

FILLES DU ROI



La fille du Roi et la grenouille par Jacob et Wilhelm Grimm

This section is about the brave young women who emigrated from France to the wilds of the New World in the 1600's.

The earliest Europeans to settle in Quebec were hunters, trappers, French soldiers, a few explorers and priests, and some sailors. However, there were very few families living there at that time.

From 1608 on, the government of France actively pursued the settlement of New France (Quebec). Quebec City was founded in 1608, and Montreal was founded in 1642, and they had one common need - families. Although there were quite a few men living in New France, there was a significant shortage of women. If the government of France had any hope of ensuring their settlement in New France, they needed to keep the men there. Many of these men served in the military forces that kept order in the area and others were merchants, farmers, and young men who had signed indenture contracts to work in New France.

Before 1660, women who came to New France were “Filles à Marier”, or marriageable daughters. Their numbers were few but they paid their own passage to New France by signing marriage or indenture contracts. King Louis XIV noticed that the population was not growing enough in New France—it had only increased to about 2,500 in the St. Lawrence Valley in 1660 and thus the population would decline if steps weren't taken to increase marriages. In order to increase the number of women emigrating to Quebec, he directed his government to recruit women who were brave enough to go on this adventure to the new world. Some of these recruits came from orphanages, where conditions were deplorable. Out of a total of 852 filles du roi that emigrated to Quebec during the 10 year period from 1663 to 1673, 414 came from orphanages. Some of the women came from the middle classes and had money and property of their own, such as inheritances. The majority of the women originated from Ile-de-France, or Francia, from which France got its name. Many of these brave women also came from Normandy. Some of the girls were educated, unusual for that time, but most were peasant farm girls. The prettiest girls married first of course. As a result, most of these women left the group at Quebec City, the first stop in the colony. The farm girls were also desirable—they were strong and usually healthier than the women from the cities. They were also quite industrious. The city women were considered less desirable because, even though they may have been better looking than some of the farm girls and slimmer, they were thought to be low class, lazy, less healthy, slightly immoral women. Some of the women who came were from the lower classes and even included prostitutes. They came with the clothes on their backs and little else. Few got in trouble or became a burden to society; only 5 appeared in court for adultery, prostitution, or debauchery. One woman, Marie Quequejeu, widow of Pierre Rivaut, was executed in 1684 for a very serious crime.

The records have since been lost, so the details of the crime are unknown. Her son-in-law who was a *coureur de bois* was executed the same day, so they may both have been involved in the same offence. Church laws were very strict at that time—maybe they were involved romantically with each other. This would be considered a very serious offence in the eyes of the church.

There are many reasons why these brave women chose to take this path in life—they may have been escaping from a prospective marriage they didn't wish to enter into, fleeing from an abusive family or from poverty, or they just may have been the type of person who was looking for adventure in their lives.

These women were called “*Filles du Roi*”, or Daughters of the King. The French government paid the girls' passage and was also supposed to give them a dowry. However, the girls were often left without a dowry, so if they had funding from their families they fared much better than the girls who had no dowry at all. The women, most young girls but some middle aged women, received a dowry of 50 *livres* (or French pounds) if she married a soldier or “*habitant*”. She would receive 100 *livres* if she married an officer. Many of the men who were seeking wives were soldiers who served with the Carignan-Salieres regiment in New France. If these men were unsuccessful in finding a wife to share their lives in Quebec, they would return to France. *Habitants* were men who weren't part of the military but were masons, carpenters, farmers, shopkeepers, etc., and these men were apt to remain in Quebec whether they married or not.

If the government paid the dowry, it was handed over to the colonial ministry after the marriage ceremony took place. Perhaps some goods would have been given to the couple as well, such as a cow, a case of pork, or some tools. A dowry of 100 *livres* was to be used as follows: 10 for moving expenses, 30 for clothing, and 60 to cover the cost of their passage. The girls also received a small hope chest, which would contain small items she would need in the new world, such as personal hygiene items, a sewing kit with needles, white thread, a pair of ribbons, a set of scissors, some knives, and pins. They also received 2 outer dresses, 2 petticoats, 1 morning jacket, linen handkerchiefs, 6 head dresses - linen, 4 black head coverings, 1 muff and 2 pairs of sheepskin gloves. The clothing usually came from the government warehouses and the girls received them on arrival in New France.

The women were strictly supervised on the trip from France. When they arrived in Quebec, they were divided into three groups for inspection. When a young man came looking for a wife, he was directed by a government official to the appropriate group of women that the official felt would suit him. The girls did have a choice in the matter, and could reject a suitor if, after asking him a few questions, she didn't like him for some reason. The plump girls were the most popular with the prospective husbands because they were thought to be good workers. If they were pretty, they of course were chosen first; however, it didn't really matter what these women looked like—even if they had bad skin and teeth, or funny-looking eyes, they were chosen for their buxom figure. The poor women who were not chosen by any suitors were disgraced and their lives usually ended in tragedy.

Marriages were performed immediately after the marriage agreement was made. After the marriage was suitably consummated, the couple would then receive an ox, a cow, 2 pigs, 2 chickens, salted meat, and 11 Crowns from the government to ensure a good beginning. However, if the government met these obligations as well as they paid the dowries, couples could go away empty handed.

Often high expectations turned into disappointment. If a young girl married a farmer, she was often the one pulling the plow if her husband didn't own any livestock or hadn't received any from the government. Under French law at that time women were considered chattels (property owned by their husband). They may have ended up in an abusive relationship, and could only legally be released from this marriage if their husband beat them with a stick wider than his wrist. For some, the marriage did become a love match, but love was not a priority or prerequisite for marriage at that time. Because marriage was the only security for a woman, these women could marry several times during their lives if they became widowed, ensuring that their children would be taken care of.

There were 852 Filles du Roi recorded by the Quebec officials, and many came during the year 1663 to 1673. Some of the men in New France did marry Indian women, but they preferred to marry white women because they tended to bear more children. Indian women had more independence, and tended to use natural forms of birth control. Nearly 700 children were born of the Filles du Roi marriages.

Among those young women who are our ancestors are Anne Bellesoeur (married Nicolas Massard), Jeanne Juin (married Bernard Dumouchel dit Laroche), Marie Renaud (married Francois Leroux dit Cardinal), Madeleine Le Quay (married Jacques l'Archeveque), and Jeanne Anguille (married Francois Allard).

The practice of importing young women from France ended in 1673, when war broke out between Holland and France, and the King's funds were needed for the French armies.

The following is a quote from Allard F. Romeo. "Pierre Allard (1653-1703) et sa famille - histoire et genealogie, Montreal, 1973. 29 p."

"The women came from every economic and social class. Many were orphans or widows. Many were penniless. The majority were from larger towns and the adaptation to the very primitive living conditions of the wilderness must have been extremely difficult. Few found the fulfillment of the dreams they must have had, and talked about with their companions in the weeks it took to cross the Atlantic. Most of them, amazingly, adapted well and today they can count among their descendants more than 5 million Canadians and Americans spread from 'sea to shining sea'."



Births in New France

Birth registration was very important at this time in new France since King Louis, by decree on April 12, 1670, ordered all inhabitants having 10 living children to be paid 300 livres each year by the government. Those having 12 children were paid 400 livres. Men were required to marry by age 20, or women by age 16, or they would incur a fine. This resulted in many early marriages in the 17th Century.

Among our ancestresses who married early and thus gave birth to many children were Marie Archambault (aged 12), Francoise Pelletier (aged 13), and Marie Louise Tessier (aged 13). Girls grew up fast during this time! They usually gave birth to their first child within the first year of marriage.

