



Yesterday and Today, Francophone Women in Canada

Women's History Month was established in 1992 to celebrate the vital contribution of Canadian women to the history of our country. In this Year of La Francophonie, we honour Canada's Francophone women who moved forward with perseverance and conviction to shape Canada as a nation. From women like Madeleine de Vercheres who defended the Fort of Vercheres against a surprise Iroquois attack in 1692, to the Honourable Jeanne Sauvé who, nearly three hundred years later, became the first woman Speaker of the House of Commons in 1980 and first female Governor General in 1984. Long before they had the right to vote or to stand in federal and provincial elections and long before they had the right to choose a profession, Canadian women were devoted to developing education, particularly in rural areas, supporting their churches and fighting for women's rights, among other worthy causes. We have highlighted the achievements of a few of them in the hope that they will inspire you to investigate further.

Courageous Pioneers . . . Our Foremothers of Long Ago

When the French arrived in the 16th century, Canada was a land inhabited by Inuit and First Nations people, whose way of life was completely foreign to Europeans. The Haidas and Iroquois lived in matrilineal societies (recognizing only inheritance through the mother), where women owned all the land, preserved the traditions of the clan and ran the "long houses." With the introduction of alternative social concepts that disrupted these societies, women gradually lost their ancestral power.

In the 17th century, educated and energetic women arrived in New France. Jeanne Mance (1606-1673), who co-founded Montreal in 1642 with Maisonneuve, worked tirelessly to establish the colony. She was the first lay nurse in all of North America and founded the Hôtel-Dieu Hospital in Montréal in 1643. Marie Guyart de l'Incarnation (1599-1672), whose 400th birthday is celebrated this year, landed in Quebec shortly after Jeanne Mance in 1639. With the help of Madeleine de La Peltrie (1609-1671) and several Ursuline sisters, she opened a school for French and First Nations girls.

During the growth of New France from 1663 and 1673, more than 700 young orphan girls, wards of the King of France and known as the "King's Daughters", came to Canada to be married. In a note dated November 10, 1670, District Administrator Talon describes the qualities that King's Daughters should have . . .

[Translation] "It would be a good idea to recommend strongly that the women who would go to this country be . . . healthy, strong and fit for work in the field, or at least, that they have some talent for working with their hands".

The physical hardships of the New Land forced women to be strong and hardy. While many men led adventurous lives as coureurs de bois for the Northwest Company, the women remained at home with the family. One exception was Marie-Anne Gaboury-Lagimodière who headed west with her voyageur husband at the turn of the 18th Century to settle in Rupert's Land. Marie-Anne took her place in the canoes with the other voyageurs, surviving the trip to become the first white woman to settle in Canada's northwest. She lived 74 years in the west, criss-crossing the prairies. Before her death at age 95, she saw her grandson, Louis Riel, become the leader of the Métis.

Marie-Anne was not the only woman to defy the challenges presented by the environment. Born in 1872, Émilie (Fortin) Tremblay was the first woman to cross the Chilkoot Pass into the Yukon in 1894. For 18 months, she and her husband prospected for gold and eventually settled in Dawson where Émilie ran a women's clothing store. She was noted for her social activities and her work on behalf of travellers, missionaries and widows; a life member of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire, a founding member of the Ladies of the Golden North and president of the Yukon Women Pioneers.

For more than four centuries, Canadian women have shown strength and courage. Let's not forget the dignity and courage of the Acadian women, who were separated from their families during the mass expulsion of 1755. They will remain forever in our collective memory.



The Fédération des dames d'Acadie Celebrates 25 Years!

In Campbellton, New Brunswick in the late 1960s, Gemma Pelletier-Caron formed the Cercle des dames d'Acadie to promote women's rights and to protect and defend the rights of Francophones. Groups were also started in Bathurst and Moncton. All three came together in 1974 to form the Fédération des dames d'Acadie with Gemma as President. The Fédération works on several fronts to eliminate pornography and violence, promote non-traditional trades for women, training women interested in political or business careers and to promote the rights of women working in the home. To protect their language, the Fédération established the Réseau des femmes francophones du Nouveau-Brunswick. The women of the Fédération des dames d'Acadie today are as sincere and passionate as their grandmothers.

Persevering and Militant – The First Associations of Francophone Women

In 1914, at the start of World War I, volunteer Almada Walker-Marchand (1868-1949) organized an initial meeting of French-Canadian women in Ottawa to raise funds to charter a hospital ship. More than 400 women answered her call and quickly grew into a formal association. In 1918 the Fédération des femmes canadiennes-françaises was officially founded with Almada as its first President. The group worked to expand the participation of French-speaking Canadian women in the fields of education, economics, culture and politics and has now branched out to reflect the needs of francophone women living in minority communities. Outside Quebec, the Fédération now has 17 member associations in all parts of Canada, serving more than 7,000 women.

In 1907, Marie Gérin-Lajoie (1867-1945) and Caroline Bélique (1852-1946) co-founded the Fédération nationale Saint-Jean-Baptiste in Québec, an association of Francophone women interested in promoting their civic and political rights. They sought reforms to the Civil Code, and pushed for a commission of inquiry into the rights of women. In 1922, with 400 English- and French-speaking suffragettes, Marie Gérin-Lajoie attempted to convince the Premier of Quebec to grant women the right to vote. Despite the dedicated efforts of several women, including Idola Saint-Jean (1880-1945) and Thérèse Casgrain (1896-1981), Quebec women waited until 1940 for the right to vote.



Working Hard in the West

For almost 40 years, Irène Fournier-Chabot has worked to promote the francophone life in Western Canada. Raised in Ferland, Saskatchewan, she began by helping her mother, Pearl Kemp-Fournier, to establish branches of the Fédération des femmes canadiennes-françaises across the western provinces. Irène became Vice-President and the western representative on the board of directors of the Fédération, and later, Coordinator. Thanks to Irène's perseverance, in 1970, Collège Mathieu, the only private French secondary school in western Canada, opened its doors to girls for the first time. This victory, both cherished and strategically important, is a concrete example of her ongoing support of Francophone women in her community.

Francophone Writers of Yesterday and Today

Marie Morin (1649-1730), born in Quebec, has been acknowledged since the 17th century as the first Francophone female writer born in Canada. Two centuries later there were still very few female artists because few women had time to write, paint or sculpt. How many creative projects lived in the hearts of our great-grandmothers but never came to fruition for lack of time, training, money or a place of their own in which to work? Over the years, economic and social changes have given women more flexibility. They have become journalists, novelists, editors, painters, ceramicists, sculptors, pianists, poets . . . A few of the writers . . .

Éva Circé-Côté (1871-1949) wrote her newspaper columns in Le Monde Ouvrier under the pen name of Julien Saint-Michel. She founded the Montreal municipal library in 1903 and wrote Bleu, Blanc, Rouge. Jovette-Alice Bernier (1900-1981), born in Saint-Fabien de Rimouski, is best known as a journalist and humorist (before the term was invented), who had audiences rolling in the aisles during the 1950s with her radio show, "Quelles nouvelles."

Anne Hébert (1916-), born in Sainte-Catherine de Fossambault, began publishing in the late 1930s. A major novelist whose work has received international public and critical acclaim, Hébert has also published a moving collection of poetry entitled Poèmes.

The prose of two major novelists, who have received prestigious literary awards, was born of the poetry of their native soil:

Antonine Maillet (1929-), born in Bouctouche, New Brunswick recreated the Acadian memory, and Gabrielle Roy (1909-1983), born in Saint-Boniface, Manitoba wrote delightful stories celebrating her native Manitoba.

Dyane Léger (1954-), born in Notre-Dame-de-Kent near Moncton is a poet and a painter who explores both words and colours with great intensity. The first female Acadian to publish in Acadia, her collection, Graines de fées, received the prix France Acadie prize in 1980.

Canada's francophones in the western provinces were served by a weekly paper, Patriote of the West (Patriote de l'Ouest), established in Duck Lake in 1910 as the first French language newspaper in Saskatchewan. The newspaper gave birth to the writing careers of Annette Saint-Amant and Marie-Anne Duperrault – two well-known and respected francophone writers in Saskatchewan. Through their regular section in the paper, "En Famille", Annette and Marie-Anne touched the lives of women and children in rural Saskatchewan by including stories and poems of interest to women as well as passing on helpful hints and advice. The women also focused on children, encouraging them to write in about their lives and activities. The section became so popular that when Annette and her family moved to Manitoba, her women's page and children's corner continued in La Liberté de Saint-Boniface.

Do You Know? . . . A Short Quiz

- Number of women whose mother tongue is French?
 - 4,100,120
 - 3,392,260
 - 2,766,150
- What does the expression "matrilineal society" mean?
 - Social group composed solely of women
 - All members of the same family
 - Descent through the mother
- What famous female pioneer co-founded Montréal?
 - Marie Rollet
 - Marguerite Bourgeoys
 - Jeanne Mance
- What national federation was founded by Almada Walker-Marchand?
 - Regroupement des centres de santé
 - Fédération nationale des femmes canadiennes-françaises
 - Association des collaboratrices et des partenaires en affaires
- What victory did Fournier-Chabot win for the girls in her community?
 - Creation of a support network
 - Opening of a recreation centre
 - Admission of women to a men's college
- Who were Irma Levasseur and Catherine Jérémie?
 - Founders of women's associations
 - Educators
 - Francophone pioneers in medicine
- Who is acknowledged as the first francophone feminist?
 - Marie Gérin-Lajoie
 - Marie Morin
 - Madeleine de La Peltrie

Francophone Women and Science

In Canadian universities, the participation of women in science programs is a recent and still somewhat rare phenomenon. Nonetheless, their numbers continue to increase, thanks to a real movement of affirmation.

A little background . . .

In Ontario, medical schools opened their doors to women around 1883. In Quebec, however, McGill University continued to restrict women's admission to the normal school and the arts programs, where they had to sit in the back of the classes with their chaperones. Until that time, women studied on their own. For example, Catherine Jérémie (1664-1744) was a practical and highly skilled woman. She was a self-taught woman studying indigenous plants to understand the secrets of Indian medicine. Marie-Henriette Ross (1762-1860), known more commonly as "Granny Ross", was an Acadian woman whose skills and adventures have made her a part of Nova Scotia folk history. She was a midwife and healer for French and English settlers on Cape Breton Island. Even when blind and elderly, Marie-Henriette's services as a healer were much in demand. Irma Levasseur (1878-1964) studied in the United States and was the first Francophone woman to practice medicine in Canada.

Women were finally allowed to enrol in medicine in 1918, although French-language universities would only allow female students to audit lectures. The University of Montréal finally opened its science faculties to women in the 1920s. Most of the female undergraduates were nurses but there were a few chemists and botanists, such as Marcelle Gauvreau (1907-1968), who received the Prix de l'Association canadienne-française pour l'avancement des sciences in 1940. Despite this honour, Marcelle was unable to find a university teaching position.

By 1996, the number of women registering in medicine and in law had risen to equal that of men. This is not the case in engineering, despite some progress: between 1988 and 1995, women's participation (anglophone and francophone) rose from 12 per cent to 20 per cent in undergraduate programs, from 10 per cent to 20 per cent in graduate programs, and from 6 per cent to more than 10 per cent in post-graduate programs. To encourage women to undertake and pursue advanced studies in sciences and engineering, some French-language universities have set up women's networks, which provide support to female students and researchers. The collective agreements of female professors (for example, at Université du Québec à Montréal) and certain affirmative action clauses have helped increase the number of women teaching at the post-secondary level. Today, most universities would be proud to hire Marcelle Gauvreau!

Answers to the Quiz

- 3,392,260
- Inheritance is through the mother
- Jeanne Mance
- Fédération nationale des femmes canadiennes-françaises
- Admission of women to a men's college
- French-speaking women pioneers in medicine
- Marie Gérin-Lajoie

