



# NEW FRANCE, NEW HOME

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**T**he wind snapped in the sails as the wooden ship ploughed through the Atlantic. Marie and Eloise, both 14 years old, climbed out onto the deck for the first time in a week. Their knees were wobbly, and their stomachs were still churning.

“*Mon dieu*,” said Marie to her friend, “you look green!”

“So do you,” said Eloise. “But at least we are still alive.”

“Yes, we are still alive.” Marie looked at her friend’s faint smile. “And we will survive.”

Two months earlier, back in France, Marie and Eloise had been excited to finally be free of the orphanage. With a dowry from King Louis himself, they were going to New France to find adventure — and husbands.

In May of 1671, Marie and Eloise joined nearly 100 other *filles du roi* on the sixth ship to travel to Quebec with potential wives for the men of the colony. Soon

after they departed, Marie had joked that all the good men would be taken before the ship arrived. One of the chaperones had replied that the girls were lucky to have a chance to marry anyone at all.

As a poor orphan, Marie knew this was true. Still, she and her companions dreamed of finding happiness in New France.

But as the weeks had dragged by, their excitement faded. Many of the girls had grown weak from seasickness. They’d tried to choke down the salt pork and hard biscuits they were given, but some just couldn’t eat. When bad weather kept them below deck, two had grown so ill that they’d nearly died.

It had been a difficult voyage. But now, finally, a watery sun was shining, and the girls were able to escape the rank smells of their sleeping quarters. Marie breathed in the cool, salty air and hummed to herself. Things were looking up.

## FIRST SIGHT OF NEW FRANCE

Days later, the ship left the ocean for the journey up the St. Lawrence River to Quebec. The girls stood on deck and stared at the land that was to be their home. When they learned they were close to their destination, many ran to change their clothes and fix their hair. They wanted to make a good first impression.

Their efforts weren't wasted. There were scores of men waiting at the dock when the ship finally anchored. Marie stared at the

eager faces looking up at the latest batch of *filles du roi*. Would one of these strangers soon be her husband?

The girls lined up to leave the ship and walk to the convent that would be their home until they were married. They smiled shyly as they passed the young men. Keeping a respectful distance, the men smiled back.

When they reached their quarters at the convent, the girls collapsed with exhaustion. Marie and Eloise were asleep in moments. But the nuns knew that after a few days' rest, the girls would be strong again.

## A BACHELOR COMES CALLING

In the following days and weeks, many potential husbands travelled up the road to the nunnery. Nineteen-year-old Pierre DuLois was among them. He was a *habitant* with a well-established farm. Even though he worried that he might be turned down because of his plain looks, he knew he had to try for a wife. Jean Talon, the *intendant* of New France, had said that if the young men of his colony didn't

marry, they would have to pay a fine.

Pierre lined up with the other men until he was called into a small room. Inside was a nun sitting behind a table. Sister Catherine stared at him, sizing him up. She asked him questions about his family and his health. She also asked if he drank or had bad habits. He couldn't tell if she approved of him or not.

"So, *monsieur*," she said sternly, "I suppose you, too, want the most beautiful girl we have for your wife."

"Oh no, sister. I know that such a wife is not for me. I ..." His voice trailed away.

## DAUGHTERS OF THE KING

In the early 1660s, there were only about 3,000 settlers living in New France. And most of them were men. Without more women, the population couldn't grow.

King Louis XIV and his government knew something had to be done. In 1663, they began to send girls to New France to marry the men there. These

girls were called *filles du roi* — daughters of the king. Most came from orphanages or from poor farming families.

Between 1663 and 1673, nearly 800 *filles du roi* arrived in New France. Most got married soon after they arrived. Slowly, families began to grow. And so did the population of the colony!



Photo: *Les Filles du Roi*, Eleanor Fortescue Brickdale, Library and Archives Canada (C-020126)

“You want something, DuLois. What is it?” Her eyes were curious — and cold.

*I might as well tell her,* he thought. *But what if it’s asking for too much?* “I ... I was hoping for a girl who likes to sing.”

“Sing?” Sister Catherine repeated sharply. Just that morning, she’d heard one of the girls singing during chores. “Hmm,” she murmured, then stood and left the room.

Pierre clutched his new hat, nearly twisting the brim off with his strong hands. *What have I done?*

## A MATCH IS MADE

“Marie!” Sister Catherine’s voice rang up the stairs to the girls’ bedroom. “I’d like you to meet someone.”

Marie felt frozen to the floor. Eloise jumped off the bed where she’d been sitting and gave Marie a hug. “See? I told you it would be your



turn soon. I hope you are as lucky as I have been.” Eloise gave her a push. “Go. Go. Then hurry back and tell me everything!”

Marie smoothed her hair then hurried down the stairs.

“There’s a young man here who’s hoping for a girl who sings,” said Sister Catherine. She looked at Marie’s white face and patted her kindly on the shoulder. “Come along, Marie,” she whispered. “You are serving your king, remember?”

Marie remembered, but it didn’t make her feel much better. When she entered the room, she looked at the young man Sister Catherine

had chosen. He wore wool pants, moccasins, and an animal skin coat cinched with a *ceinture flechée*. He smelled of wood smoke and the soap he’d washed with that morning. He wasn’t really handsome, but his skin was clear and tanned, and his brown eyes glimmered when she said hello.

Sister Catherine retreated to a far corner of the room. No one spoke.

*He’s shy,* thought Marie. With a small smile she said, “I was told you want a girl who likes to sing. Why?”

When Pierre heard her voice, his heart soared. If only this pretty girl would

take him. “My mother sang to me and my brothers and sisters every night before bed. Her beautiful voice is the most important memory of my childhood. I wish similar memories for my own children ... if ...” he blushed, “if I ever have a family.”

Marie felt herself blushing, too. For a moment she pictured herself years later, singing softly to Pierre and their children. Though love wasn’t there yet, Marie suspected that this man was right for her.

Pierre was nervous. She hadn’t said anything — and she was looking at him strangely! “If ... you ... don’t want me,” he stammered. “I mean, my brother told me I was too homely for anyone to marry. So, I could just go ...”

Marie smiled and took a deep breath. “You certainly may go,” she said. “But only to tell your brother how wrong he is — and to invite him to our wedding.” **K**