

# The King's Daughters (Les Filles du Roi)

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My eight-great-grandmother was a king's daughter, but she was not a royal. Instead, she was a pioneer. Madeleine Guerin was born about 1647 in Vauxaillon, France. At about the age of 18, she left her home and family to go to New France (Canada). King Louis XIV of France was eager to increase the French population of his new colony, and he set up a number of programs to achieve that goal. One of the more successful attempts was the King's Daughters (Les Filles du Roi).

The first King's Daughters were selected from the upper class, hand-picked to become wives of the gentlemen and military officers in an effort to encourage these men to remain in New France. The women, however, were ill-suited for the rugged life in the vast, unsettled wilderness with its hostile Indians and harsh winter weather. Subsequent women underwent an intensive screening process. Each girl had to have a birth certificate and a letter from a priest or government official stating she was free to marry, and she had to be healthy and strong enough to do the work she would have to do to run a household.

It cost 10 livres (pounds) to send each girl to New France. That included the cost of clothing for the voyage and the voyage itself, paid for by the king. Each girl also received a package consisting of everyday items such as a hat and gloves, handkerchief, stockings, shoelaces, a comb, ribbon, white thread and 100 needles and 1,000 pins, scissors, two knives and two livres of cash.

After leaving home, the girls waited in Paris until there were enough of them to fill a ship. Most then traveled two weeks to the port of Dieppe, although a few left from the port of LaRochelle. It took another two months to cross the Atlantic aboard cargo ships

by side on thin mattresses in the hold at the back of the ship. Living conditions were primitive, and the hold was filled with the smells of cargo, which often included livestock, and odors of every day living and seasickness.

Upon arriving in New France, the first stop for most of the King's Daughters was Quebec City, where they were housed in an Ursuline monastery and in later years in a house specifically built for them. There they were taught basic home skills essential to running a household, including sewing, knitting, weaving, cooking, washing clothes and using plants and herbs to make natural medicines. Periodically, the girls received additional money to pay their expenses while awaiting marriage, which usually happened within four or five months of their arrival.

When a man was ready to marry, he would come to the house and meet with his prospective wife, in the presence of a chaperone. He had to apply to the directress of the lodging for permission to marry and had to show that he made a good living and had sufficient possessions to provide for a family. The girls were free to select or reject a potential husband.

Once married, the couple was usually given a couple of chickens and pigs, an ox, a cow and two barrels of salted meat. Additionally, there was an incentive to have large families, with the couple receiving 300 livres for 10 children and 400 for 12 or more. The families had to farm to provide food for their table, so having many children was a necessity rather than a burden.

Ten years after the program began, it ended when the French government felt it was no longer needed, that the colony in New France had enough marriageable women of its own. There were more than 760 women who had traveled to New France as King's Daughters, and the population had grown to 6,700. The program was a