

The Filles à Marier of Montréal's Grande Recrue of 1653

Excerpted from *The Women of Ville-Marie: Pioneers of Seventeenth Century Montréal*,
a non-fiction book by Susan McNelley

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*17th-C French Emigrant Women, Sailing Ship,"
AI image generated by Microsoft Designer, May 26, 2024*

In the late fall of 1653, the French inhabitants of Ville-Marie, the settlement later to be known as Montréal, were overjoyed to welcome more than one hundred would-be settlers, including fourteen women, to what was little more than a fortified compound. The population of this small colony on the banks of the Saint Lawrence River in New France had held steady at around fifty from its founding in May 1642 to 1650. Hostile Iroquois had subjected the French settlers to frequent raids and massacred many of them. Those leaving the fledgling colony, as well as the deaths of unfortunate colonists, offset new arrivals. For

much of the ten years since the foundation of the settlement, the colonists were confined within the walls of the compound. There was open talk among them of abandoning the settlement. A discouraged Paul de Maisonneuve, then governor of the colony, concluded that he must go back to France to recruit reinforcements. If he failed, he resigned himself to abandoning the colonizing project and ordering the settlers to return to France.¹

Two women, one on either side of the Atlantic Ocean, played a pivotal role in the success of Maisonneuve's mission. The governor needed funds to support recruitment. It was Jeanne Mance who came to his rescue. She was Maisonneuve's co-leader and founder of Ville-Marie's small hospital, known as the Hôtel-Dieu. Jeanne offered Maisonneuve 22,000 *livres* the wealthy Angélique Faure de Bullion of Paris had given her for the benefit of the hospital. Maisonneuve

¹ Dollier de Casson, *History of Montréal*, 159-161; Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 101.

sailed for Europe on November 5, 1651, on a Dutch ship and arrived in France at the end of that year. One of the first things he did upon his arrival was to get the blessing of Madame de Bullion for this endeavor.²

It was no simple task finding individuals willing to go to a distant and dangerous world across the sea. The French had heard stories of the harsh environment, as well as torture and death at the hands of the Iroquois. While not recruited for their military experience, the men had to be physically healthy and able to bear arms in the defense of Montréal. They had to be ready for the backbreaking work of clearing the land for construction and agriculture, and they had to live under rough and dangerous circumstances. It took Maisonneuve almost two years to find enough recruits for his mission.³

In the spring of 1653, 118 men signed contracts to go to the settlement on Montréal Island. Another thirty-eight men signed on in other parts of France, for a total of 154 men. However, of these, fifty-two changed their minds or deserted, leaving only 102 men who set sail for Montréal.⁴ The contract specified five years' service at Ville-Marie. Besides their wages, the men would receive lodging, food, and the tools to exercise their profession. Maisonneuve hoped the men would settle in the colony, but at the end of five years, they could return to France at the expense of the company.⁵

Poor economic conditions in France motivated those who agreed to come to New France as the colony offered opportunities not available at home.⁶ The men in this recruitment were between the ages of twenty and twenty-five. One was only sixteen. There were two married men; the rest were single.⁷

² Dollier de Casson, *History of Montréal*, 159-161; *Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, XXXVI:145; Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 105.

³ The *Jesuit Relations* of 1653 noted, "There were sent over to Montréal more than a hundred worthy Artisans, all well versed in the trades they professed, and all men of courage for war" (*Jesuit Relations*, ed. Thwaites, XL:83).

⁴ The number of recruits who sailed varies slightly according to different sources – see Atherton's footnote 1 on page 112. No passenger list exists. The numbers are based on the signed contracts and other documents.

⁵ Lanctot, *Montréal under Maisonneuve*, 55-57. Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 112.

⁶ Déchêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 23-25; Lanctot, *Montréal under Maisonneuve*, 57.

⁷ Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 112; Dechêne, *Habitants and Merchants*, 23-24, 335 n40.

Certainly outnumbered, but no less important than the men, were the fourteen women who were part of the 1653 recruitment. A dozen unmarried young women, or *filles à marier*, came with no contract but understanding that they were to marry settlers in Montréal. Most, if not all, of the women came from impoverished backgrounds. Lacking dowries, they had little hope of marriage and family in France. Emigration offered them the chance for a better life than they could expect in their home country.

The brides-to-be in this recruitment were Marie-Marthe Pinson, Marie Dumesnil, Jeanne Soldé, Jeanne Rousselière, Catherine Lorion, Catherine Hurault, Jeanne Védié, Jeanne Merrin, Marie Renaudin de La Blanchetière, Marie Lorgueil, Marie Renaud, and Michelle Artus. All were between fourteen and twenty-four years old, except for Marie Dumesnil, an eleven-year-old orphan. In addition, the pregnant Perrine Meunier came with her husband Julien Daubigeon, a worker contracted as a land-clearer and laborer. Finally, among the women was Marguerite Bourgeoys. She had not come to be married. Governor Maisonneuve had selected her to be schoolteacher for the children of the colony.⁸

The recruits sailed on the *Saint-Nicholas-de-Nantes*, under the command of Captain Pierre le Beson. It left the small port of Saint-Nazaire, some forty miles from the city of Nantes, on June 20, 1653. The *Saint-Nicolas* was far from seaworthy when it left the French port. The vessel was old with rotting timbers and was soon leaking on all sides. When they were 900 miles from Saint-Nazaire, it became all too apparent that they could not continue, and the captain reluctantly returned to France. A month later, Maisonneuve secured another ship and this one, bound again for New France, weighed anchor on July 20, 1653. Voyagers often had to deal with illnesses such as dysentery, scurvy, measles, yellow fever, smallpox, or the plague. Indeed, sickness broke out on this Atlantic crossing and resulted in the deaths of eight men. The ship dropped anchor in the small harbor at Québec on the 22nd of September 1653. The trip across the Atlantic had been a harrowing experience. For Maisonneuve and the recruits, it had been a long three months and two days after they had first set sail from mainland France. The arrival was not the last of the troubles for the ship. It ran aground on a sandbar at low tide and no amount of effort would dislodge the

⁸ Campeau, *The Jesuits and Early Montréal*, 127. Auger, *La Grande Recrue de 1653*, 26-28. Auger lists fifteen women, including Marie Chefdeville. However, it has been discovered that Marie Chefdeville was in Montréal as early as 1651, when she is listed as godmother to an Indigenous child who was baptized that year.

sailing vessel. In the end, it was burned in the harbor at Québec. As soon as possible, the weary recruits boarded smaller vessels for the trip to Ville-Marie. The upstream river voyage from Québec to Montréal – sixty leagues or 180 miles – could take as long as a month. It was mid-November before the travelers reached their destination.⁹

The men at Ville-Marie far outnumbered women in the settlement. Maisonneuve understood the men would return to France if they could not find a wife to establish a home and family. The marriageable women who arrived in 1653 caused a stir of excitement on Montréal Island. When these women arrived, there were just fourteen women and fifteen children in the settlement. Now the number of women had doubled!¹⁰

Perhaps it was the lateness of the season upon their arrival. Maybe they were still recovering from their trip across the Atlantic or maybe the men didn't have suitable lodging to offer the women. Whatever the reason, the *filles à marier* who came in the recruitment of 1653 waited until the coming of the new year to wed. The registers of Notre-Dame de Montréal documented thirteen marriages in 1654. In the prior twelve years, there had been only ten marriages of French couples, beginning with the first in 1647.¹¹

Of the thirteen marriages at Ville-Marie in 1654, nine of the brides were women who came in the recruitment of 1653. The first to marry were Marie-Marthe Pinson and Jeanne Soldé. They married in a double wedding ceremony on Wednesday, January 7, 1654. Marie-Marthe Pinson exchanged vows with Jean Milot *dit* Bourguignon, whom she had met aboard ship during the voyage across the Atlantic. Jeanne Soldé wed Jacques Beauvais. No one from the recruitment of 1653 married during the Lenten Season of the new year. Neither did they marry that spring and summer; the colonists were too busy clearing land, planting, and harvesting their crops.

The other women of the recruitment waited until the fall of 1654 to celebrate their nuptials. Then there was a flurry of weddings. Three occurred on October 13: Catherine Hurault married Jean

⁹ Lanctot, *Montréal under Maisonneuve*, 58-59. Campeau, *The Jesuits and Early Montréal*, 127-131. Atherton, *Montréal Under the French Régime*, 114-115. Those going downriver could make the trip in two days – four or five days when the weather was unfavorable.

¹⁰ Simpson, *Marguerite Bourgeoys and Montréal*, 108.

¹¹ The details of the marriages of the women in this story come from PRDH marriage records of Notre-Dame de Montréal, linked to scanned parish records at Genealogy Québec.

Lemarché, Jeanne Rousselière married Pierre Gaudin *dit* Chatillon, and Catherine Lorion married Pierre Vilenne. The community celebrated four marriages in November, three taking place on the same day. On November 9, Jeanne Merrin married Éloi Jarry *dit* Lahaye, Marie Dumesnil married André Charly *dit* Saint-Ange, and Jeanne Védié married Jean Dumais. On November 23, 1654, Marie Lorgueil married Toussant Hunault *dit* Deschamps in the last wedding to be celebrated in Ville-Marie that year.

There were also three young women from the recruitment of 1653 who remained in Québec over the winter and married there in the fall of 1654. Possibly these women were too sick after their trip across the Atlantic to travel to Ville-Marie upon their arrival the previous year. The first to marry was Marie Renaudin de La Blanchetière, who wed Nicolaus Levieux de Hauteville on September 10. Twenty-one-year-old Marie Renaud married the recruit Mathurin Langevin *dit* Lacroix on October 5, 1654. On the same day, Michelle Artus married Jean Decary. Governor Maisonneuve, who was then in Québec, witnessed these weddings. Marie Renaudin de La Blanchetière remained at Québec; the latter two women traveled on to Ville-Marie with their husbands. Many of the male immigrants to the colony returned to France after they had fulfilled their commitments as *engagés*. Women were more likely to remain. However, not all the women stayed in Canada. Marie Renaudin de La Blanchetière gave birth to a child in Québec in September 1655 and then returned to France.

Fate was not kind to the hundred men who signed on to come to Montréal Island in 1653. A third died within the first ten years of leaving their mother country. The women recruited in 1653 fared better than the men. None perished on the voyage across the Atlantic.¹² Only Marie-Marthe Pinson died in the ten years following their arrival, one week after giving birth to her sixth child in January 1663. Six of the fourteen women saw the dawn of the eighteenth century.¹³

The men and women who arrived in the fall of 1653 helped to ensure the survival of the fledgling colony. Given the small size of the settlement and the large number of victims of Iroquois wrath,

¹² Campeau, *The Jesuits and Early Montréal*, 127; Auger, *La Grande Recrue de 1653*, 15. A list of all the male and female recruits of 1653 is included in Auger's book.

¹³ *PRDH* family records, with links to scanned parish records at Genealogy Québec.

the destruction of the colony often seemed imminent. The Montréal project almost certainly would have failed without these reinforcements from France.

Life was a struggle and challenge for everyone who settled in Ville-Marie in those early years. For some of these pioneer women, dreams of a better life were dashed. Others successfully established a home and family, despite everything they had to endure. For more information on the founding of Ville-Marie and on the Grande Recrue of 1653, see Susan McNelley's *The Women of Ville-Marie: Pioneers of Seventeenth-Century Montréal*.

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LA GRANDE RECRUE DE 1653

Ils venaient surtout de la région de La Flèche mais également d'autres provinces de France à l'initiative de Jérôme Le Royer de La Dauversière. Embarqués à Saint-Nazaire le 20 juillet 1653, sur le Saint-Nicolas-de-Nantes, ils arrivèrent à Québec deux mois plus tard avant de mettre pied à terre à Ville-Marie le 16 novembre 1653.

*« Ils ont sauvé l'île de Montréal et tout le Canada aussi »
De Denonville et De Champigny (1687)*

ARTUS, Michelle
AUGER dit Le Baron, Jean
AVERTY dit Léger, Maurice
BAREAU dit Lagogue, Pierre
BASTARD, Yves
BAUDREAU dit Graveline, Urbain
BAUDRY dit L'Épinette, Antoine
BENOIT dit Nivernais, Paul
BESNARD dit Bourjoli, René
BITEAU dit Saint-Laurent, Louis
BOIVIN dit Panse, Jacques
BONDY, René
BOUCHARD, Étienne
BOURGEOIS, Marguerite
BOUVIER, Michel
BOUZE, Pierre
BRASSIER, Jacques
BROSSARD, Urbain
CADIEU, Jean
CHARTIER dit Robert, Guillaume
CHARTIER, Louis
CHAUVIN dit le Grand Pierre, Pierre
CHEVALIER, Louis
CHEVASSET, Antoine
CRUSSON dit Pilote, François
DANIS dit Tourangeau, Honoré
DAUBIGEON, Julien
DAVOUST, Jean
DENIAU, Jean
DENIAU dit Destailis, Marin
DE RENNES dit Pachane, Bertrand
DESAUTELS dit Lapointe, Pierre
DESORSON, Zacharie
DESPRÉS dit Berré, Simon
DOUSSIN, René
DUCHARME dit Lafontaine, Flacé

DUMESNIL, Marie
DUVAL, Nicolas
FONTAINE dit Le Petit Louis, Louis
FRESNOT, Jean
FRUITIER, Jean
GAILLARD dit Leprieur, Christophe
GALBRUN, Simon
GASTEAU, Jean
GAUDIN dit Chastillon, Pierre
GENDRON dit Rolandière, Guillaume
GERVAIS, Jean
GRÉGOIRE, Louis
GUERTIN dit Le Sabotier, Louis
GUYET, Jean
HARDY, Pierre
HOURAY dit Grandmont, René
HUDIN, François
HUNAUULT dit Deschamps, Toussaint
HURAUULT, Catherine
HURTUBISE, André
HURTUBISE, Marin
JANNEAU dit Lachapelle, Marin
JETTE, Urbain
JOUANNEAU, Mathurin
JOUSSELIN, Nicolas
JOUSSET dit Laloire, Mathurin
LAIR, Étienne
LANGEVIN dit Lacroix, Mathurin
LA SAUDRAYE, Louis
LAUZON, Gilles
LECOMTE, Jean
LEFEBVRE dit Lapierre, Pierre
LEMERCHER dit Laroche, Jean
LEROY (ROY), Simon
LORGUEIL, Marie

LORION, Catherine
LOUVART dit Desjardins, Michel
MARTIN dit Lamontagne, Olivier
MARTIN dit Larivière, Pierre
MERRIN, Jeanne
MEUNIER, Perrine
MILLET dit Le Beauceron, Nicolas
MILLOT dit Laval, Jacques
MOUSSEAU dit Laviolette, Jacques
NAL, Jacques
NOCHER, François
OLIVIER dit le Petit Breton, Jean
PAPIN, Pierre
PICARD dit Lafortune, Hugues
PICARD, Jean
PINSON, Marie-Marthe
PIRON dit Lavallée, François
PIRON, Pierre
PRESTROY dit Laviolette, Jean
RAGUIDEAU dit St-Germain, Pierre
RENAUD, Marie
RENAUDIN, Marie
ROBIN dit Desforges, Étienne
ROBUTEL de Saint-André, Claude
RODAILLER, René
ROGER, Christophe
ROINAY, François
ROUSSELIER, Jeanne
SOLDE, Jeanne
TAVERNIER dit Laforêt, Jean
THEODORE dit Gilles, Michel
VACHER dit Saint-Julien, Sylvestre
VALETS, Jean
VALIQUET dit Laverdure, Jean
VOIDY, Jeanne

Cette plaque a été dévoilée le 12 octobre 2003 à l'occasion du 350^e anniversaire de l'arrivée à Ville-Marie de la Grande Recrue de 1653 par M. Gérald Tremblay, maire de Montréal, M. Guy-Michel Chauveau, maire de La Flèche et des représentants des organismes suivants :

La Société généalogique canadienne-française

La Société historique de Montréal

La Fédération des familles souches québécoises

Pointe-à-Callière, musée d'archéologie et d'histoire de Montréal

Réplique, 2008
Ville de Montréal