtrière, such as a court order, transfer from another branch of the *Hôpital Général*, or even a *lettre de cachet*, a “secret letter” issued by the King that served as a royal arrest warrant. Many times the Crown issued these letters at the request of a high-ranking husband or family member who wished to imprison a rebellious or unruly female family member. The most common method of entry, according to Carrez, was the *billet de bureau*. This was a document for the common poor women procured in the office of the *Supérieure* and her accountants that permitted these women to receive houseroom. Carrez states that a woman had to present a baptism certificate that attested to the woman’s age, place of birth, and name as well as an affidavit from her priest affirming her poverty. The fact that a good number of women chose this imprisonment, more or less willingly, shows that the quality of life in the Salpêtrière, however abysmal, was a good deal better than life on the streets of Paris.

Carrez describes daily life in the Salpêtrière as having three main components: religious devotion, mealtimes, and work. Though we have established that nearly every member of the staff had taken no religious vows, piety was a central part of the prisoners’ lives. As Henry Légier-Desgranges asserts, these charity hospitals were “veritable annexes of the Church” (Légier-Desgranges 7, my translation). They sought to enlighten the prisoners and save their souls through Christian charity and constant devotion. Indeed, life in this hospital would not have been very different from life in a convent. As

Carrez illustrates: “Supervised by personnel whose piety was of the first order, the pensioners, the ill, and the prisoners engaged in numerous prayers, meditations, communions and daily confessions which could make one think that they were in a real convent” (Carrez 145, my translation).

Religious instruction played a major role in the daily life at the Salpêtrière from its inception in 1656. As we have seen, the laws of the time prohibited Protestantism or adherence to any sect other than Catholicism. Carrez mentions in several cases that women were held in the Salpêtrière uniquely because they were accused of Protestantism. Until these women converted and showed adequate devotion to the Church of Rome, the Salpêtrière was their permanent home. The strict religious atmosphere dictated a rigid schedule of activities for all inhabitants of the hospital for each moment of the day down to the quarter-hour from 5:15 in the morning until the *officières* retired to their rooms at 10:00 in the evening. The women were taught to be pious, and above all, obedient. It was evident, in Carrez’ opinion, that medical care was secondary to spiritual healing and guidance.

The *officières* regimented every aspect of life in the Salpêtrière, and mealtimes were no exception. The cuisine of the Salpêtrière fell short of the standards of the time, both in quality and quantity. According to Gagné, the diet in the Salpêtrière “furnished 1,737 to 1,943 daily calories instead of the required 2,500 and was lacking in calcium and vitamins A, C and D as well as other essential nutrients” (Gagné 24). Carrez asserts, however, that some women ate very well in the confines of the dormitories. If a pensioner

had a family that could furnish an annual sum, her diet was far more rich and abundant. Those who lived on the graces of the Crown were not so fortunate.

Carrez states that the base ration of food consisted of one pound of meat for four people, which came in the form of a mug of broth each day as well as five portions of bread. On non-fast days, the menu also included a small portion of peas or a one-ounce serving each of Norman butter and gruyère cheese. In comparison, the ecclesiastic staff received five portions of white bread, a pound of meat, a liter of wine. In addition to this, they received a small entrée on Thursdays and Sundays. Friday and Saturday menus included fish, vegetables and salads. Fruit was eaten when the gardens produced it, and Lenten menus included fish, rice, beans, and other similar foods. Women whose families paid pensions generally received meals commensurate with the amount of their annual gift to the hospital. Those who paid the highest pensions (generally 600 pounds) had meals nearly as rich and plentiful as the staff.

Annual gifts to the hospital resulted in more than just better and more abundant food. Those whose families or husbands paid the vast sum of 600 pounds per annum had lodgings in private, furnished rooms complete with fireplaces and an ample supply of firewood and candles, according to Carrez. The lowest pensioners, paying on average 60 pounds a year enjoyed slightly better food, but still shared a bed with three to five other women. It took a minimum pension of 120 pounds to have a private bed if the inmate supplied the furniture herself and 150 if she could not. Carrez states that some particularly ill women slept in private beds without payment, but this was not frequent.

Some might wonder if this system of pensions was elitist and cruel, but these payments did allow the hospital to house more women who were without any resources.

The final constant of life in the Salpêtrière was work. All residents capable of labor performed a useful and profitable task of some variety in order to help pay the cost of their lodgings and as a means of earning a small amount of pocket money. The edict of 1656 that emptied the streets of Paris of the vagrant population “turned the *Hôpital Général* into a veritable center of professional training” (Carrez 108, my translation). The belief was that labor was the ultimate weapon against vice and idleness, and was a chief virtue instilled in the prisoners. Though this forced labor was exploitation in many ways, the women learned important skills that made them excellent bridal candidates even for lower nobility and wealthy merchants, as mentioned in an earlier citation by Douville and Casanova. No doubt, the skills acquired by the *filles du roi* in the Salpêtrière served them well in the New World.

The length of stay in the charity hospital varied from woman to woman, and based on the reason for her enclosure in the institution. Some women without resources had few options for leaving the Salpêtrière, and travel to the colony as a prospective bride became an attractive option. In the case of immigration to the Antilles, Madagascar, and the Louisiana region, Carrez states that the administration was all too happy to use this opportunity to rid itself of some of its more troublesome residents. This is likely not the case for Canada, however, as ‘debauched’ women were not yet a major facet of the population of the hospital, and the conduct of the women once in Canada was not the subject of major contention despite rumors to the contrary.



In the previous chapter, we saw that, according to Landry, 327 of the 770 *filles du roi*, about 42 percent, came from the region of Paris. It is unlikely that all the women from the area near Paris who participated in the program resided in the Salpêtrière, which means that at best, the emigrants from the Salpêtrière to Canada represented less than ten percent of the approximately 3,000 inmates of the hospital. The *filles du roi* were, in all probability, a collection of the women meeting the needs of the king, some wealthy pensioners, others completely under the protection of the *Hôtel Général*, who sought in Canada the freedoms that France denied them.

### II.3 The *Filles du Roi* of Rural Origin

Though the court of Louis XIV was known for being nomadic during the era of the *filles du roi*, the people of the countryside were exactly the opposite. Pierre Goubert describes the farmers and country dwellers as being "...very sedentary due to their physical attachment to the land of their birth" (Goubert 1994, 37, my translation). The *filles du roi* who grew up on farms likely never travelled far from the homes where they were born. For the small farmer, the land was life, and earning a living from it was no easy task. Those who farmed the land submitted to the authority of a *seigneur* who could impose taxes and claim rights over the farmers. According to Goubert's study *Les Paysans Français au XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, independent farming was an extreme rarity during the epoch of the *filles du roi*. In 1692, less than twenty years after the last envoy of *filles du roi*, Louis XIV passed an edict making him the *seigneur* over any independently run lands. "No land without a lord" (Goubert 38, 1994, my translation) was his edict; his desire was no doubt to keep control over these small vestiges of free lands.

For the country-dwelling residents of France, marriage was primarily a holy sacrament. It was in the middle of the seventeenth century that the Catholic Church succeeded in formalizing many of the customs concerning marriage in the rural regions of France. Priests posted banns for three consecutive weeks before performing marriages in order to ensure that both parties were free to marry. First cousins wishing to marry had to petition the church and received a dispensation for a fee. It was during this time, Goubert states, that the church mandated that all couples have parental consent before marriage even after reaching the age of majority, which was twenty-five years. The approval of the bride's and groom's fathers was obligatory, and as Goubert argues, likely indicated that the parents arranged a good number of marriages.

Most rural people during this time chose a potential spouse from their own parish. Exceptions, according to Goubert, were those who lived in very small parishes and wealthier farmers and artisans who broadened their search to find a bride of similar situation and financial means. Goubert points out that finding a marriage partner of similar age and status was vitally important during this era. As he states, "any disproportionate union, not only of age, but of condition, shocked, provoked mockery, derision, and sometimes cruelty" (Goubert 1994, 89, my translation). Knowing this, the choices for perspective spouses would have been very limited in many cases, making Canada an attractive option for many women from small parishes.

Brides often waited until their mid-twenties before entering into a union, and grooms were often aged twenty-seven years or more before taking a wife. Goubert asserts that this lateness in marriage was generally due to socioeconomic factors and parental

influence. Few remained unmarried past the age of thirty, though as we stated before, many poorer farmers were forced to wait. Those who did not marry were generally servants, those who suffered from deformities, and those who did not settle due to migrant work and similar situations. Families of the French countryside closely supervised their daughters, rarely permitting them to leave their homes and farms. The result of this caution was that only one to two percent of all births were illegitimate and only five to ten percent of children at most were conceived before marriage. Women bore the brunt of the shame in these instances, and risked ostracism from their family and the village if a child were born out of wedlock. Chastity was not just a moral convention; it was a social necessity of the time.

The term “family” was not a simple concept, even in the 1600s. Goubert describes two common family paradigms during the era of the *filles du roi*: the extended family and the nuclear family. The extended family included most anyone connected by family ties such as parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, their spouses and children, aunts, uncles, and so on. This larger family group might reunite for festivities such as marriages, baptisms, Christmas, and other holy days. There might be gatherings as well for funerals, harvests, and major undertakings on the various family farms. The more basic nuclear family consisted of a married couple, their children, occasionally an elderly parent, and very rarely a single sibling. These convenient definitions bear a strong resemblance to the definition of the “traditional” family unit we see today. To be sure, the modern concept of family is remarkably complex, but Goubert shows us that the seventeenth century familial structure was, in many cases, far from simple.

Aside from agriculture, Goubert points out; other employment was available outside the city walls. Merchants had learned that a willing and inexpensive workforce was available in the country. In order to reduce their expenses, large merchants would hire men and women from the country to produce wool, linen, and other textiles to be sold in the cities. This saved the merchants a good deal of money, as guilds and corporations caused sharp increases in the price of labor. The country worker also found employment and income during winter months that would otherwise have been devoid of both.

There existed, however, a world in between the toils of the tenant farmers and day workers and the ease and privilege of their lords. In a village of any size, there were often a handful of citizens who attained a comfort in life beyond that of most of their neighbors. Goubert gives the examples of skilled laborers such as the innkeeper, miller, schoolmaster, cooper, wheelwright, and saddler as being those with a higher quality of life. In addition, a number of successful farmers and artisans found financial stability during these times as well. The lives of these skilled workers were not the lives of luxury found in the lordly manors, but were likely a vast deal more comfortable than the poorer farmers and laborers. In any of these homes, comfortable or otherwise, a surplus of daughters would have been a drain on finances. It is not surprising that a healthy number of the *filles du roi* came from the hard-working homes of the French countryside.

#### II.4 The *Filles du Roi* of the Nobility and Upper Bourgeoisie

Not all the *filles du roi* toiled on the family farms or suffered as captives of the Salpêtrière. Some of these women, approximately sixty, came from some of the best

society of seventeenth-century France. During the reign of Louis XIV, however, it must be understood that not all nobles stood on equal footing. The complex social hierarchy of the time categorized the nobility into two main classes. The nobles from the oldest families and with the most family connection and fortune were the “*grande robe*,” while those who gained nobility, perhaps through military service or commerce, were the “*petite robe*.” The highest classes in France guarded their position in society jealously, especially from the middling classes and ‘lesser’ nobles. In that era, ancestry counted for far more than merit or accomplishment. Indeed, nobles depended on their family lineage to an enormous degree. In his work *La Vie Quotidienne de la Noblesse Française aux XVI<sup>e</sup> et XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles* Jean-Marie Constant asserts, “for the gentleman, family lineage was simultaneously a support and a necessity for driving his career” (Constant 148, my translation).

Among the nobility, marriages were familial alliances, for financial and sometimes professional gain. The personal feelings of the couple bore little weight on the outcomes. Young noblemen had a great deal more freedom in their marriage and occupation than did their female counterparts. Though family pressure upon young gentlemen brought about many marriages, the final decision was often in his hands, and not those of the prospective bride. Wilhelm states that it was rare for a woman of notable parentage to marry with a bourgeois for noble families sought to preserve a noble name. It was not nearly as problematic for a noble man to marry a bourgeois of sufficient quality, so long as she was in possession of a considerable dowry. Constant explains that “marriage [was] an essential element of the social strategy of the noble family for

perpetuating the name, conserving prestige and the power of the house, and if possible, to increase it” (Constant 132). As stated previously, this liberty of choice belonged to women as well as men, perhaps even more so, in the colonies.

The image of the noble classes constructing and residing in grand *châteaux* provides an almost irresistible mental image. Constant, however, points out that few nobles had the means to build or maintain a building of such magnitude. As an illustration, Constant provides the example of the region of Beauce. In this area containing fifty-four *seigneuries*, only thirteen of these territories housed *châteaux*. Most lords resided in smaller stone manors, which were decidedly less elegant than the *châteaux*, though a world apart in luxury from the homes of the tenants over whom they presided. In reality, many of these lords would have spent little time in their manors in the remote provinces. The most influential “*grande robe*” sought to spend as much time at court as possible. It was through days spent in idle chat and nights spent dancing in marble halls that nobles sought favor from the sovereign. Though nobles hailed from every corner of the country, all who wished to maintain status during the reign of Louis XIV needed to make frequent appearances at court. Pierre Goubert illustrates this in his work *Splendeurs et Misères du XVII<sup>e</sup> Siècle* in stating “...it was necessary to be at court to obtain ‘graces’” (Goubert 2005, 566, my translation).

It is unlikely that many of the *filles du roi* belonged to this elite echelon of society. The small number who did, likely came from very large families where dowries for a youngest daughter were not substantial enough to make an alliance of importance to the family. Agreeing to send a daughter to marry an officer or principal citizen of Quebec

might have served to gain a noble family some standing at court and permitted the daughter to marry better than if she had stayed in France. Of the sixty *filles du roi* who Landry classifies as having “notable” parentage, it is likely that most, if not all, came from newly ennobled families and the upper bourgeoisie.

Those of the lesser nobility and from the upper ranks of the middle classes did enjoy more social freedoms and mobility than those from the highest rung of society, but had a distinctly less prestigious position in society. While their lives held vast comforts balanced with fewer social restraints, they lacked an old family name and the prestige that came with it. Without these credentials, the newly ennobled never found welcome into the highest stratum of Parisian culture. Indeed, seventeenth-century Paris was a place where lineage and connections often counted for more than ability and merit. These lesser nobles might have earned favor and fortune through commerce, military service, or a fortunate marriage; indeed sometimes, their fortunes rivaled or exceeded those of the courtiers. However, any aspiration of this “*petite robe*” to the most privileged class, as Wilhelm argues, met with great consternation from the old families. It is likely that the *filles du roi* of notable parentage grew in the shadow of the courtiers and upper nobility; and without old family names and connections at court, many of these immigrants had little hope of social ascension. Canada may have represented a forum for these women to make grand leaps in their social standing.

CHAPTER III  
THE *FILLES DU ROI* IN CANADA: FROM IMMIGRANTS TO FOUNDING  
MOTHERS

Once a *fille du roi* made the decision to embark on the voyage to the New World, she would endure, as Gagné describes, the voyage from her hometown to either Dieppe or La Rochelle, which might take as long as two weeks. Landry's data indicate that of the 566 departures that have existing documentation, 443 of the *filles du roi* travelled from Dieppe, and the other 123 from La Rochelle. The journey from the port cities to New France took two months, and was grueling even for the most steadfast of the voyagers. When weather was poor, the passengers found themselves trapped in the hold with the smells of the livestock, waste, and seasickness. Even at best, sanitation was poor, and disease ran a deadly course on the ships. As Gagné illustrates, dysentery, scurvy, boils, and various fevers plagued many voyagers. It is thought that as many as ten percent of passengers did not survive the crossing from France to Canada, which would translate, according to Gagné, into the loss of 60 would-be *filles du roi*.

Add to this traumatic voyage, the possibility that in 1667 Catherine-Françoise Desnoyers, the chaperone sent to protect twenty of the *filles du roi*, stole half the contents from their trousseaux before departing from Dieppe, and the journey proved to be a great risk for the brave women who departed France. Despite the complaints against Mademoiselle Desnoyers and some of the clerks from the French West India Company, Gagné



states that the administration cared less for their trouble, and more about controlling the damage of the accusations. From that time, Colbert and his men selected chaperones with more care, and no similar exploitation appears in the records. Once the arduous voyage ended, a new life awaited the 770 *filles du roi* as they stepped foot onto Canadian soil. This chapter serves to illustrate the living conditions the *filles du roi* experienced in the colony, and the steps they took to transform themselves from daughters of the king to the founding mothers of the French-Canadian nation.

### III.1 The Arrival and Integration of the *Filles du Roi*

The *filles du roi* spent as little as a few weeks or as long as several years in Quebec before choosing a husband from among the settlers. The majority of the immigrants had no considerable financial resources, and therefore depended on the colonial government to provide temporary housing while the young men paid court to the new arrivals. This task fell to the religious communities: namely, the *Congrégation de Notre-Dame* under the supervision of Mother Marguerite Bourgeoys in the region of Montreal and the Ursuline sisters of Quebec City led by Marie de l'Incarnation. Though brief in many cases, this preliminary period in the colony proved an important experience for the *filles du roi* before they entered into life in the colony as brides. Dumas' study shows that seventy percent of the *filles du roi* originally settled in Quebec City, eighteen percent in Montreal, and twelve percent in Trois-Rivières. We will examine the boarding houses established in Montreal and Quebec in order to understand the living conditions these young women experienced upon their arrival in the colony.

In her work, *La Métairie de Marguerite Bourgeoys*, Sister Émilia Chicoine describes in detail the living conditions experienced by the *filles du roi* and those in service with Marguerite Bourgeoys. Prior to 1668, the *filles du roi* and the sisters who worked with Mother Bourgeoys lived in a stable converted into a rudimentary school and dormitory. It was certainly no life of comfort, but the building served its purpose both as a school for local girls as well as lodgings for the sisters and marriageable immigrants for a decade. When the numbers of the *filles du roi* increased and the population grew, the need for a larger establishment became apparent. Marguerite Bourgeoys had the means in 1668 to purchase a small farm and a relatively spacious house to serve the needs of her order more adequately.

Sister Catherine Crolo presided over the running of the farm and closely supervised the king's charges until their marriages. Though the *Maison Saint-Gabriel* might seem lacking in comfort to the modern observer, life in the house likely seemed luxurious to many of the *filles du roi*. The ground floor of the house contained a large kitchen and a community room where the young men of the community could come to meet prospective brides under the watchful eyes of the sisters. Each of these rooms contained a large fireplace for cooking and warmth that would have been exceedingly inviting in the bitter Canadian winter, but stifling in the summer months. On warm days, cooking was often done out of doors in smaller cauldrons in order to avoid excessively raising the temperatures inside the house. Upstairs, the women slept in a common dormitory stocked with straw mattresses placed directly on the floor.

During the day, a large table with narrow benches in the middle of the dormitory served as their washstand, writing desk, and sewing table. The farmhouse served as a school to the local girls and as a place for the future brides of Canada to learn the skills necessary to run a household. According to Chicoine, the *Congrégation de Notre-Dame* was in the business of lodging and training prospective wives from France even before the *fille du roi* program began in 1663. These *filles à marier*, who arrived in Canada by their own means or with assistance from a private party, needed the same hospitality and education as the *filles du roi*. Moreover, the sisters under the direction of Marguerite Bourgeoys continued to welcome brides from France into the *Maison Saint-Gabriel* after the king withdrew his attention and finances from the colony.

The French immigrants were not the only beneficiaries of the sisters' generosity and expertise. Sister Chicoine refers to the *Maison Saint-Gabriel* as "the first school of homemaking in America," (Chicoine 37, my translation) and records indicate that many of the families near Montreal benefited from the presence of Mother Bourgeoys and her colleagues. Sister Crolo and her colleagues offered free courses to the local women in order to prepare them for their future lives. As Chicoine states, Marguerite Bourgeoys had her objective clearly in mind: "to pluck the young girls, boarders and schoolgirls alike, from idleness, and above all to prepare them for their role as mistresses of their houses" (Chicoine 38, my translation). Marguerite Bourgeoys and the others also worked to provide assistance for young mothers after they left the residence and schoolroom. Childbirth was no easy business in the seventeenth century, and the sisters' presence and help would have been a welcome aid to inexperienced mothers. There was certainly no

overabundance of medical staff in the colony, and the sisters' knowledge likely eased many births.

Like those who ran the Salpêtrière in Paris, the sisters believed that work was a miracle cure against dissipation and laziness. The residents of the *Maison Saint-Gabriel* ran all but the most exigent tasks on the farm from tending animals to cooking and sewing for the household. The diet of the house, while not varied, was abundant. As was the case in France, the main staples of the diet at the *Maison Saint-Gabriel* were bread and soup. The baking of bread for such a large household was a major undertaking, requiring a large wooden churn that served to knead the massive batches of dough that would provide the two to three pounds of bread each resident would consume in a day. Because the farm did not need to sell its crops for taxes and fees, the sisters and the *filles du roi* had a far superior nutrition than many of their French counterparts. Rather than carting their precious vegetables to market, the women of the *Maison Saint-Gabriel* added them to their hearty daily soup.

Due to the menace of the Iroquois nation, the residents of French Canada could not count on hunting as a reliable means of supplementing their diet. Farms depended on domesticated livestock for their meat supply, while smoked eel and salted pork were important elements of Canadian cuisine in the winter months. In the spring and summer, wild fruits added valuable nutrients to the diet of the young women of the *Maison Saint-Gabriel*, but this sometimes posed the same risks as hunting when the native population became bellicose. Later in this chapter, we will examine how relations with the Iroquois affected the daily lives of the colonists.

In Quebec City, the *filles du roi* resided with the Ursuline nuns in the home of Madame Madeleine de La Peltrie, a widowed noblewoman of great charity from Caen who devoted a great deal of energy to Christian causes. Like the sisters in Montreal, the Ursulines sought to provide the young women with a strong, basic education before they left their guidance. According to Françoise Deroy-Pineau's work, *Marie de l'Incarnation: Marie Gruyart, Femme d'Affaires, mystique, Mère de la Nouvelle-France, Tours 1599-Québec 1672*, the sisters took prodigious care of their charges. Deroy-Pineau explains that because of the disproportionate number of men to women, the sisters felt that they and the immigrants were at risk of rape and violence from the male settlers at the slightest lapse of supervision. Such constant attention was certainly a demanding task for the sisters, and as Marie de l'Incarnation herself attests in her correspondence, "thirty girls give us more work in the dormitory than sixty in France" (Incarnation 802, my translation).

Aside from their critical duties as supervisors of the *filles du roi*, the sisters worked to instruct the women of Quebec City to read, write, and perform arithmetic in addition to religious and domestic training. The school here, like the one in Montreal, was not only open to the immigrants from France, but to the established women of the colony as well as the native girls. The attestations of historians indicate that these two religious organizations were of primary importance not only in the settlement of the *filles du roi*, but also in providing comfort and protection for all women in the colony.

### III.2 Courtship and Marriage of the *Filles du Roi*

Shortly after their arrival in the New World, the *filles du roi* set out on their primary objective: to secure a husband. The rituals of courtship and marriage differed in many ways for the *filles du roi* in comparison to other women of their era. The religious communities that housed the *filles du roi* closely supervised their courtships with the male settlers. According to Dumas, the men of the colony visited the immigrants during three predetermined days out of the week under the close supervision of the religious communities that housed them as well as the *Intendant* or one of his deputies.

Though the sisters and the colonial government took prodigious care of the king's charges, this was not the same as a parental authority. The result was an unprecedented amount of marital freedom for the *filles du roi*. We saw that arranged marriages were relatively common among the upper and middle classes in France, but the *filles du roi* had no parents present to broker their marriages. According to Marie de l'Incarnation, this was a wide inquiry because "those who were not at all settled suffered a great deal before they found comfort" (Incarnation 862, my translation). The young women depended on the advice of the sisters and their new friends in the colony for guidance and, as Dumas states, changes of heart were frequent. Dumas explains, "the visits to these girls by the colonists of the country had the defect of being too brief and obligated the lovers to go back on a first choice, or even a second, before deciding definitively" (Dumas 38, my translation).

In his book, *Séduction, Amour, et Mariages en Nouvelle-France*, André Lachance depicts the image of the perfect bride held by the men of France and Canada during the

seventeenth century. White skin and thick, long flowing blonde hair, as well as red lips and cheeks and dark eyebrows were all marks of beauty. In Anne Hébert's novel *Le Premier Jardin* she promotes a common belief about the *filles du roi*, nearly imitating the Baron de la Hontan word for word, in stating, "the fattest ones were chosen first, during the course of brief visits to the house lent for this purpose by Madame de la Peltrie. It was better for them to be fleshy in order to resist the rigors of the climate" (Hebert 97, my translation). The basic premise is true; the colonists of the era desired heavier women for the practical reason that they would better survive the harsh Canadian winter. Lachance explains further that fleshy women were not only practical for the climate, but also fashionable for the time. "Skinniness became," Lachance states, "synonymous with ugliness, poor health, and often poverty" (Lachance 44, my translation). The difficulty with Hébert and La Hontan's statements is that they accord too much power of choice to the male colonists. The reality is that single women represented such a feeble minority that the power of choice rested in the hands of these emancipated women, and not the men who courted them. The first question a woman asked her potential suitor was "have you built a home upon your land?"

Despite the choices these young women had, the *filles du roi* generally did not wait long to fulfill their obligation to the Crown and take husbands. These data show unequivocally that the vast majority of the *filles du roi* married within six months of their arrival in Canada, with only three percent waiting longer than sixteen months to marry. It was more likely for one of these immigrants to marry within a month of her arrival than to wait longer than a year. In an era and culture where divorce was not a viable option, it

might seem surprising that so many women entered into marriage so quickly after arrival in the colonies. If we remember Colbert's edict of 1670 requiring all single men to marry within two weeks of the arrival of the *filles du roi*, or else face severe financial hardships, we can understand that many of these men may have been desperate to persuade one of the immigrants into a hasty marriage. The numbers indicate, however, that most women did at least wait a few months before marriage, rather than the two weeks that Colbert insisted on.

According to Landry, all but 32 of the 770 *filles du roi*, or about four percent, entered into a marriage in Canada. As the primary purpose for sending these women was to establish French-Canadian families, it is not surprising that so few of the immigrants remained unmarried or returned to France before marriage. We saw in the previous chapter that French brides were generally in their mid-twenties, and the same was true of their Canadian counterparts. Landry provides data that illustrate the distribution of the ages of the *filles du roi* and their husbands, also taking into account their status as widows and widowers. Historical records indicate that the *filles du roi* were significantly younger than their husbands, by generally a margin of close to five years. We also notice that, understandably, widowed colonists and *filles du roi* were older than first-time brides and grooms. Landry also explains that while socioeconomic status had little bearing on the average marriage age of the *filles du roi*, the average age of their husbands was far less than the average if they came from the noble classes. The average marriage age for the husband of a *fille du roi* was between 27.1 and 27.9 years for all professions, but 24.2 years was the average marriage age for young noblemen who courted the *filles du roi*.



This stands to reason, as these young men had the resources to marry earlier and support large families.

Interestingly, we also see the smallest difference in the marriage ages of those couples originating from the uppermost social stratum and the lowest. The average age difference between noble spouses was 1.7 years, and only 1.3 years for those coming from the most “humble” professions. Other social groups had average age differences ranging from 3.9 to 4.8 years. Of course, there were a number of couples who deviated greatly from these averages. On the extreme, Landry mentions one immigrant who married a settler thirty-two years her senior, and another who married a man thirty-six years her junior. Such disparity in age would have invoked censure in France, but the dearth of marriageable women led to a society that accepted such lopsided unions.

It is certain that the *filles du roi* enjoyed a great deal more freedom in their choice of husband than did many other women of the time. Once entered into these unions, however, these immigrants were subject to the marital traditions of the time like the rest of the women in France and Canada. During the seventeenth century, the husband had sovereign control over his wife, and had the right to correct her behavior as he saw fit. Lachance explains that the Canadian society had an obvious double standard regarding marital infidelity. The church condemned infidelity in both partners as an act of utmost immorality, but socially, male dalliances were seen as a normal act of healthy men. According to Lachance, all the man had to do was prove a measure of discretion in his affairs, show that he had not spent an excessive amount of money on his mistress, and do what he could not to cause too much domestic unrest with his legal wife and family. A

good wife closed her eyes to her husband's misconduct in order to preserve peace in her home. Though female infidelity would become more tolerated in the eighteenth century, women who were found being unfaithful to their husbands faced strict legal and social consequences.

Sergine Desjardins describes such a situation in her historical novel *Marie Major* that depicts the life of her ancestor, the title character. Marie was a *fille du roi* who arrived in the colony in 1668. Based on her research, Desjardins found that Marie was imprisoned in the Salpêtrière due to a *lettre de cachet* requested by family members because she refused to marry the man of their choice. The choice for Marie was prison or emigration. Marie, like many others, chose the latter. Once in Canada, Marie married Antoine Roy dit Desjardins who, after a time, entered into an extramarital relationship with Anne Talua. Once Anne's husband, Julien, suspects the affair, he surprises the couple in the midst of one of their trysts, and fatally shoots Antoine. Julien is imprisoned for a short time and fined for his crime of passion. Anne is banished from Quebec, her sentence reduced from public flogging, imprisonment, and other punishments due to her husband's violent nature. In our modern society, we cannot imagine that the spouse of a murdered man who was caught in the act of cheating with another woman would be held culpable, but this was not the case for Marie Major. A wife was supposed to lead her husband away from the temptation of other women, and she was fined excessively and her family treated as outcasts by the rest of society. Without explicitly stating her name, the priest ended Marie's career as a midwife during a sermon when he urged the congregation that a midwife should lead a life of model virtue. Her young son Pierre also

shared in his father's disgrace by association. Though he was only a child, many would hesitate to do business with him in the future because of his father's wrongdoing.

For years, Marie struggled to raise her son on her own. Neighbors and friends helped in ut most discretion, or else face a rebuke for aiding such a woman. For the rest of her life, Marie lived under a pseudonym, as did her son for many years. Nonetheless, the, young Pierre grew to enjoy a life of some prosperity, but because of her husband's faithlessness, Marie led a tarnished life. Though this example is certainly an extreme case, we can see that despite the liberty of choice enjoyed by the *filles du roi*, not all unions were happy ones. Though certainly, many women enjoyed satisfying partnerships, love was viewed as a luxury in marriage during the seventeenth century.

### III.3 The Challenges of Childbirth in New France

Of all the activities a woman could undertake in the seventeenth century, none was so dangerous as childbirth. The *filles du roi*, whose main purpose was to populate the colony, found themselves encouraged to undertake this perilous task as soon as possible after marriage. Landry's data show that the arrival of these women caused an expectedly sharp increase in the French-Canadian birthrate in that era. From Landry's data we can draw several interesting conclusions about childbirth and the *filles du roi*. Primarily, we see that the key years for childbirth for these women were between 1669 and 1685, a span of just over fifteen years, during which 71 percent of the 4459 of these children were born. It is not until 1688 that the birth rate for these immigrants begins to decline steadily; with the last child being born to a *fille du roi* nearly forty years after the first envoy of marriageable women sent from France. This would mean the woman who gave

birth to the last child of a *fille du roi* had lived in the colony for at least twenty-nine years, if not longer.

Even more remarkable is the percentage of the children born to the *filles du roi* whose parents chose to have them baptized into the Catholic Church. Nearly eighty-eight percent of these children underwent this important religious rite. Knowing that the child mortality rate was high, we can understand why parents were so eager to have their local priests welcome their children into the Catholic faith. The people of New France were very religious people, and adhered to the belief that unbaptized children could not enter heaven. Since many of these children would never grow to adulthood, parents saw this ritual as a necessary act in preserving their infants' souls from torment. Landry's data indicate that parents preferred to have their children baptized on Sundays. This makes good sense both for practical and religious reasons. First, the families would already be attending Mass on Sunday, and it was a day of rest. By baptizing babies on the Sabbath, they could save a trip to the church and avoid missing a day of much needed labor. Secondly, the Sabbath is the holiest day of the week, and devout parents would have thought a baptism on this day to be especially fortuitous for their child.

Having said this, parents waited as short a time as possible to have these fragile babies blessed by the local priest. Baptismal records clearly show that the parents from urban areas (Quebec City, Montreal, and Trois-Rivières) had their children baptized considerably sooner than their rural counterparts did. Despite the fact that children born in rural areas generally waited twice as long to be baptized than the children born in Quebec City, Montreal, or Trois-Rivières, the records of the more than 3,100 children

that Landry was able to study seem to show that very few of these children waited longer than two days to receive the sacrament. We can also see that, regardless of the area where children were born, those who entered the world mid-week tended to wait longer for their baptisms.

Only three to six percent of the *filles du roi* who entered into marriages in Canada did not have at least one child with their husbands. Due to difficulties in pregnancy and childbirth, some women became sterile, but only a small fraction remained childless. Landry's study provides us with an illustration of the typical family size that would have been expected of the *filles du roi* and the length of the marriage that produced these children. As we might have expected, longer marriages had the benefit of producing more children. Landry establishes the average length of these marriages at 23.5 years, and that most families would expect to have five or more children during the course of that marriage. The profession of the father had some bearing on the number of children born, but there is not a vast difference. Fathers of noble background, tradesmen, and farmers had an average of 5.3 to 5.6 children with marriages lasting between 23.7 and 26.6 years. Men with less distinguished careers and those of undetermined social background, however, had an average of 2.7 to 3.2 children and were married for an average of 22.3 years in the case of the less distinguished trades and only 13.9 years for those men of undetermined social rank.

For the three superior social ranks delineated by Landry—nobles, tradesmen, and established farmers—it is not astonishing that the differences are slight in the average number of children and the average length of marriages. These groups generally had the

means to feed their families and to provide for their basic needs. Furthermore, these groups often would have followed the teachings of the Catholic Church concerning childbirth in order to preserve their social status. The Church advocated for families to welcome as many children as they physically could into the world. Women were encouraged to hire wet nurses for their infants, for lactating women are generally infertile. It was also thought that if a man “approached” his wife while she was lactating, the milk would spoil and potentially harm the child.

Women of the lower social strata could not afford the luxury of a wet nurse for their babies, and often performed this service for their wealthier counterparts, which explains their significantly smaller families. These poorer members of society would have suffered from a shortage of food, thus poorer health, which led to fewer children, a shorter life span, and commensurately shorter marriages. Moreover, the numbers for the lower classes run the risk of being less accurate than those for the more fortunate ones. Landry’s numbers are based on parish records, and some of the lower social ranks might not have had the means, financial and otherwise, to have their children baptized or registered with the local parish. Interestingly, there is no noticeable difference, according to Landry, in the average number of children born to rural and urban families. One might think that rural families would be more apt to produce large families in order to provide a workforce for the family land, but in the era before effective birth control was available and accepted, families had little control over the number of children they would have.

We do see a very strong correlation between the age of the bride at marriage and the number of children she could expect to have. Landry’s data paint a very clear picture

that shows that the younger a bride was on her wedding day, the more children she was likely to bring into the world. Landry's findings stand to reason. The younger a woman was, the better chances she had of enjoying a longer marriage, and the better able she would be to withstand the difficulties of childbirth. Interestingly, the number of childless families did not fluctuate all that much between the age groups, especially after the age of twenty-five. There was roughly the same number of childless families in the 25-29 year age group as there was in the 40-44 year group. Even women who married in their forties had a better than fifty percent chance of having children, two of these families having four children—close to the average for the *filles du roi* of any age.

Greer points out that childbirth was almost entirely the province of women. Midwives and female family members presided over the births of most children, with male family members only interceding in an emergency. The Church demanded that midwives be of upstanding moral quality and required each midwife to take an oath of office, though women in rural areas often practiced without Church sanction. Priests condemned the use of any pain-relief for the birthing mother, as the Church believed that the pain of labor was woman's price for original sin, and that the pain was a means by which humans purified their souls. People of New France considered even basic hygiene dangerous for the mother and newborn child, and death from infection was not uncommon. As Greer states, it was not until the end of the French regime that a band of professional, trained midwives were established in the cities in New France, and it was not until after the British conquest that male physicians took an active role in delivering babies in Quebec.

#### III.4 The Households of the *Filles du Roi*

As we can well imagine, establishing a household in New France was no easy task in either the wilderness or the settlements. Houses were generally small, and according to Louise Dechêne's work, *Habitants et marchands de Montréal au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, were made almost exclusively of wood in Montreal until the mid-eighteenth century, though the number of stone homes was significantly higher in the suburbs. Due to fire concerns, the city of Quebec became more proactive in requiring homeowners and shopkeepers to build structures from stone. Bernard Audet's text *Avoir feu et lieu dans l'Île d'Orléans* illustrates that many of these homes were smaller than two-hundred square feet, with only a small fraction of the homes on this rural island being built of stone.

Peter Moogk's work *Building a House in New France* describes in detail the process that colonists underwent to establish themselves as homeowners in the fledgling cities and villages. The colonial government took city planning very seriously, and went to great measures to make sure that the cities were both aesthetically pleasing and readily defensible. The widths of streets were closely monitored, and outside of the lower town in Quebec City, the roads were generally wide and spacious. City planners attempted to create compact cities and towns that the military could easily protect from invasion. This met with moderate success in the cities, where lawmakers tried to reduce the number of vacant lots by requiring the purchaser to construct a stone home within a year. These measures, despite Talon's greatest efforts, were not nearly as effective in the rural areas.



Settlers rejected the compact villages so desired by the government, favoring larger plots of arable land.

Rural homes were made largely of wood, which stands to good reason, according to Moogk, as timber could be found in great abundance. Toward the end of the seventeenth century, stone homes became increasingly popular in the cities. The risk of fire led to many urban homes being reconstructed from sturdier, more fire-resistant materials. In the countryside especially, we can see French influence on the architecture. Many of these homes strongly resemble the farmhouses of Normandy and Brittany, which might have provided a measure of comfort for the displaced *filles du roi*. Certain changes had to be made to the design of these homes, however, in order to accommodate for the vast difference between the two climates. Houses that had higher foundations, for example, stayed warmer in the winter, which was undoubtedly a most desirable trait in the Canadian climes.

The majority of the *filles du roi* would have spent much of their time preparing food for their families. As many of the families were large, and fortunes generally were not, this was not an easy undertaking. Marie de l'Incarnation described the difficulties of the founding families in saying:

...this country is rich...vegetables and other sorts of grains grow in abundance: the land is wheat land. The more we find forest, the more fertile and abundant [the soil] is... Nevertheless, this abundance does not prevent there from being a good number of poor people here; and the reason is that when a family takes over a homestead, it takes them two or three years before they have enough to eat, without even mentioning clothes, furniture, and the infinite number of little things needed to maintain a home (Incarnation 828, my translation).

As was the case in France, bread was a main staple of the New France diet. Often prepared in an outdoor oven, baking was not a simple task due to the large quantities

consumed by each family. In *Se Nourrir au quotidien en Nouvelle-France*, Audet states that one luxury enjoyed by the families of New France was the existence of a personal bread-oven in each home. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, many of the inhabitants of rural France depended on communal ovens, for which the lords charged fees, for their bi-weekly bread baking. With the convenience of an oven in her home that she could use without fees, a *fille du roi* could bake more often and serve fresher, more healthful bread to her family. Audet points out, however, that those residents of Quebec who rented their homes had to cede usage of their oven to the lord if ever he required its use.

Inside the home, an immense cauldron was the most important cooking tool, the center of the kitchen and the heartbeat of the home. One of the primary tasks in the home was keeping the fire burning steadily at all times. As Audet shares, this meant that keeping a comfortable climate in the home was a challenge. In the summer, the fire could make the house sweltering; whereas in the bitter Laurentian winter, even the roar of the cooking fire was often not enough to warm the house. Only families fortunate enough to be able to afford two fireplaces in the home were protected from the cruel winter weather.

The wives and daughters prepared soups for the family using whatever meat and vegetables the family could cultivate and acquire. By the time many of the *filles du roi* had settled into their marriages, the arrival of Carignan's regiment had quelled most of the Iroquois uprisings that plagued the settlement of Marguerite Bourgeoys' farm, but wild animals and treacherous weather encouraged many to stay near the safety of their homes. The gathering wild fruits and other abundant riches came at a great personal risk,

so families often contented themselves with a meager diet until their farms or commerce were established enough to provide for the cultivation of food or the means to purchase it. Unlike Marguerite Bourgeoys' farm, the families did not have a large staff to conquer the land and create viable farms in the Quebec wilderness. Clearing the land and making the soil fertile required years of hard work, and those months often meant scanty diets and hard times for the farmers and their families.

In his book *À table en Nouvelle-France*, Yvon Desloges illustrates that one of the main differences in the diets of the colonists and their European counterparts, was the tendency to adopt the eating habits of the Native Americans. In the earliest days of the settlement, this was a matter of survival. By the time the *filles du roi* arrived, it was a matter of habit and convenience for the settlers to eat the wild game and produce when it was available. The native diet was bland in comparison to that enjoyed by the French: no salt, no bread, and no wine. Desloges states that many of the early settlers missed the staples of French cuisine, but some of these luxuries began to reappear as the settlement grew more established. Indeed, Duchêne indicates that while many of the inhabitants of New France struggled to earn their daily bread, there was still a clientele for luxury products "...such as vinegar, olive oil, pepper and other spices, prunes soaked in liqueur, grapes, rice, coffee, Dutch cheese, etc." (Duchêne 161). The clients of these merchants were, not surprisingly, the Montreal elite. Poor farmers and middling tradesmen could often not afford these luxuries even once their businesses enjoyed some success.

Earning money in New France was generally thought to be the province of men, perhaps even more so than in France. Sergine Desjardins affirms that servants in the

colony were usually men, likely because families needed a servant capable of taxing physical labor rather than cooking, housekeeping, and other chores that would have been suitable for women in the eyes of seventeenth-century society. Women who found themselves unmarried had little option in New France other than to marry or enter a religious order. Some women did practice the profession of midwifery, though they were rarely well paid for their efforts.

Catherine de Baillon was a rare example of a woman of independent means in New France. She was among the handful of noblewomen who joined the *filles du roi* on their journey. She arrived in August 1669 and married Jacques Miville in November of the same year. Raymond Ouimet and Nicole Mauger published an exhaustive study on this *fille du roi* and her descendants. Few of these women have been the subject of such intensive study, but Catherine is a rare woman for the time. She was the “seigneureuse of Chesnes...seigneureuse of a territory vaster than the lands of her father, her mother, and even her grand-parents put together!” (Ouimet and Mauger 29, my translation). That a woman was the “lord” over such a vast territory was not in any way common, either in France or in her colonies, but that a woman was able to maintain this position in New France without public consternation shows that the colony did occasionally afford women some freedom that they did not enjoy in their native France.

The husbands of the *filles du roi* practiced many of the same careers that they knew in France. Soldiers, merchants, artisans, and farmers all found work in the New World, even though exercising their occupation was more strenuous and clients were in short supply. Farming, for example, was closer to waging a war against a savage land

rather than the civilized enterprise they learned in France. So difficult was the farming in this cruel environment that many men in possession of property chose not to farm, but to try their luck at fur trapping. This venture was by no means a simple source of income. Trappers often had to stay awake for twenty hours in a stretch, trekking through uncharted and dangerous forests. The successful trapper could indeed make a fortune from the precious beaver pelts, but even tireless hard work and determination did not guarantee success. Sadly, many trappers encountered an untimely end at the hands of Canada's frigid winters, wild animals, and discontented native population. Few men had the physical strength to continue this exhausting work past the age of thirty-five.

Interestingly enough, one profession that had a good following in France was forbidden in the colonies. Louis XIV forbade the colonists from serving as lawyers in order to avoid "chicanery" in the remote lands far from his control. People relied on friends for legal counsel and often had to defend themselves in court. The absence of lawyers, according to Jean-Pierre Hardy's book *Chercher Fortune en Nouvelle-France*, presented a strong incentive for some to immigrate to Canada.

For both men and women, making a living in New France was no simple feat. As Sergine Desjardins explains in the annexes of her historical novel, *Marie Major*, she argues that for the colonists of the mid- to late-seventeenth century, "indebtedness was no longer an exception...but rather formed the rule" (Desjardins 436, my translation). Though historical records painted Antoine Roy dit Desjardins as a lazy, shiftless man for having accumulated debts before his life was taken, Desjardins discovered in the course of her research that her ancestor's debts were not as considerable as many of the other

colonists who escaped such censure. The preponderance of debt among the colonists is a strong indication that most families took quite a bit of time to find their financial bearings in New France.

### III.5 Religion and the *Filles du Roi*

The Council of Trent (1545-1563) stood to denounce the Protestant Reform, and France and her colonies stood behind the doctrine of the Holy Roman Empire and her Church. Whereas England expelled religious dissidents to the colonies where they could freely practice their faith, France only allowed those who professed allegiance to the Catholic authority to leave the mother country. Indeed, many of the first settlers in New France were priests, monks, and nuns who wished to establish their religious orders in the New World and to help “civilize” the native population. The result was a community in Quebec that generally adhered to the same religious creed and social values.

The clergy, active and authoritative in the colony, urged the continual quest for salvation through sacraments and good works. As discussed in the section of this chapter on childbirth, parents ensured the baptism of their children often within the first seventy-two hours of life. This first sacrament symbolized entrance into the church, but as Marie-Aimée Cliché explains in her work *Les Pratiques de la Dévotion en Nouvelle-France*, this initiation into the church did not prevent people from wanting to separate from the Church in later years. The Church worked to ensure that the people of New France remained faithful to its teachings and followed what they considered to be the path to salvation.

Many people of the seventeenth century, like many people today, looked to religion, rather than science, to explain the world around them. For example, Cliché states that the earthquake felt in New France in 1663, the year the *filles du roi* arrived in Canada, was attributed to God's will. The clergy told the colonists that the earthquake, which occurred just before Lent, was the result of God's anger at their sinful ways. The sin most egregious, the clergy argued, was the trade of alcohol with the native peoples, condemned many times, according to Cliché, by Monsignor de Laval, bishop of the Colony. As a result of this natural disaster, which thankfully did not claim any lives, many of the colonists went through a period of extreme devotion, though alcohol trade with the Native Americans still continued.

The clergy and people of New France also viewed diseases and epidemics as punishments from God. Sadly, many of these diseases spread because the Church did not approve of "excessive hygiene." People generally washed their face and hands in cold water (warm water was considered unhealthy) each morning, but all-over bathing was only done rarely, and only when entirely necessary. The Church wanted to discourage people from touching their own bodies as much as possible, for they felt that this was a sure road to sin. Though public bathing had been common practice in France in the sixteenth century, the Church discouraged the practice, and promoted the belief that full-submersion bathing was dangerous to one's health.

Cliché explains that the people of New France held a great deal of stock in the importance of dreams. Especially the dreams and visions of those on their deathbeds were considered to have prophetic qualities. In some instances, the Church actually

sanctioned the publication of the accounts of these dreams when the visions upheld Catholic canon. Cliché cites the example of a converted Native American woman who dreamed “that she thought she had been transported into Heaven, where she said she saw people she once knew, notably among others, a young girl who died shortly after her baptism.” (Cliché 67) The Jesuit priests published the account of this dream, seeing the woman’s visions as a confirmation of their beliefs.

Despite the omnipresence of the Catholic Church, the people of New France also held some beliefs that did not always hold with the doctrine of the Church. Superstition was abundant in the colonies, especially when it came to health and fertility. Talismans were worn to ward off illness and to induce fertility. Cliché recounts the story of a woman who, desiring to know if her husband was alive or dead, baked a cake and distributed it to her family. She kept a piece for her missing husband, and was convinced that if the cake remained fresh he was alive. If her husband were dead, the cake would spoil. The priests of New France, according to Cliché, saw this as a sin in need of absolution from the clergy. The Church generally tolerated simple, harmless superstitions, but anything serious, involving a crucifix for example, could have serious consequences.

More sinister than the domain of superstition, the Church of the seventeenth century saw witchcraft as a real and threatening phenomenon. Women accused of witchcraft in France and New England often found their lives tragically cut short. Though the death penalty was rare in these cases in New France, the risk was not totally absent. The clergy took the accusation of sorcery seriously, and warned people not to bandy this



charge lightly. Priests performed exorcisms on those thought to be possessed by evil spirits, and even Marie de l'Incarnation refers to this sort of evil doing in her correspondence. She wrote to her son describing an outbreak of whooping-cough by saying, "we have cause to believe these miserable people poisoned the air" (Incarnation 668).

The *filles du roi* lived in a society where religious tolerance was far from the norm. Women from this group who did not adhere to the teachings of the Catholic Church risked serious social and even criminal consequences for any deviances from their canon. In France, Protestantism was a crime punishable by imprisonment, and the colonies were no more accepting. We can clearly determine that the women sent to Canada under the king's auspices were not seeking religious freedom. If they were, they would have been sorely disappointed.

### III.6 Death and Loss in New France

Death was a sober reality of the seventeenth century in New France that permeated daily life. Few parents had the joy of seeing all their children live to adulthood, wives lost their lives in childbirth, and men often succumbed to the physical strain of providing for their families in an untamed land. According to Landry's study of the mortality of the *filles du roi* and their husbands, the king's charges outlived their husbands in two marriages out of three. The data show us that most of the *filles du roi* had a life expectancy into the sixties, considerably longer than the population of France and that of the colonists already established in Canada. This meant that the question of remarriage was one that many of the *filles du roi* would have faced in their lifetimes. Just

as in France, speedy remarriage was common practice for those bereft of a spouse. Men needed to provide stepmothers to raise small children and educate daughters. Women needed husbands for the financial security they provided for themselves and their children. According to Josette Brun in *Vie et mort du couple en Nouvelle-France*, remarriage was virtually a necessity for men in the colony. The men of New France earned their living working the land and in other professions that kept them from the homes, and they needed to find a caregiver for their offspring as soon as possible in order to continue their labors.

Women, even those who did not need the financial support of a husband, had a massive social pressure to remarry. As women were scarce, the settlers would have ardently courted young widows, thus making the widowed state difficult to maintain for long. Brun also points out that the prospect of remaining single in a colony full of sometimes-rowdy soldiers and fur-trappers would probably have appeared unappealing, if not hazardous, for women of the seventeenth century. Men represented not only a source of fiscal security, but also physical protection in a treacherous land. Interestingly, Brun points out that the significant number of widows in the colony posed a concern for the Church. The clergy worried that these women, having known the pleasures of physical love, might lead dissident lives without the supervision and guidance of a husband or father. Priests preached the importance for widows either to remarry or to re-embrace their pre-marital chastity as a means of avoiding sin.

With all the practical inducements to remarry as well as the social pressures, it is not shocking that Brun found that an overwhelming majority of the settlers chose to

remarry after losing a spouse. The data below depicts the percentage of these settlers who chose to enter into a second union according to their age at widowhood and their city of residence.

Table VIII. Remarriage rates for widows and widowers of New France based on age at widowhood.

| Age at widowhood       | Quebec               |                        | Louisbourg          |                       |
|------------------------|----------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
|                        | Widows %<br>(of 137) | Widowers %<br>(of 147) | Widows %<br>(of 43) | Widowers %<br>(of 31) |
| <b>0-29 years</b>      | 80                   | 90                     | 100                 | 100                   |
| <b>30-39 years</b>     | 59                   | 89                     | 89                  | 83                    |
| <b>40-49 years</b>     | 42                   | 80                     | 67                  | 43                    |
| <b>50 years and up</b> | 0                    | 24                     | 60                  | 33                    |
| <b>Unknown</b>         | 0                    | 0                      | 52                  | 43                    |

Source: Brun, Josette. *Vie et Mort du Couple en Nouvelle-France*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006, p. 108.

We see a strong correlation between the age at widowhood and the likelihood that a settler would opt for remarriage. Especially in the case of women, the older a colonist was, the less frequently they chose to enter into a second union. Marriages in New France were overwhelmingly practical arrangements, and this is especially true of second and subsequent marriages. Men needed younger women who had the energy to manage sometimes-large broods of young children and manage the home. Many men also wanted younger brides who could still provide them with more babies to help in the running of farms and other enterprises.

Older women perhaps relied less on the financial aid of a husband than their younger counterparts did. Brun indicates that women did have some strong motivations to remain unmarried after losing a husband. Public outrage against widowers and widows who remarried too promptly sometimes resulted in violent protest. As was the case for a

first marriage, a widow had to seek the permission of her family (if they were present) for their blessing. Remarriage without familial endorsement, even for those who attained the age of majority, could result in disinheritance. For this reason, the clergy insisted that many of these customs of first marriages be observed in second unions.

Widowhood was a unique status for women that provided them with a degree of independence over their deceased spouses' estates. Upon re-entering the married state, women relinquished these rights and they once again became subject to the authority of their husbands. For women who had a negative experience in their first unions, taking another dabble in the marriage market might not be an appealing prospect. Furthermore, Brun argues that second marriages were often more contentious than first. Arguments about the blending of families and the treatment of children from different marriages caused friction, resulting in the "separation of body and goods" (the seventeenth-century Catholic equivalent of a legal divorce) being more frequent in second marriages than in first unions. Though pressures and realities proved strong inducements for remarriage, the motivations to remain single were also compelling enough to ensure that remarriage was not universal.

Landry provides us with data specific to the remarriage rates of the *filles du roi* and their husbands as well as of the number of children that were brought into these blended families. Like Brun's data, they show that the *filles du roi* were much less likely to remarry once they reached their forties, whereas the male colonists remarried frequently in their forties, and with considerable regularity in their fifties. For both sexes, it appears that the more children a widow or widower had, the more probable a

remarriage would have been. Three-fourths of all widowed women with five or more children remarried, which speaks volumes of the marriage market in New France. In the previous chapter on life in rural France, we saw that widows with large broods often had trouble finding a new husband. The scarcity of women in Quebec made men willing to accept extra mouths to feed if it also provided them with a dependable helpmeet.

CONCLUSION:  
CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE *FILLES DU ROI* TO MODERN SOCIETY  
AND RECENT RESEARCH ON THEIR LIVES

Charbonneau states that two-thirds of all present-day French Canadians can trace their ancestry back to one or more *filles du roi*. The genetic contribution these women made to Quebec is incontrovertible, but this is not the only gift these remarkable women gave to French-Canadian society. These women, frequently maligned in history books or forgotten altogether, represent, along with their husbands, a solid foundation for the society that blossomed along the Saint Lawrence River.

The *filles du roi*, with little exception, provided hearty stock for future generations of Quebecois. Each of these women survived a treacherous transatlantic journey that involved famine, lack of potable water, and exposure to deadly diseases. Moreover, of the 770 *filles du roi*, only fifteen died within two months of childbirth, which was significantly less than the death rates for women in France and the rest of the colony. The resiliency and impressive lifespan of these women is somewhat surprising considering that most of these women had lost one or both parents at an early age. This may indicate that many of their parents may have died prematurely, often due to disease, rather than to various congenital problems inherited by their daughters.

Another admirable trait of these women was their adaptability. We saw that the majority came from urban areas in a relatively temperate France. Louis XIV asked these brave women to transplant themselves to the isolated rural farms and founding towns of Quebec. The fact that these women not only survived these difficulties, but also thrived in

the adverse conditions, is remarkable. Though Marie de l'Incarnation worried for the city-born *filles du roi* who had such a hard time adapting to life in New France, only thirty-three of the 770 women went back to France permanently. This shows that these courageous women found the strength to overcome the harsh conditions in the colony.

Despite their defamed portrait in history, a characteristic that we can attribute to the *filles du roi* is moral integrity. Only a minuscule fraction of children born to the *filles du roi* were illegitimate, and the number of pre-marital conceptions was not much higher. The number of these questionable births was higher in France and in other Canadian women, which shows that the religious and moral education that the *filles du roi* received at home or from the *Salpêtrière* made a lasting impact. That Quebec remained a hugely Catholic area until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s is due in no small part to the foundation laid by these pioneers.

One of the most important contributions these women made, however, was in the area of language. In the era of the *filles du roi*, many outside of Paris spoke regional dialects rather than standard French. The men of New France came largely from rural areas, but the *filles du roi* more often originated from Paris or another urban environment. The *filles du roi* helped to bring a language to North America that was closer to the French spoken in Paris, as opposed to a regional dialect. The result was that many visitors to the settlements in the seventeenth century affirmed that the French spoken in Quebec was, in many ways, similar to, yet distinct from, the French spoken in Paris.

Sadly, these contributions are little known to most people. Many historians have either ignored these women, or chosen to believe the malignant rumors passed down for

centuries. The three major works of the twentieth century that have shed much needed light on this marginalized subject are the studies conducted by Gustave Lanctôt, Silvio Dumas, and Yves Landry. Landry's work is the most recent, and the most complete of the three. Since its publication in 1992, there has been no major study published on the subject. Many may consider Landry's study as the definitive work on the *filles du roi*, and it would be a challenge to produce a more complete illustration of the lives of these remarkable women.

This is not to say that the *filles du roi* are not still the subject of scholarly interest. Biographies of individual women, like Tougas' *L'Allemande* and Ouimet's *Catherine de Baillon* examine the lives of these women in astounding detail. These works allow us to move beyond the general picture provided by Landry, Lanctôt, and Dumas and better understand the individual struggles of each woman. The area where interest in these pioneers has grown recently is in the domain of historical fiction. In some cases, like Sergine Desjardins' *Marie Major*, the work is a fictionalized account of real people and events. In other cases, like René Forget's *Eugénie, fille du roi*, the characters and events are fictional, but the situations are based in historical probability.

Other examples of the influence of the *filles du roi* in modern society can be seen in film and music. Anne-Claire Poirier named her 1974 film *Les Filles du roy* in honor of the women pioneers. The film explores the complexity of the role of women in French Canadian society in the twentieth century; the working woman, the stay-at-home wife and mother, the girlfriend, and the daughter who all struggle to find their place in a male-dominated society. Like the contributions of the often-slandered *filles du roi*, the women



of the 1970s in Canada felt their work and sacrifices were undervalued, yet essential to society. The parallel that Poirier draws between the remarkable adaptability of the modern woman and the early pioneers is rather poignant. Christine Authier also alludes to the “...girls/left from Coutances in the month of April? . . . ten for Marie de l’Incarnation/and the rest for my boys” (Authier lines 1-6, my translation). These references show that a public awareness and interest in these women still exists hundreds of years after their arrival in Canada.

Organizations, such as the *Société des filles du roi et les soldats du Carignan*, also exist to promote interest and study about the *filles du roi* and their descendants. Indeed, dozens of genealogical societies and individual researchers devote countless hours to preserving their family lineage specific to the king’s charges and their spouses. In honor of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Quebec City one such organization, the *Association des Filles du Roi*, organized a scholarly and genealogical conference dedicated to the women who helped found the first North American city. The *Maison Saint Gabriel* is a living memorial to these women, where tourists can go and see the farmhouse where Mother Marie Bourgeoys and her colleagues welcomed and trained the brides of Canada. The memory of these brave and adaptable women is still vivid in the minds of the Canadian citizens who descended from them. In whatever format, the research that continues in this area helps to ensure that the bravery, strength, and sacrifice of these women can be experienced by future generations. It is through these works that we will preserve the legacy of the young girls from France who risked their lives and left their families to become the founding mothers of Quebec.

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