

The Danger of Assuming Details about the Past
Suzanne Boivin Sommerville, FCSHM member

A dangerous tendency among both academic historians and family historians is to assume that what is true today or was true in the past in areas very different from New France is also true for that distinct 17th and 18th century society of New France. Some examples:

One writer of historical fiction, early in the novel in a scene set in France, has Marie Grandin and her mother discuss dowries. Marie says: “Oh, why should a girl need a dowry in the first place?” Her mother replies: “Why? Because a woman cannot come to marriage empty-handed, that’s why!” This, however, was not necessarily the case in New France, with its over-supply of eligible bachelors! What is more, this author was, apparently, not aware of the provisions of the *Coutume de Paris* / Custom of Paris, whereby in a marriage contract a future groom promised his future bride a *douaire*, widow’s rights to a sum of money or use of property, should he pre-decease her, and that this *douaire* was not the same as the *dot*, or gift, a bride herself brought to the marriage, a gift known in English law as a dowry. Unlike an English bride, a bride in New France could and often did reserve in her own name all or part of this *dot*, her “dowry” as the English call it, most often provided by her parents (and by King Louis XIV for the *Filles du Roi* / Daughters of the King of 1663-1673). The *dot* sometimes included real property (land). And a wife had rights to half of her husband’s and her community property, which she or someone appointed administered for their minor children, if he died before she did. In addition, under the Custom of Paris, all children, male and female alike, inherited the other half from their surviving parent in equal shares.

This same author placed her 17th century ancestors in a location far from any neighbors, isolated in the forest. It is, however, well-established that French settlements in New France (and at Detroit, both sides of the strait) were planned not in the middle of a forest but along a waterway, like the Rivière Saint-Laurent, or in some secondary *rangs* (conceded subdivisions added in the interior) along another waterway or primitive road, with the family dwellings erected in a line on the river or the interior stream or road. These *rangs* were called *Côtes*. Most concessions of individually granted land outside of cities or towns were narrow ribbons of two to three *arpents* wide at the front, although each concession (not to mention the seigneurie as a whole) could be many more *arpents* deep, often thirty *arpents* for an individual concession, with the as-yet uncleared forest to the rear of whatever land had been prepared for dwellings and farm land. At somewhat more than the distance of a football field, the *habitants* living two *arpents* apart were almost close enough to shout to each other! An *arpent* was 180 French feet or 191.83 English feet; thus two *arpents* would measure 383.66 English feet or about 120 yards in width, a little larger than a football field. This was particularly necessary before the Carignan Regiment subdued the Iroquois by 1668.

An academic historian transformed a French minor nobleman and military captain into a farmer at Lachine, claiming Captain Guillaume de Lorimier’s Panis slave [*sic*: He is never identified as a slave.] “worked alongside Lorimier and his sons clearing, planting, and harvesting” before 1708. One problem (and not the only one) with this apparent statement of fact is that the first of Lorimier’s sons had died by this date; and, although his second son survived to marry in 1730, he would have been only three years old in 1708. So much for Captain de Lorimier “clearing, planting, and harvesting” alongside his sons and his “slave.” The author assumed the sons were of age to work on land that he assumed was a “farm”. This author had no idea that Lachine at that time was primarily a staging point for the fur trade; that the land in question was the property inherited by de Lorimier’s wife; and that captains in the Troops of the Marine were notorious for avoiding manual labor, often impressing their soldiers into serving as their valets and to fetch wood for the fireplace.

This same historian also proclaims that the “two [Cuillerier] brothers, who are often indistinguishable [*sic*] in the records, owned at least sixteen Indian slaves between them. He cites only the lists in Trudel’s

Dictionnaire des esclaves, 309-310, without subjecting this list to any examination. Raw numbers can, after all, lie or distort. He maintains that: “During the 1750s and 1760s, [Pierre Chesne *dit*] Labutte used his wealth **to buy** at least eleven Indian slaves, who bolstered his productive capacity and elevated his status [*sic*] among Detroit’s most influential families.” In total, in the period from 1754 to 1769— fifteen years—nine of the eleven Native Americans Rushforth and Trudel attribute to Pierre Chesne *dit* Labutte *père* in the registers of Ste. Anne de Detroit were said to “belong to him.” Of these nine, five were female, one dying after her birth (Catherine), who most certainly was not “bought”; one adult whose fate is unknown (Charlotte); and the three who died in their teens (1744 Magdeleine, 1746 Magdeleine, 1761 Josette). Four were male: one (1732 Antoine) died in his early teens. At least one male baby also died soon after birth (1766 Charles); he, also, was not “bought.” The fate of the other males cited by Trudel is uncertain. In the 1762 census at Detroit, Labutte had one slave and one hired man. The assumption that all eleven Indian “slaves” identified by Trudel existed at the same time and were “bought” cannot be supported.

Often assumptions are based on other inaccurate views. One concerns the role and function of the Catholic Church in New France and also ignorance about the rites of the Church. Thus some believe that baptism was forced on non-Catholics against their will, particularly on Native Americans. The extant records, however, are filled with examples of individuals who were not baptized until they had been catechumens, students of the religion, their formal baptisms even delayed when they were ill. When researchers see delayed marriages or baptisms, they at times do not know that there had been no priest available to perform the rites any sooner and that correspondence is filled with requests for priests to be assigned. Far too many assume that if an individual was illiterate, that meant he or she was ignorant. This is far from the truth. Literacy is only one subset of skills. Others believe same or similar name equals same person. Especially in French Canada, this is not likely to be true. I urge everyone to pay attention to Anne Morddel’s “French Genealogy Blog” titled “ ‘Mastering Genealogical Proof’ and French Genealogy - Part 5,” on 1 August 2013,¹ which reminds genealogists and historians about

how important it is to clear one's mind of prejudices and assumptions when analysing and correlating. One must leave aside every belief, hope, fear, suspicion, prejudice, dream, assumption and so forth held about the people and lives under scrutiny. Stop suspecting pre-marital sex every time a child is born less than nine months after a marriage, stop suspecting bigamy, stop suspecting false identity, false parents and false ages, stop hoping for nobility or a connection to celebrity [or, I add, in North America, a connection to Indian ancestry]. While any of that may turn out to be the case later, it is catastrophic to the process to have such assumptions or suspicions in mind at the time of analysis for they will becloud vision.

One must have the clarity and observational habits of the scientific researcher who with a pure celibacy of mind sees only what is there and not what he or she desires [or expects] to see.

Stop assuming the current belief that the French robbed Indians of their land and that the particular form of slavery that existed in Colonial America also existed in New France. New France had no “slave quarters”; instead the mainly-Indian slaves (not African) lived with the families of their masters and were often freed when they came of age. Other faulty assumptions are that New France women had few rights and that every voyageur was a fur trader. In fact, they were most often forbidden to trade. And you must realize that some of these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century people traveled a great deal, much more than I imagined before I began to examine the actual documents. Many left a paper trail of legal documents. If you can open your mind and drop assumptions, you might be surprised at what you will

¹ To subscribe to Anne Morddel's blog, go to <http://french-genealogy.typepad.com/genealogy/>

learn. Finally, don't accept, without question, everything that has been published. Many of those who have written about French Canada in the past did not have the whole story, nor did they always understand this society as it is possible to do now with the easier access to documentary sources.