

# Women of New France

## Introducing New France

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



New France 1719

## European Women's Roles

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

## Women in New France

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



Former extent of New France



Re-enactors of New France

## Recreating Women's Lives

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

## Exhibit Goals

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

## Clothing Production and Repair

All classes of women in New France had to master sewing and needle arts. People ordered many garments "ready made" from Europe or from tailors in the cities of Montreal and Québec, but these items required fitting and finishing. Women usually made household linens, undergarments and children's clothing at home and embellished clothing with embroidery, beading and quilting. Common people owned only a few articles of clothing because of the high cost of both clothes and fabric, so they often needed to repair what clothing they owned. They also remade garments to reflect the latest European fashions.



Braided sash

## Weaving

Both the English and French governments restricted the development of commercial weaving in the New World, so nearly all fabrics were imported from Europe. Women wove cloth at home on a limited basis. The spinning of wool and flax remained important for the yarns they produced. Women in New France knit yarn hats, mitts, and stockings and braided them into the finger-woven sashes and garters particular to residents of New France and Native Americans.



Re-enactor spinning



Re-enactor sewing

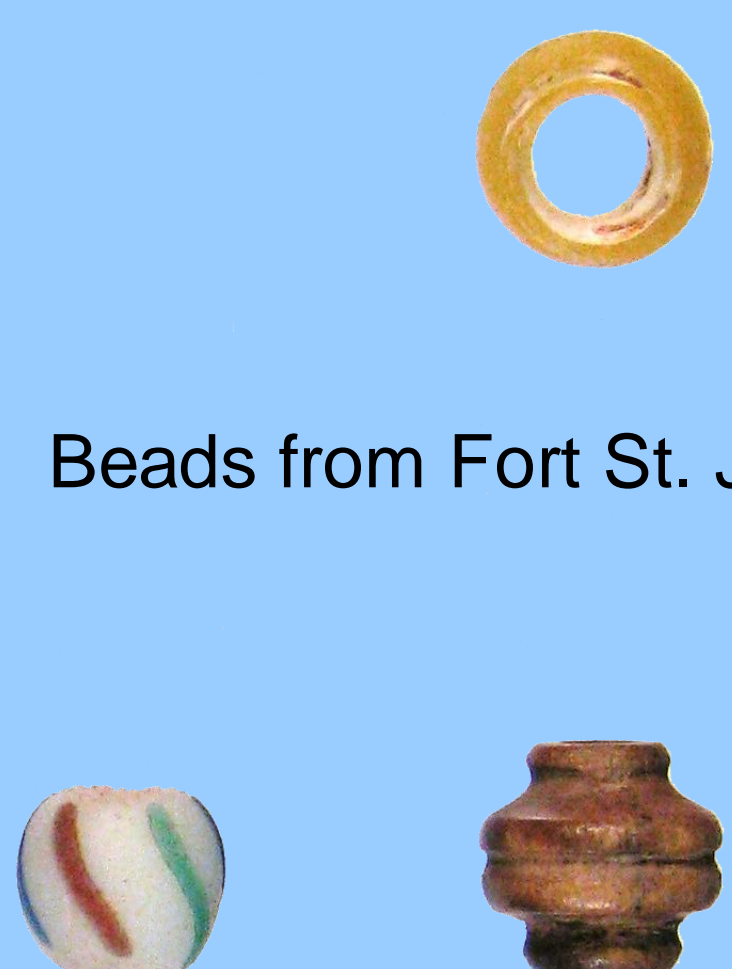
## Sewing

Girls in the 18<sup>th</sup> century learned to sew at a young age. Hemming pillowcases and sheets served as easy and practical first tasks. Later on, girls learned the skills of embroidery, quilting, and perhaps even lace making. Only natural fibers were available in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Linen and wool were the most common cloths, but cotton and silk were also available. Archaeologists have found pins, needles, thimbles, beads, and scissors at the Fort St. Joseph site that testify to these daily activities.



Embroidered pocket

Beads from Fort St. Joseph



Needles and thimbles from Fort St. Joseph

## Garments

Eighteenth-century women of European descent generally wore the same basic garments. Fashion and regional tastes influenced their look. The women of New France wanted to dress as fashionably as they could, especially on Sundays. The latest European fashions – even silk gowns – reached the furthest frontier regions. Catholic priests often decried women's wearing of immodest and expensive clothing in styles beyond their status. Many observers also commented on the short skirts (mid-calf!) and jackets (rather than gowns) that *habitant* women wore.



Re-enactor modeling undergarments

## Caps and Hats

A *coiffe* (cap) covered a woman's hair at all times unless her hair was elaborately styled.



When outdoors, a wide-brimmed hat kept the sun from women's faces.

## Articles of Dress

Women wore a simple *chemise* (shift), usually made of linen as an undergarment and a nightgown. Over it, they wore at least two *jupon* (petticoats) tied about the waist. Whalebone stays provided the foundation for the gown or jacket, gave the rounded fashionable shape, and provided an erect posture. While at home in a state of *déshabillé* (less formal dress) a woman might wear a quilted vest or jumps rather than the stays. Pockets were tied about the waist rather than sewn into women's clothing – usually under the top petticoat, which had slits to allow access to the pockets. A jacket or gown went over the stays. Around the shoulders women wore a *fichu* (neckerchief) tucked into the front of her gown.



Needlework pockets



Quilted petticoat

## Shoes

In the cities or on Sundays women wore fine leather or brocade shoes over thigh-high stockings. *Habitant* women often wore moccasins and/or *sabots* (wooden shoes) while working. In the summer they often went barefoot.



Stylish 18<sup>th</sup> century woman's shoes

## Adornment

Women of both France and New France wore finger rings, medallions, and crosses or crucifixes on ribbons around their necks, all of which have been recovered from Fort St. Joseph.



18<sup>th</sup> century cross from Fort St. Joseph



Inexpensive finger rings from Fort St. Joseph

# Cooking



Re-enactor demonstrating outdoor cooking

## Open Hearth Cooking

People prepared meals in the 18<sup>th</sup> century over a fire or hot coals. Fireplaces varied substantially in terms of how they were equipped, and what hardware was used to assist with cooking. Most fireplaces in frontier areas were small and did not include dampers. Some may have had a “crane” to move pots in and out of the fire, while others may have had a *crémailleur* (a notched metal rod attached to a horizontal brace in the fire place) to move pots closer to, or away from, the fire or coals. Baking occurred in a cast iron oven (Dutch oven) on the hearth. In more densely populated communities, people used a brick or mud oven built outside for baking.



18<sup>th</sup> century fireplace at Fort Michilimackinac.  
Photo courtesy of Clay Johnson



Remains of a fireplace found at Fort St. Joseph

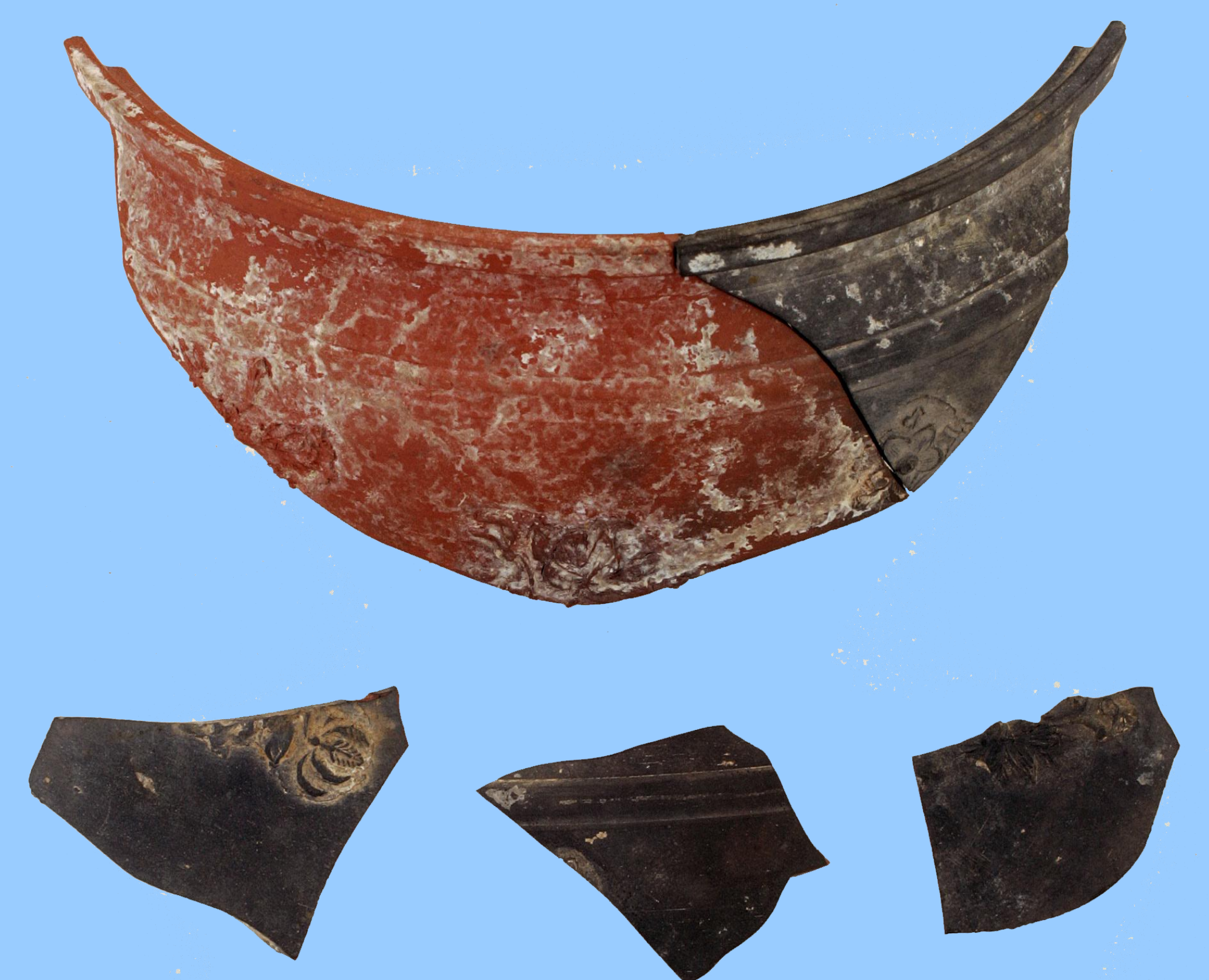
## On the Table

Unlike in Europe, laws did not restrict hunting and fishing, and the men of New France became excellent marksmen. The *habitants* quickly introduced the new animal and plant foods of North America into their diets including deer, other wild animals, corn, squash, and maple sugar.

*“I have seldom seen any people shoot with such dexterity as these. . . . There was scarcely one of them who was not a clever marksman and who did not own a rifle.” ~ Peter Kalm, 1749*



Carbonized corn cobs from Fort St. Joseph



Ceramic fragments from Fort St. Joseph

*“Squashes are a kind of pumpkin which the Europeans got from the Indians, . . . They are eaten boiled, either with meat or by themselves.” ~ Peter Kalm, 1748*



18<sup>th</sup> century brass kettle from  
Fort St. Joseph



Bone-handled knife from Fort St. Joseph

# Music, Dance, and Diversions



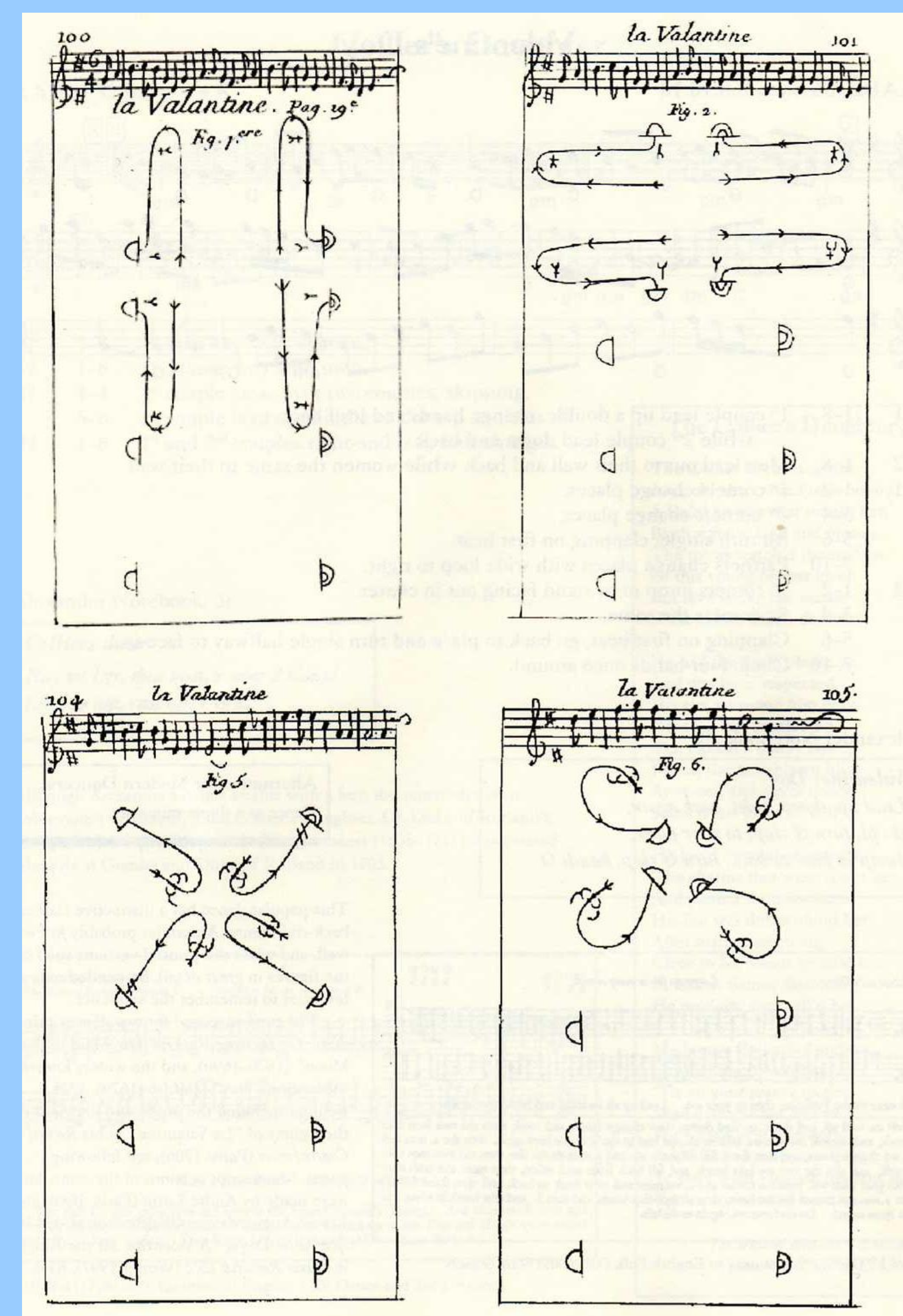
Re-enactors demonstrating  
18<sup>th</sup> century dancing



18<sup>th</sup> century dancers

## Music

Music was an important part of a young woman's education in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Society frowned on wind instruments for ladies – they looked too disagreeable with puffed out cheeks – but approved of string instruments and vocal music. If a young woman's family had the financial resources she would learn to play the harpsichord. Violins or fiddles and guitars were far more common.



18<sup>th</sup> century dance steps

## Dance

Dancing was very popular in New France. Even at frontier posts like Fort St. Joseph, the *habitants* wanted to learn the latest dances of Europe. In Europe and the larger towns in the New World, wealthy people hired dancing masters to teach themselves and their children the proper dance steps. Frontier settlers acquired books detailing the latest dances and how to perform them. For example, the *habitants* at Fort Michilimackinac held dances at least once a week. Priests throughout New France railed against the French love of dancing, all to no avail.



Mouth harp and bone gaming pieces found at Fort St. Joseph

***"[The men were] engaged in drinking brandy by the full bowl from which they were all drunk together, that during this debauchery Boudor had been gambling against Guilhebaud [who lost] ten packs of beaver...he had good reason to judge that Guilhebaud had drunk to excess...because of the error that he had noticed that Guilhebaud made in the way he played his trump [card]..."***  
~ Witness testimony, Fezeret v. Boudor, 1700



French playing cards

## Diversions

Games were popular pastimes that women and men enjoyed. Gaming pieces made of bone, similar to those used by Potawatomi women well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have been recovered from Fort St. Joseph. Archaeologists surmise that these were left by the wives of French fur traders from neighboring tribes. Card games were also extremely popular and, at the fur trade posts, were often accompanied by drinking and gambling.

# Education and Literacy

## Education

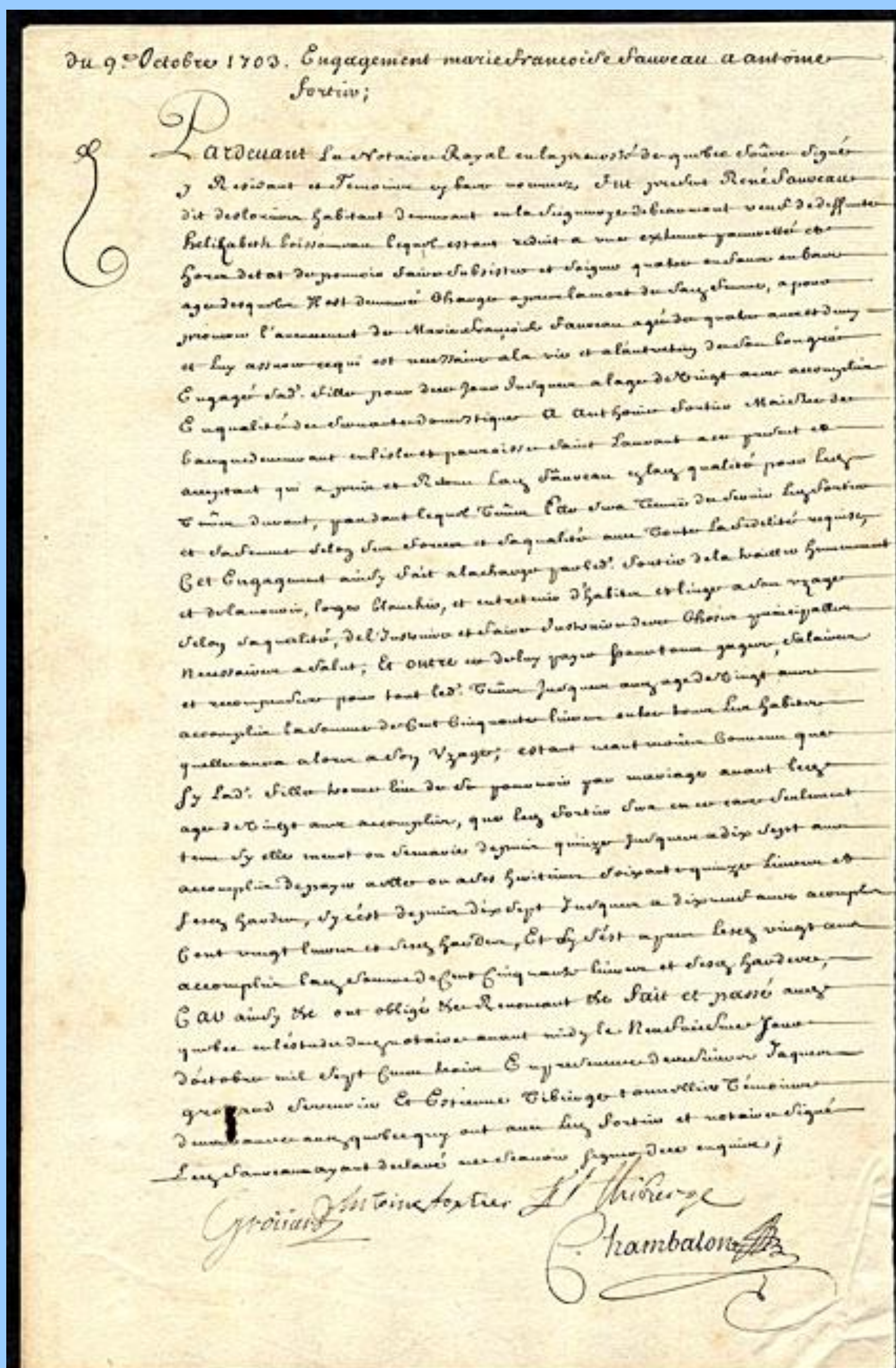
In 1639 three Ursuline nuns sailed from France to Québec to establish a school to educate Native and French girls. At their head was Mother Marie de l'Incarnation who learned the Huron, Algonquian, Montagnais and Iroquois tongues. She composed a dictionary, grammars, and books of Christian doctrine in the Native languages. In 1697 a second Ursuline school opened in Trois Rivières. The Sisters of the Congregation de Notre-Dame founded a school in Montreal in 1670 and by 1731 maintained twelve schools for the education of *habitant* girls. Some frontier area families sent their daughters (including *métis* daughters) back to Montreal for their education.



Ursuline nuns



Ursuline Superior



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

## Literacy

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



Re-enactor writing with a goose quill



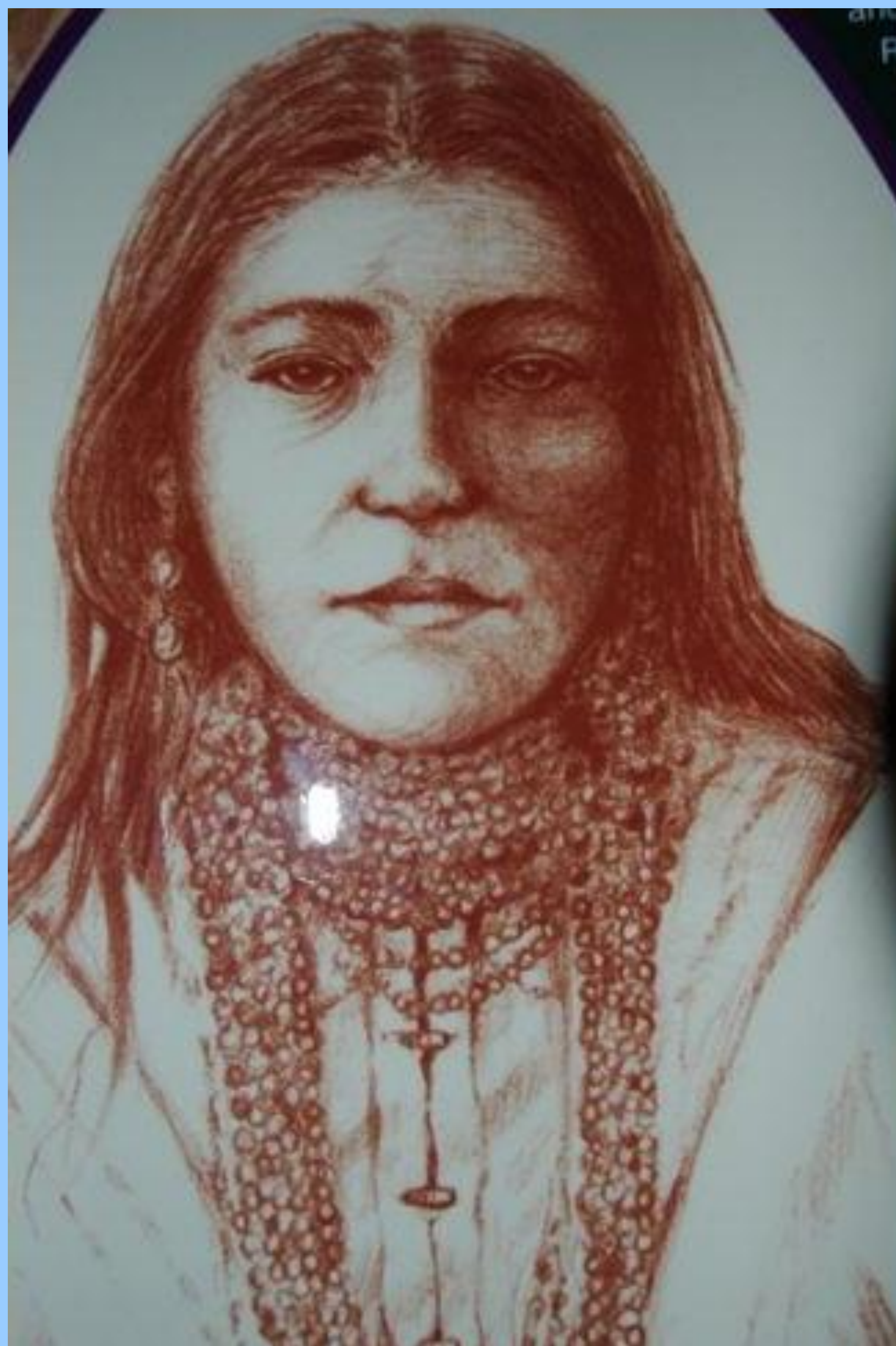
Artist's conception of a nun teaching girls

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

# Women in Trade and Diplomacy

## “Go-betweenes”

Native American and European cultural mediators known as “go-betweenes” traveled the woods to carry messages and negotiate compromises as representatives of their respective cultures. While much of the literature focuses on the contributions of men as intercultural diplomats, recent scholarship points to the presence of several women in New France who shaped indigenous-colonial interactions. Women did in fact translate documents and carry messages to help maintain peace and build diplomatic bridges between cultures.



Modern artist's conception of Madame Montour

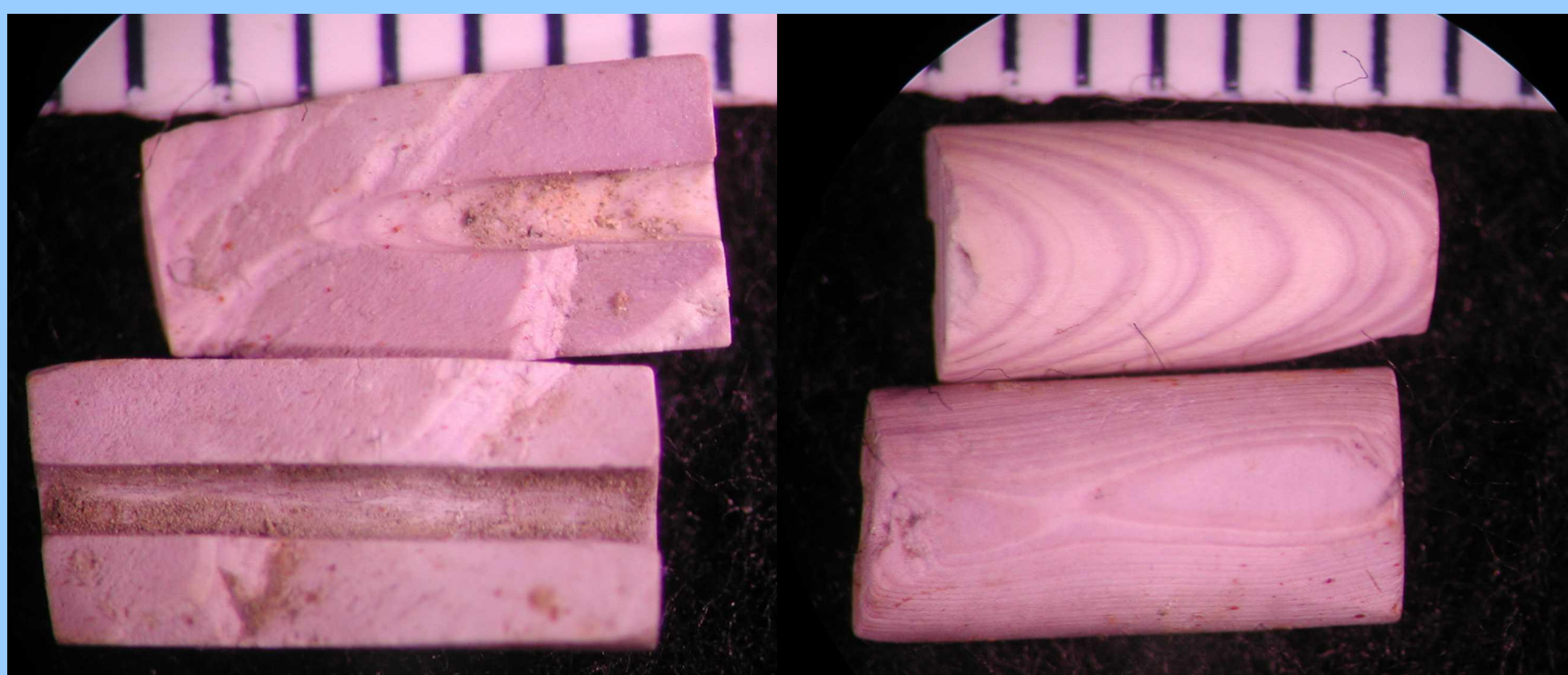


Native Americans trading, from a 1657 map of New France

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

## Madame Montour, *métis* diplomat

Madame Montour, a woman of Native and European descent, was one such fur-trade era translator and frontier diplomat. Madame Montour, a *métis*, was born Isabelle Couc in Québec in 1667 and grew up multilingual. She left Québec in the 1690s to join family in Michigan where she began serving as an interpreter. In 1706, she joined her brother Louis Couc Montour, a *voyageur*, in New York. From 1709 to 1719, Madame Montour served as interpreter for New York Governor Robert Hunter, emerging as one of the most visible Native women in colonial New York and later Pennsylvania. There are numerous accounts of the various meetings she attended, the expeditions she went on, the wampum belts that she was commissioned to acquire, and the payments she received. In New York she interpreted during various political negotiations between delegates of the Five Nations Iroquois and the Governor of New York. Later in Pennsylvania she attended meetings between Pennsylvania's Provincial Council and a variety of multinational Indian delegations. Multilingual go-betweenes such as Madame Montour clearly played an indispensable role in Indian-white relations.



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



Iroquois wampum belts

# Women and Servitude

## Slaves

In addition to married French women, wealthy and otherwise, there were female slaves and servants in New France. Numbers are hard to determine, but at least 1,100 slaves, men and women, lived in New France. (This does not include Louisiana where chattel slavery was common.) Of those in the Great Lakes region, about 55% were Indians captured by Native allies of the colony and sold to the French. Indian slaves were known as *panis*, from the French word for Pawnee, the nation from which most captives first came. The term *panis* is used almost interchangeably with *esclave* (slave) in the records of New France's northern regions. Most African female slaves served as domestics in the homes of the wealthier members of society in Montreal and Québec and came from French possessions in the Caribbean. *Panis* more often served as domestics in frontier settlements and were sometimes married to French inhabitants of the posts. The baptismal register for Fort St. Joseph lists a number of *panis* at the post.



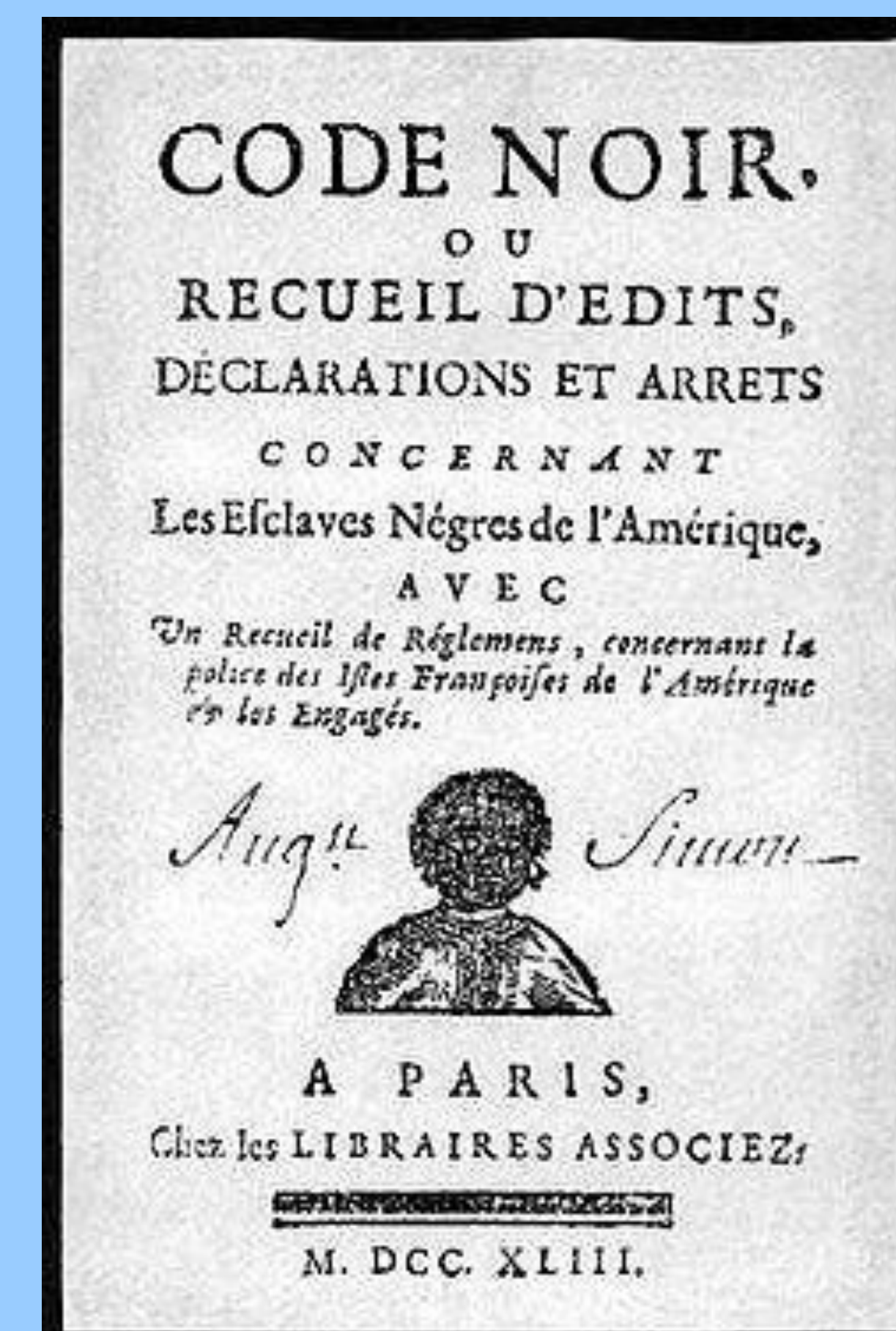
Artist's rendition of laundress servant



Artist's rendition of a kitchen servant with food

## Servitude

Young women in New France also served as servants, many indentured. They were contracted to work for a family for a period of time for often little more than room and board. This sort of arrangement relieved their families of the burden of providing for them and gave them an opportunity, if they were lucky, to acquire some education by associating with the better-off members of colonial society. Most servants, however, appear in the records due to complaints about harsh treatment and even physical and sexual abuse.



Code Noir ( Slave Code ) governed master/slave relations

***“Marie Lesueur [age 17] ...work[ed] at the home of Laurent Renaud for the amount of four livres per month, and left it...because...the sieur de Beaujeu, a lieutenant in the Troupes de la Marine who was living in the home of the said Renaud, constantly asked her to go to bed with him, going to find her everywhere her housework took her, whether in the garret or the cellar or in the upstairs rooms and especially during the night when she was asleep because she slept in a single room where she did the cooking for the household. She declares that one night the said Beaujeu among other nights during the first two weeks or so of the said month of last November had come to find her as she was sleeping wanting to possess her carnally. She awakened and tried to prevent him from doing it by crying out, he threatened to put his sword through her body if she cried out which he did three separate times, and he had her carnally on three different nights.” ~Testimony of Marie Lesueur, Montreal, 1705***



BRANDING SLAVES.