



Heritage Notes

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The Congregation of Notre-Dame in 18th-Century Louisbourg

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First on Cape Breton Island, then in exile in France, the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame served the people of Louisbourg for many decades. Their aim was always to educate young girls, and in that they were an unqualified success. The Sisters' achievement was all the more remarkable in light of the many difficulties and hardships they had to overcome.

The story of the Congregation of Notre-Dame at Louisbourg reveals a great deal about the 18th-century fortified town. It also shows how the Sisters' commitment to duty, through perseverance, led to fulfilment and accomplishment.

The Congregation of Notre-Dame

The Congregation of Notre-Dame, like many of the religious orders and communities which helped shape society in New France, was founded in the 1600s. More so than the 18th century, the 17th century was a time of profound missionary zeal and fervour.

Marguerite Bourgeoys, born in Troyes (France) in 1620, was one of those who felt the religious call to action. She became motivated to come to North America and contribute in a practical way to the development of the France's overseas colony.

Marguerite Bourgeoys crossed the Atlantic for the first time in 1653. She was soon a moral and social force at Montreal (Ville Marie). She began teaching in 1658. In 1670 she received from Louis XIV the official letters patent for the Congregation of Notre-Dame, a



Marguerite Bourgeoys. Painting by Sr. St. Renée. Courtesy Centre Marguerite Bourgeoys, Congrégation de Notre Dame, Montreal. P.Q.

community of women dedicated to female education. The sisters took the same vows as many religious orders - poverty, chastity and obedience - yet unlike most of the rest, the Sisters of the Congregation remained a non-cloistered community. That is, they lived, worked and served in the day-to-day world.

The motherhouse of the Congregation was - and still is today - in Montreal. Yet the influence of the Sisters of Notre-Dame was felt far beyond that settlement on the St. Lawrence River. They established schools throughout New France. By 1731 there were sisters in no

fewer than 12 different missions. By 1760 there were 70 sisters belonging to the Congregation of Notre-Dame, which was more than twice as many as the next largest community of nuns in New France. Competent and dedicated, the Sisters of the Congregation earned respect and admiration wherever they served.

Educational Situation in Louisbourg

During the initial settlement of Louisbourg the administrators of the colony did not see any need for teachers or schools. Instead, the focus was on economic, social and military questions: getting the fishery well established, the community organized, and the soldiers and fortifications in place. Instruction and literacy were not a priority. Moreover, it was an era when the state was not usually involved in education. Such matters were generally left to the church, or to private tutors for those who could afford to hire them. So it was in Louisbourg, where the well-to-do could afford to employ private teachers or to send their children to France or to Quebec or Montreal.

The first person to propose sending teaching sisters to Louisbourg was the Bishop of Quebec, Saint-Vallier. Beginning in 1724, eleven years after the town had begun, the bishop proposed sending representatives from the Montreal-based Congregation of Notre-Dame to the new colony. Saint-Vallier was responding to reports he had received of the children growing up in Louisbourg with "*bad morals*," ignorant of the basic principles of the Roman Catholic religion. It was said that the children were "*almost completely without the necessary means for Christian education*." The bishop was especially concerned about the girls of the town. If the Sisters of the Congregation could be sent to the colony, Saint-Vallier contended, it would have a positive, community-wide impact.

In Louisbourg, the governor and commissaire-ordonnateur supported the bishop's idea. Unfortunately, the Minister of the Marine in France would not agree to offer any financial assistance. He said it was too early for such a step in the young colony. In truth, there were at the time already over 300 children in the town.

In addition to the lack of official approval in France and the funding assistance

that went with it, there was another hurdle. The Superior of the Congregation of Notre-Dame in Montreal, Marguerite Trottier, had doubts as to whether or not the initiative was a good one. Who would provide for the Sisters subsistence? Who would provide spiritual direction? The Sisters were supposed to be under the guidance of secular priests, but there were none in Louisbourg. The parish was served by the Récollets, who were regular clergy.

The situation was at an impasse. The town's children needed both instruction and education, but neither the authorities in France nor within the Congregation of Notre-Dame would take the first step. Had it not been for a bold initiative, the situation might have continued for several more years to come.

The Congregation of Notre-Dame Comes to Louisbourg

Bishop Saint-Vallier took matters into his own hands. He acted on his own authority and despatched a teaching sister to Louisbourg in 1727. The individual he sent was 53-year-old Marguerite Roy (Soeur de la Conception). She had an excellent reputation as a teacher and was pleased to participate in Saint-Vallier's plan to establish a school for girls at Louisbourg. She was accompanied by two lay assistants. The school opened in October 1727 and by mid-December had 22 boarders. The number of day students is not known.

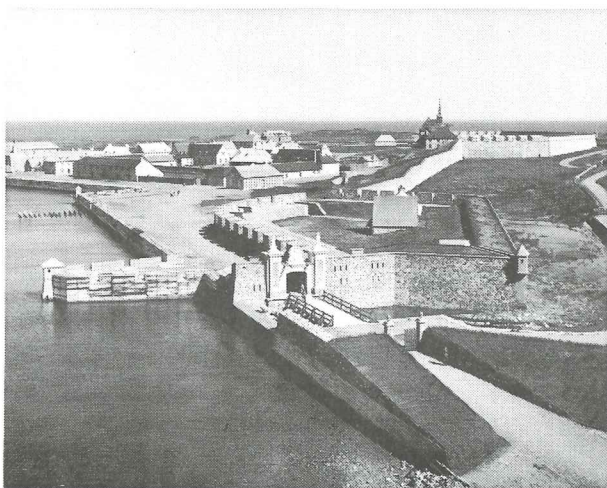
Settling In at Louisbourg

Since Marguerite Roy had arrived in Louisbourg without the approval of either the Minister of the Marine or her own Superior within the Congregation of Notre-Dame, there was doubt as to whether or not the school and the sisters attached to it would have the finances to stay. The Louisbourg governor and commissaire-ordonnateur asked the minister in France to consider providing wages or other assistance. One idea was that the sale of goods from the wreck of the *Chameau*, a ship that had sunk in 1725, be used to establish the nuns and their school. The minister delayed answering the question until 1730. At that time he agreed

that the Louisbourg contingent of the Congregation of Notre-Dame would receive an annual subsidy of 1500 *livres*. The future looked bright for the Louisbourg sisters.

Unfortunately, Marguerite Roy had entered into the purchase of a property that was well beyond her means. Fully two-thirds of the annual subsidy was committed to making payments on the building, leaving little for food, firewood, and other necessities of life. The sister found it impossible to make the required payments.

Trying as the financial problems were, Marguerite Roy was next faced with an outright attempt to have her recalled to Montreal. Saint-Vallier had died and Pierre-Hermann Dosquet, coadjutor to an absentee Bishop of Quebec (and soon to become bishop himself), wrote that Roy was not suited to be in charge of a mission. He described her as *"the most deceitful, the most scheming nun, and the one filled with the most illusions that I know."* The local governor and commissaire spoke up in her defence, calling her beloved and respected, an edifying presence in the town. Besides her educational work, the sister had shown great charity during the smallpox outbreak of 1732-33 when she had taken more than 20 orphaned girls into the convent house and put them under her care. In the end, Dosquet's influence prevailed. Marguerite Roy, foundress of the Louisbourg school, was recalled to Montreal. Due to delays, she would not make the trip until 1734.



The partially reconstructed Fortress of Louisbourg

In August 1733, three new sisters arrived from Montreal to take over the Louisbourg mission. In charge was Marguerite Trottier (Soeur St-Joseph), the very woman who as Superior had earlier refused to agree to starting a school at Louisbourg.

The new sisters continued the good works and good will that Marguerite Roy had established. Abbé Pierre Maillard would write that after the arrival of the Sisters of the Congregation in Louisbourg, the whole moral tone of the town had improved. Before, the inhabitants *"scarcely partook of the Eucharist at Eastertide such was the state of religion."* Since the coming of the *"good sisters,"* because of their good example, parishioners were taking the sacrament more often, *"nearly every Sunday and feast day."* Even Thomas Pichon, who wrote scathingly of the male religious at Louisbourg, described the Sisters as *"women of true piety."*

Facing the Difficulties

Marguerite Roy's purchase of a property beyond the means of the Congregation left the Sisters with a legacy of financial difficulties. There were other hardships as well.

Soon after Marguerite Trottier arrived in 1733 she wrote to Montreal asking for assistance. She and the two other sisters were often ill and found it difficult to cope with teaching the boarders and day students as well as doing the many household tasks. The motherhouse responded by sending out two additional sisters and a novice. Thus, by 1734, there were six Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame in Louisbourg. This helped reduce the workload, but it must be remembered the royal subsidy was fixed at 1500 *livres* regardless of the number.

To give the Sisters additional income the governor and commissaire designated them as the recipients of various fines in the town. They also purchased bedclothes and straw ticks made by the Sisters and their students for use in the soldiers barracks and the hospital. The Minister of the Marine finally agreed to help with the mortgage payments, by providing a special subsidy. Soon, there was more good news. Governor De Forant died in 1740 and

left a large bequest to the Louisbourg Congregation in recognition of their good work. Touching only the interest on the bequest, the Sisters of Notre-Dame would have 1600 *livres* a year in income. Once royal officials in France learned of that income, however, they cut off the annual subsidy which came from the king.

The hardships at Louisbourg took their toll. In 1744, in failing health after eleven arduous years, Marguerite Trottier and another sister set sail for Montreal. The superior of the Louisbourg mission died aboard the ship as it approached Quebec.

Less than a year later, in 1745, Louisbourg found itself besieged, blockaded and eventually captured by troops from New England supported by the Royal Navy. Along with almost all the other French inhabitants, the Sisters were deported to France. They made their way to La Rochelle where they lodged in an hospital for orphan girls. One of the Louisbourg sisters passed away within a month of reaching France.

For the next few years, the surviving sisters lived in misery and sickness. They no longer received any significant financial assistance. There was an attempt to persuade them to cross the Atlantic to rejoin the Montreal motherhouse, but they refused. They feared the voyage and the possibility of British capture.

With the return of Louisbourg to the French by treaty (in 1748), the Congregation of Notre-Dame and most of the other inhabitants of the town returned to the colony. On arrival they discovered that their former convent and school was no longer habitable. They had to rent another building, which was smaller and which meant that they could not accept as many students. Finally, in 1753, they had assurances of royal assistance to erect a large building. Work began and was proceeding well, when a violent hurricane destroyed the structure. It would be several more years before they could rebuild again.

Impact on Literacy

Despite the countless hardships they had to deal with, the Congregation of Notre-Dame had a great impact on the education of girls at Louisbourg. The Sisters' work, combined with their willingness to accept charity cases, meant

that many girls learned to read and write than would otherwise have been possible. Analysis reveals that young women raised in Louisbourg had a much higher literacy rate than males brought up in the same town. This was undoubtedly due to the dedicated work of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame.

The many contributions the Sisters made to Louisbourg were commemorated in 1946, when a stone monument was raised where the convent once stood. That spot is now a stop on the Fortress of Louisbourg's "Ruins Tour."

Want to Know More?

A good starting place is the Marguerite Bourgeoys Center on York Street in Sydney. This museum opened recently, across the street from Holy Angels School.

For reading material, we suggest the following:

The Dictionary of Canadian Biography contains short biographies of Marguerite Bourgeoys, Marguerite Roy and Marguerite Trottier.

A.J.B. Johnston, *Religion in Life at Louisbourg, 1713-1758*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984. (see especially Chapter 4)

A.J.B. Johnston, "Education and Female Literacy at Eighteenth-Century Louisbourg: The Work of the Soeurs de la Congregation de Notre-Dame," 48-66, in J. Donald Wilson, *An Imperfect Past, Education and Society in Canadian History*. Vancouver: Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction, 1984.

[Lemire-Marsolais] (Sister Sainte-Henriette), *Histoire de la Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Montréal*. Montréal: CND, 1941. 9 vols.

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