

Curriculum for Franco-American Women of Maine, Grades 7-12

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Researched and written by Rhea Côté Robbins, © 2001

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"I believe that it is time to introduce these French women pioneers. ☐As a young lady once asked me, 'Were there ever any?'"
-Corinne Rocheleau

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☐☐☐The immigration of the French to the North American continent, for the most part, does not take place with immigrants passing through Ellis Island. The entry point for the French immigrants, beginning in the early 1600s up until the conquest by the English in 1765 for Quebec and the deportation in 1755 in Acadia, was into Canada, also known as New France, and then immigrating via a border crossing into the United States. ☐The French came to North America, New France, via the St. Lawrence River and settled the many towns along the river. ☐Québec, Ville-Marie as Montréal was first known, Isle d'Orleans and many more towns were the first homes to the French. ☐The French, and how they came to be in the state of Maine and the Northeast via a land bridge, border crossing, makes them a unique cultural immigration group. ☐They came for many reasons, some to stay in the U.S. and some who returned to their homelands in Canada. Most of them came to live and work and have been here for several generations. ☐All levels of society immigrated to the U.S.: ☐professional, clergy, religious, laborer, merchant and more.

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☐☐☐The long history of immigration to the North American continent by the French culture, since the 1600s, brings to mind the question: ☐Who were the Franco-American heroines? ☐The following is an introduction to a play written by Corinne Rocheleau, an early Franco-American women writer, which was commissioned by the Cercle Jeanne-Mance in the early 1900s, and it brings to mind the idea that there were heroines who made important contributions to the settlement and development of the North American continent. ☐The legacy of these women lives today in the Franco-American women of Maine.

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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE
HISTORICAL SKETCHES & EXCERPTS FROM THE LIVES OF THE PRINCIPAL
HEROINES OF NEW FRANCE

☐
As performed in Worcester, Massachusetts on February 10, 1915

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PREFACE

☐
Some say that a happy people have no history. ☐If this saying applies to individuals, we must believe that the first French women in America were happy for we seldom hear about them.

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We have often discussed the major feats and accomplishments of the French colonists, but we have left their "better halves" in semi-darkness. ☐I believe that it is time to introduce these French women pioneers. As a young lady once asked me, "Were there ever any?"

☐
It is truly sad that so few details survive concerning these courageous women who confronted the dangers of long and stormy ocean crossings to establish themselves in a strange and foreign country. ☐The centuries have practically erased all traces of their footsteps on American soil.

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To find the names of these heroines, we must consult the old records of Québec, of Montreal, of Detroit or of New Orleans. If this proves to be too much, we need only to look in the monumental work "Dictionnaire Généalogique de Tanguay" which would prove to us that so many thousands of these pioneer women lived and died. A genealogical dictionary, however, does not tell their stories.

But, by studying the Canadian and American archives, these women appear - almost like magic - from their pages. Taken aback by their beauty, their charm and dare I say it, their French mentality, I have retrieved them - one by one - from the cloudy depths of history where they have been hidden - first of all for the sheer pleasure of admiring them like cameos from the past and finally for the greater pleasure of seeing them reborn as interpreted by the members of the "Cercle Jeanne-Mance."

No one asked me why I did not interpret Marie de L'Incarnation, Marguerite Bourgeois and the "Soeurs Hospitalieres". It is because these have been interpreted by others more capable than I. It is also because I thought it best to leave these religious sisters hidden beneath their veils, in their cloisters, relegating to those who worked alongside them - women such as Madame de la Peltrie and Jeanne Mance the task of revealing the arduous life of these wonderful women.

Corinne Rocheleau
Worcester, Massachusetts - August 1915

As well as those women mentioned above, the play is about heroines (which can all be researched on the internet) such as:

Huron Squaw
Mrs. Louis Hébert
Guillemette, her daughter, first female settlers in Québec
Mrs. Samuel de Champlain
Mrs. de la Peltrie
Mrs. de la Tour, baronne de St. Estienne
Lady in Waiting
Jeanne Mance
Mrs. Jacques de Lalande
Mrs. Louis Jolliet
Madeleine de Vercheres
Jeanne le Ber
Jeanne le Ber's cousin
Mrs. de la Mothe-Cadillac
and in the EPILOGUE
A Franco-American mother and her daughters
Marie and Françoise.
(Roy, 1999)

(Editor's Note: To the above list, I would add Les Filles du Roi, the King's Daughters)

Now almost a century has passed and we are to investigate the lives of the Franco-American women and we too believe that it is time to introduce these French women pioneers and to learn more about their descendants.

Where would a learner begin to look for the Franco-American women in the history of Maine? Where would their presence be felt and seen? Who are they and where have they left their imprint? What was the primary language for many of these women? Were they French speakers exclusively, and when or where is the English language introduced? What are the issues of becoming a citizen of the United States when one is of the French language and cultural heritage group? What happens in the process of assimilation, or if not, what does that mean for a women?

To begin with, Franco-American women are not all the same. Some are of Québec heritage, some are Acadian, Métis, Mixed Blood, French Canadian, 'Cajun, Creole and Huguenot.

FRANCO-AMERICAN

United States residents of French heritage and culture (more than 10 million) having full or partial expression of the North American French language and culture reflecting at least two distinct historical experiences as well as other distinctions.

Québec: Québec roots: History, folklore, culture and language marked by the

Québec rural farm depopulation of the latter part of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century and their "overnight" settling in urban textile manufacturing areas of the Northeast with smaller numbers in the wood cutting and farming economy.

□

Acadian: Acadian roots: History, folklore, culture and language marked by the maritime--Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island--historical home of their forebears and the Acadian dispersion of 1755 and 1785. In the North East they are found mostly in Maine's St John Valley with smaller settlements elsewhere in Maine, in Massachusetts, Connecticut

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Métis: □A person of mixed racial/cultural heritage--generally applied to Native American and French American "métissage" of race and culture. People of mixed French Canadian and Indian heritage.

□

Mixed Blood: □A person of French and other cultural heritage(s).

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French Canadian: □An older version defining the French population of the Northeast. Comparable to Franco-American.

□

I include the next three definitions because of the possibility of comparison/contrast history being done with the cultural connection to the Maine Franco-American/Acadian heritage group:

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'Cajun: Cajun is a person who descends from Acadian exiles banished from Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century and -- importantly -- all the ethnic groups with whom those exiles and their offspring intermarried on the south Louisiana frontier (for example, French, German, and Spanish settlers).

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Creole: A Creole, however, is a native south Louisianan whose ancestry is black, white, or mixed-race (black-white, black-Indian, black-white-Indian), usually of French-speaking heritage.

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Huguenot: The Huguenots were French Protestants who were members of the Reformed Church established in France by John Calvin in about 1555, and who, due to religious persecution, were forced to flee France to other countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Considerable numbers of Huguenots migrated to British North America, especially to the Carolinas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and New York. Their character and talents in the arts, sciences, and industry were such that they are generally felt to have been a substantial loss to the French society from which they had been forced to withdraw, and a corresponding gain to the communities and nations into which they settled.

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□□□□□ The question remains why this particular heritage group is of importance to address in the Maine classroom. □ Sheer numbers of immigrants coming from Québec and Acadian lands would warrant a serious look at this cultural group.

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□□□□□ Between 1840 and 1930 roughly 900 000 French Canadians left Canada to emigrate to the United States, mostly to the Northeast. This important migration, which has now been largely forgotten in Quebec's collective memory, is certainly one of the major events in Canadian demographic history. According to the 1980 American census, 13.6 million Americans claimed to have French ancestors. While a certain number of these people may be of French, Belgian, Swiss, Cajun or Huguenot ancestry, it is certain that a large proportion would have ancestors who emigrated from French Canada or Acadia during the 19th and 20th centuries. Indeed, it has been estimated that, in the absence of emigration, there would be 4 to 5 million more francophones living in Canada today. Around 1900, there would scarcely have been a French-Canadian or Acadian family that did not have some of its members living in the United States. (Belanger, 1999) [On-line]. Available: <http://www2.marianopolis.edu/quebechistory/readings/leaving.htm>. Accessed August 12, 2001.

□□□□□ The 4 to 5 million residents are now in the United States and 40% of the population of the state of Maine is of French heritage. □ Of these, many are women.

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Where are the women and how to study their contributions?

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Geographically, the state of Maine can be divided into Northern, Central, and Southern sections when looking at the geographical gathering points for the Franco-Americans. □ Each section would reveal a history of rural, urban, mill worker, professional, farmer, farmer's wife, life of the religious, and more. □ There can be templates of the inherent culture of each geographical section, but the danger would be to allow stereotypes to define these women and their lives. □ Under each category of cultural geography there would be many subsets of history defining the lives of the Franco-American women.

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Each section would have a cultural geography which is unique and similar to the larger cultural definition of Franco-American historical perspectives. □ Franco-American women have played a very important role in the settlement and development of the entire state. □ The challenge would be to learn the known contributors and to further investigate the women of the various communities.

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Starting in one's own family, or community, conducting interviews of the local women will reveal much about the history of their lives. □ Some women might tell the student interviewing them that they have nothing of interest to say, but if prompted, they have a wealth of information to share. □ The women have not always understood the value of their lives and their contributions. □ First person accounts such as interviews would begin to build a data base of the life stories of the women, their mamans, their mémères, ma tantes, nieces and cousines. □

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Some of the suggestions, while not exhaustive, for finding these women and their histories are to be found in the following:

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Farming
 Wood Harvesting Operations
 Small Town Residents
 Cross-border citizenships
 Nursing Home
 Assisted Living Residences
 Teacher
 Nurse
 Co-operatives
 Religious Life
 Mill Work
 Retail
 Homemaker
 Motherhood
 Single Woman Status
 Married Woman Status
 Divorced
 Separated
 Politics
 Sports
 Medicine
 Midwife/Sage Femme
 Writer
 Journalist
 Singer
 Entertainer
 Waitress
 Public Monuments to women

□

Each section of the state would also have women who have accomplished exemplary achievements. □ Short biographical histories have been recorded about some of these

women and much remains to be done. □ Some of the women, such as Marguerite "Tante Blanche" Thibodeau of northern Maine is an example of one of the unsung heroines of the Franco-American/Acadian culture (see Resource List for web site).

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Another example would be Senator Margaret Chase Smith who was also of Franco-American heritage--a little known fact that her mother was of French ancestry. □ Tracing the history of such an influential woman as Chase Smith would reveal the size of the contributions that Franco-American women have made worldwide. □ The Margaret Chase Smith Library has yet to recognize her Franco-American ancestry. □

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The first president of the Maine Press and Radio Women was a Franco-American woman from Lewiston, Maine. □ Her name was Charlotte Michaud. That organization is still in operation today known as the Maine Media Women. □ The history of this organization is due in part to the dedication of the founding women, one of which was a Franco-American.

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These are only a few of the examples of the women who are prominent and not always included in the history books. □ Many, many more can be discovered and recorded.

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Another source of information would be in primary documents within the family or community such as letters, prayer books, recipe books, baby books, knitting or crochet patterns, baptismal, First Communion, Confirmation records, cemetery headstones, old newspapers, magazines as well as any other type of record keeping that would help define these women and their often silent, but dedicated existence. □ Family and community folklore, stories, songs, plays, and other means of recording the culture of a group who immigrated to the state of Maine. □ Histories of the many orders of nuns is also a little known piece of the general history of Maine. □ Each geographical area of Maine would have had their own order of nuns, or even several orders doing work in the community. □ There are also Franco-Americans who have been members of Protestant religions, both in the past and in the present. □ An example would be the French Baptist Church in Waterville. □ Local town histories would be a source of this kind of event.

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What follows is a list, again not exhaustive, of resources. □ Some will have information on the Franco-American women, and some will not. □ This is a caution to a student doing research. □ Simply because an organization or individual offers Franco-American cultural information, it may not be specific to the women of the culture. □ In order to arrive at the women's lives and their contributions, a student doing research must focus specifically on the women and not on the general culture. □ General Franco-American cultural study does not go deep enough into the inquiry to reveal the women's lives. □ Staying on topic, both in the interview and inquiry process, should be a criteria for the work □ being done on Franco-American women's history.

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There is no better time in history to embark upon such a learning experience because of the resurgence of the local communities and the Franco-American culture to re-learn their histories. □ The field of study is varied and rich in possibilities!

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Resources

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General:

Local Libraries

State Library

University Libraries

Genealogical Societies

Historical Societies

Festival Committees

Local Newspapers, present and past

Auxiliaries to VFW, American Legion

Church Organizations
 Religious Orders
 Church Histories/Archives
 Town/City Records
 State Archives
 Local Historians
 Private Collections/Museums
 Art Museums
 Arts Organizations
 Mill Records
 Military Records
 Civic Organizations
 Economic Organizations
 Bingo Halls
 Laundromats
 Restaurants
 Religious Stores

Northern Maine:

Organizations:

Acadian Archives/archives Acadienne

<http://www.umfk.maine.edu/archives/>

Evangeline 150th Anniversary: Saint John Valley

<http://www.fawi.net/Evangeline.htm>

Tante Blanche Museum

<http://www.acadian.org/blan-f1.html>

Acadian Festival, Madawaska, Maine

<http://www.townofmadawaska.com/cc.html>

Bouchard Family Farm

<http://www.ployes.com/>

Acadian Village - The Virtual Tour - Van Buren, Maine (Founder: Frances A. LeVasseur)

<http://www.themainelink.com/acadianvillage/tour.html>

St. John Valley Times, weekly newspaper

People:

Don Cyr

Ida Roy

Lisa Ornstein

Geraldine Chassé

Ann Roy

Judy Paradis

Central Maine

Organizations:

Franco American Center / Centre Franco-Américain, University of Maine, Orono, Maine, publishes Le Forum

<http://www.francomaine.org/index.htm>

Franco American Studies / Études franco-américaines. University of Maine, Orono, Maine

<http://www.umaine.edu/francoamericanstudies/>

Franco American Women's Institute / l'Institut Femmes Franco-Américaine, Brewer, Maine

<http://www.fawi.net/>



Nos Histoires de L'Ile / Our Stories of the Island French Island, Old Town, Maine
<http://www.old-town.org/nos/>

Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine, Orono, Maine

<http://www.umaine.edu/folklife/>



Historic Byways

http://www.francomaine.org/English/Histo/Histo_intro.html

one being the

Old Canada Road

http://www.francomaine.org/English/Histo/Canada/Canada_intro.html



Chaud-Bec Project

<http://www.chaudiere-kennebec.com/>



The French Connection, Waterville, Maine

<http://members.mint.net/frenchcx/>



People:

Paulette Anne Ducharme, OSU

E-mail: fiainfo@ccmaine.org



Rhea Côté Robbins

RJCR@aol.com

Paula Currie Raymond

Sylvanne Pontin

Linda Gerard de Simonian

Lisa Michaud

Susan Pinette

Amy Morin

Rober Chenard



Southern Maine

Organizations:

Acadian Roots, Rumford, Maine

<http://acadianroots.com/>



Franco American Heritage Collection

Centre d'Héritage Franco-Américain

Lewiston-Auburn College, Lewiston, Maine

<http://usm.maine.edu/lac/franco/franco.html>



Franco-American Studies Program, University of Southern Maine,

Lewiston-Auburn College, Lewiston, Maine

<http://usm.maine.edu/lac/francoamericanstudies/>

Portland Press Herald

<http://www.happyones.com/franco-american/>



Women Religious

<http://www.dioceseportlandmaine.org/religious/>



Catholic Hospitals

http://www.portlanddiocese.net/catholic_hospitals_main.html



Church World, (Franco-American women editors, writers, stories, lay and religious)

Contact the Maine Diocese in Portland, Maine



People:

Marie Therese Martin
 Juliana L'Heureux
 Doris Provencher Faucher
 Madeleine Giguere
 Maureen Perry
 Madeleine Roy

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Rhea Côté Robbins was brought up bilingually in a Franco-American neighborhood in Waterville, Maine known as 'down the Plains.' □ Her *maman* came from Wallagrass, a town in the northern part of the state and her father □ was from Waterville. She has spent many years researching the origins and □ visiting the hometowns of her ancestors in Canada and France. □

Côté Robbins was the winner of the Maine Chapbook Award for her work of creative nonfiction entitled, *Wednesday's Child* □ □ She is a founder and □ Executive Director of the Franco-American Women's Institute. □ She has written a sequel titled 'down the Plains.'

She lives in Brewer with her husband, David. They have three grown children.

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The **Franco-American Women's Curriculum** was written in response to the proposal below:

Looking for teachers to help work with the pilot program

Women in Maine History Project

During the 2001-2002 school year we plan to produce a curriculum guide on "Women in Maine History" featuring women of African American, Franco-American,

Native American, Jewish and other European descent, primarily from the working class. To accomplish this we will organize an advisory group of women and girls who will guide us in working initially with teachers and students in five elementary, middle, or high schools that have students representing the above backgrounds, to identify potential women from Maine history, and to research their stories. The resulting guide will then be made available to other schools in Maine.

The goal of Social Justice & Truth in History is to promote recognition of the histories of working class people, racial, and ethnic minorities and women. We want students and the general public to have a chance to explore American history as it really happened. Our activities to date include producing materials for use in school classrooms, making presentations to schools and the community, participating in the Maine Civil Rights Team project, and collecting oral histories of people from marginalized groups living in Maine.

For more information contact:

Social Justice and Truth in History P.O. Box 633 Monroe, Maine
04951 207-525-4538

sjth@mint.net

Looking for teachers in the following area to help work with the pilot program:

Social Studies Maine Studies American Studies U. S. Studies