

## Author



# Obstinate Nuns, Industrious Wives, and Independent Widows: Women and Power in New France, 1689-1730

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*History*

When reading a book about her mother's family, Christine Nyholm discovered that one of her direct ancestors, though eleven generations removed, was killed and his wife and children were taken captive. This knowledge inspired Christine to create a database of all known captives of the French and Indian Wars that refused to return to New England. Christine particularly enjoys traveling as part of the research process and exploring centuries-old archival records. She will soon graduate with a History degree and a minor in Anthropology. Christine advises students who are pursuing historical research to get to know librarians who specialize in their particular field because they can often aid in locating difficult-to-find resources.

## Key Terms

- ◆ Assimilation
- ◆ Captivity Narratives
- ◆ Colonization
- ◆ Gender Roles
- ◆ Intercolonial Wars
- ◆ *Patresfamilias*
- ◆ Power
- ◆ Social Networks

## Abstract

Contemporary scholarship on the nature of power and the dynamics of gender permit a re-examination of captivity narratives, a 300-year old genre in North America. These theoretical insights reinvigorate the stories of capture and hardship as historical sources, giving them an appeal beyond simple colonial tales of adventure. Between 1689 and 1730, in the frontier areas of Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, the French and English colonists periodically waged war against each other. Repeated flare-ups of hostilities occurred at the slightest provocation. Native Americans, allied with the French, raided New England settlements and took hundreds of civilian hostages, most of whom ended up in French colonial settlements, sojourning there while the war continued, and returning home when a truce was declared. However, a considerable number of the captives, mostly those taken as children, refused to return during interludes of peace. Most of the captives who refused to return were girls. This paper offers a new interpretation by arguing that women were offered more opportunities and potentially more independence in French colonial society than in New England, resulting in twice as many women as men choosing to remain permanently in New France.

## Faculty Mentor



Christine Nyholm successfully weaves together strands of social history and colonial politics to create a compelling narrative that illuminates the differences in women's life experiences in New France and New England. This paper demonstrates that structures of colonial power shaped North American societies, but also emphasizes the ways in which individual agency exploited political tensions between competing colonies. The triangulation among New England, New France, and Native-American communities afforded some women the opportunity to create greater personal and economic liberty from a condition deemed "captive." These conclusions ask us to reconsider the nature of power and to acknowledge the variety of strategies employed by subordinated people who sought to reconfigure the parameters of their daily lives.

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## Introduction

In June of 1722, during one of the intercolonial conflicts collectively known as the French and Indian Wars, thirteen year-old Mary Scammon, daughter of Humphrey and Elizabeth (Jordan) Scammon, was captured in Scarborough, Maine by a group of Abenaki warriors (Coleman 147-154). They took her to Montreal where she was ransomed by wealthy French citizens and placed in the care of Arabella Jordan, a maternal aunt whom she had never met. They did not know each other because nineteen years earlier, during a previous conflict, Arabella had also been taken hostage in a raid on a frontier settlement in Maine and never returned. On August 10, 1703, during Queen Anne's War, her father opened his door to Abenakis he knew and traded with and was killed by a tomahawk blow to the head (Clayton 363). He was taken by surprise, unaware that the on-again off-again war with the French and their Indian allies had re-erupted. Only two months earlier, a peace treaty had been negotiated between the colonial government and the Indians. His wife and children, including twelve-year-old Arabella, were taken to Canada where they spent a number of years in captivity. Eventually, the entire family was redeemed except Arabella, who found a home among the French and refused to return after the hostilities ended. Like her aunt before her, Mary Scammon decided to remain in New France, where she soon converted to Roman Catholicism and married a Frenchman. This pattern of an earlier captive woman helping a later captive assimilate would become a recurring theme throughout the intercolonial wars.

The tumultuous history of the relationship between New France and New England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is rooted in the conflicts waged by their mother countries on the European continent. Often these hostilities spilled over into the colonies, as happened in the Anglo-French wars that were fought on the North America frontier. The first three of these wars, King William's War (1689-97), Queen Anne's War (1702-13), and Dummer's War (1722-25) resulted in hundreds of New England civilians being taken captive by both Indians and French from frontier settlements to New France. Remarkably, a considerable number of female captives (twice as many as men) decided to make permanent homes among their captors, refusing to return after hostilities ceased and they were free to return to their families. Mary Scammon and Arabella Jordan are two of the approximately seventy New England women captured during the period from 1689 through 1730 who chose to remain in New France. A number of them took on important roles in their adoptive country. At least ten entered religious life as nuns and worked in schools,

hospitals and orphanages. One, Esther Wheelwright, eventually became Superior of the Ursuline convent in Quebec (Baker 63). Others supervised and were in positions of authority over male laborers, often fellow captives. The level of power these women wielded is notable for their era, an anomaly that is evident when compared to their counterparts in New England. They participated in supportive female networks and assisted other captive women. Their life choices reflect the empowerment they achieved through the adoption of gender roles that were not available in their home colony.

## Historiography

Although aspects of the lives of New England captive women are well documented in archival sources, until recently, there was little analysis of the reasons why so many more women than men chose to stay in New France. This includes the connection, if any, to the empowering options available to women there. In part, this absence of analysis can be explained by the evolution of women's history during which the analytic category of gender has only come about in the late twentieth century (Scott 1066). Further, concepts about the meaning of power have changed significantly since the 1960s, when post-structuralist philosopher and historian Michel Foucault began writing about it with an entirely new perspective. Prior to his work, historians generally treated power as a stable, monolithic and unidirectional (top to bottom) force. In the North American colonial context, it was perceived as being wielded by patriarchal systems; women were seen as passive and having little agency. Under this standard, power is repressive and coercive, and resistance is not recognized as a mode of power. Foucault asserted that power is not something that is possessed but instead is exercised in dynamic, non-centralized networks. In this updated model, women can become active agents in their own lives, sometimes internalizing and confirming societal norms and, in other cases, resisting and pushing the boundaries of these standards. Under this definition, resistance is a form of power. Although by today's measures, the power Canadian women wielded is minimal, in the context of their time it was considerable. These changes in understanding gender and power are critical to performing an up-to-date, multi-faceted analysis of women and power.

The earliest attempts to give meaning to the experiences of captive women during the colonial period came through captivity narratives that were packaged and disseminated for mass consumption by the Puritan clergy (*Captors'* 17). Most of the narratives were heavily influenced—possibly even

ghost written—by ministers like Cotton Mather. They portrayed the captors as religious heretics intent on using any means possible to convert Puritan women to Catholicism. As such, colonial New England captivity narratives have significance to historians as embodiments of the vulnerability felt by the patriarchal leadership of Puritan society rather than for their historical accuracy.

The first historians to compile documentary evidence concerning the New England captivities during the Colonial era were Charlotte Alice Baker and Emma Lewis Coleman. These two women collaborated during the late nineteenth century; their work provides modern scholars with a foundation of accurate historical data about the New England captives. Baker and Coleman devoted several decades to researching the history of the attacks and captivities. They spent considerable time in French Canada, examining and extracting information from colonial archives there, interviewing descendants, and compiling biographical data regarding all of the known captives. Although their books were written long before the advent of historical gender analysis, their compilation of diverse primary source records is of considerable value to historians. Coleman's work contains many extracts of documents such as prisoner lists, letters, baptismal, marriage and convent records, as well as colonial government papers. More recently, Canadian archivist Maurice Fournier located additional primary source records pertaining to some of the captives that were missed by Coleman and Baker. In 1992, he published a biographical dictionary covering 450 captives who lived in Canada long enough to appear in the archival records.

The interpretational question of why female captives remained with their captors has been explored recently by historians. Although each contributed to the understanding of this phenomenon, the question deserves further discussion since the answer gives insight into the differences in gender relationships between New England and New France. In *The Unredeemed Captive*, John Demos examines the situation of Eunice Williams, daughter of Deerfield minister John Williams. Although Eunice was one of the captive women who refused to return to her family after the war, her story is atypical in that she belonged to the small number of female captives who assimilated into Indian communities, whereas the majority who chose to stay in New France passed through Indian hands and became part of French society. Historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich examined this group to find out why twice as many captive women as men chose to stay in Canada. She concluded that the women remained because of “the primacy

of marriage, the influence of religion, and the supportive power of female networks” (Ulrich 208). Historian William Henry Foster contributed a groundbreaking work that provides insight into the dynamics of gender roles and power struggles involving male captives and their female captors. Foster uses the term “gender power inversion” to describe a phenomenon where female gender roles existed in New France that clashed with patriarchal Puritan ideals (*Captors'* 4). In these inverted roles, women were overseeing schools, hospitals, and businesses, and most importantly were in positions of direct authority over Puritan men.

New England captive men, on the other hand, often found themselves being sold by their native captors in the markets of Montreal where, because of a chronic male labor shortage, Canadian women, including former captives, purchased them. Men, for the most part, resisted conversion. However, newly captured women, supported by former captives, frequently joined the ranks of the converted. The men's resistance may have had as much to do with the male captive's reproach of the inverted gender roles and the challenge to patriarchal norms they represented, as it did religious differences (*Captors'* 3-4). Foster's work debunks the long-held image of vulnerable female captives that was promoted by Puritan authorities, and shows the importance of alternative female gender roles and empowered role models in the decision-making of captive women.

### Using Captive Women to Analyze Colonial Power Structures

This study builds on Foster's work, which primarily focuses on the relationship of female captors to their male captives. In this paper, the scope of analysis broadens to show that various gender roles appropriated by female captives not only empowered women, but also reflected some options that were absent or diminished in New England. As such, this study compares the available female gender roles in the two colonies, the reasons for the differences, and how particular societal gender norms contributed to the empowerment of women. To this end, I have consulted a number of secondary sources, most of which have been written in the past decade, and weave together elements of religion, marriage, widowhood, and captivity in the context of both New France and New England.

Further, this paper focuses on three gendered roles that captive women assumed most often during their adulthoods: nuns, wives and widows. This study examines the New England captive population as its focus for several reasons. The most important in most cases is that these women had

experience with the cultures of both New England and New France and the choice of where they lived was ultimately theirs. Second, for a number of reasons various aspects of the lives of these women have been well documented in the records of both colonies. There was a protracted effort on the part of their families and the Massachusetts colonial government to have them return and these efforts are documented in numerous journals, letters, and governmental records. In the records of New France—including baptisms, student lists, marriages, and convent records—the captives are usually notated as being *l'anglaise*, making them easy to distinguish from the French population.

Nearly all the captives who chose to stay in New France were children when captured. The majority of adults who were taken eventually returned to New England, some leaving their children behind in New France when they departed.<sup>1</sup> It was not unusual for children to be captured without their parents, either seized while playing outdoors or separated from their families during the chaos of fleeing from attackers. Other times, parents and children were captured together and later separated from one another. Occasionally, one or both parents were killed in the attack. Raids on New England frontier villages were either conducted by joint French and Indian forces or by Indian war parties alone. Even when the French were involved, most of the captives landed in the hands of Indians who in time usually ransomed them to Canadians. A few captives remained permanently with their Indian captors. This was particularly true of those taken by Mohawks, who sometimes adopted captive children into their own families (Richter 529). Captives taken by Abenakis were usually enslaved for a period of months or years before being released to priests or ransomed to citizens of Montreal, Quebec or Trois-Rivieres.

## Nuns

Once ransomed, captive children were usually taken into the homes of French families where, if old enough, they sometimes worked in households to pay back the cost of their redemption. A number of young girls were sent by wealthy sponsors to convent schools to be taught by Ursuline nuns. The Ursulines, a teaching order dedicated to women's education, ran two types of schools: a boarding school, or *pensionnat*, and a day school, called an *externat*. The registers of the *pensionnat* in Quebec City survive and on them appear the names of at least 21 English girls who were enrolled between 1690 and 1730 (Austen 32). Most of them can be

identified as captives brought there by wealthy merchants or priests who purchased their freedom from the Indians and, in turn, sponsored their education. At least four of them became nuns themselves including the celebrated Esther Wheelwright, who became Superior of the convent in 1760 (Baker 63). Unfortunately, the register for the convent-school that existed in Montreal was destroyed in a fire during the eighteenth century. Had it survived, it would most likely show a similar representation of English girls, as the majority of captives were taken to Montreal (Austen 32).

Whether these girls were introduced to nuns at schools, hospitals or missions, the images they saw of religious women were very different from those they were accustomed to at home. Puritanism, as practiced in New England, offered women limited responsibilities in the private sphere as evangelizers of their husbands and children. A woman was encouraged by Puritan ministers to persuade her family to attend church and to help explain the sermons to them. Activities in the public sphere were restricted to writing about a woman's religious duty within marriage and her household (Brown 189). Puritan ministers condemned celibacy, thus leaving women with no respectable options other than marriage (Morgan 62). In New England, the Puritan Church was predominantly the state religion, as was the Roman Catholic Church in New France. However, in New France, the monarchy turned over to the Church the responsibility for the creation and operation of schools and charitable institutions like hospitals, orphanages and poor-houses, which in turn were subsidized by the crown (Crowley 123). In colonial New England, there was no equivalent arrangement. Further, in the colonial settlements of New France, men were often scarce as many were involved in economic or military activities that required lengthy stays away from home. Thus, French colonial society came to depend on monastic communities, especially those run by women, to provide social services to its settlements.

The nuns that the young captive girls encountered in New France were undoubtedly influential role models. Unlike the small schools in New England towns that educated boys and girls, the convent schools provided a completely feminine environment. In the *pensionnat*, student residents established close-knit relationships that lasted throughout their lives. Former students' names appear together in marriage and baptism records, from when they acted as witnesses or godparents (Austen 33). They called the convent nuns "mother" and spent their hours in a structured and secure environment. In the convents and *pensionnats*, the beginnings of female networks were created that helped captives acculturate to their new environment.

1. In some cases they may have been prevented from taking their children with them; in others, it is clear that the children refused to leave.



By the time the earliest of the captives were brought to the nuns in 1690, the convents in New France were large, well-established institutions. Although subject to the oversight of bishops, the nuns exercised a considerable amount of freedom and authority in the discharge of their duties. The institutions they ran were only partially funded by donations from wealthy patrons and the monarchy. To provide additional monies for their charitable activities, they operated entrepreneurial ventures and managed investments. They also owned *seigneuries*, farms and gristmills (Crowley 119). However, the relative autonomy they enjoyed did not come without a prolonged struggle against the patriarchy of the Church.

The first nuns that came from France to establish their orders in Quebec battled not only against the designs of the male ecclesiastics to restrict their actions, but also against the hardships of frontier living. That they came to America at all is remarkable given the obstacles put in front of them by the Church leadership. In the years leading to the settlement of Quebec, remaining Catholic areas of Europe were experiencing a proliferation of religious fervor in the form of the Counter Reformation. Women joined religious communities in record numbers. However, at the same time there was an effort by Church officials to enforce reforms decreed by the Council of Trent in 1563. The Council had issued directives requiring that nuns be cloistered, which required separation from most of the population at large and limited their freedom of movement. Additionally, they were to take lifelong solemn vows rather than simple vows, and be subject to the authority of bishops (Crowley 113). The belated enforcement of these dictums in France met with resistance from some orders, especially the active apostolate. Many nuns pleaded with the Church and monarchy for years to be allowed to join the mission in the New World to evangelize native peoples. In 1639, a group of six nuns, three Ursulines teachers, and three Augustinian *hospitalières* were finally allowed to travel to Quebec along with three laywomen who were sent to assist them (Choquette 634). Other sisters were prevented from joining them, as the monarchy did not want women sent to the colony who could not marry, procreate, and help establish a regenerating populace.

Mère de l'Incarnation, a 40-year-old gifted and energetic widow, led the group of Ursulines. A short time after her arrival, Mère de l'Incarnation learned the Algonquin and Huron languages in which she wrote dictionaries and catechisms. After the appearance of a new bishop from France in 1659, the Ursulines became embroiled in a disagreement with him over their constitution and mission of christianiz-

ing the Indians. Mère de l'Incarnation handled the situation diplomatically and eventually prevailed in the matter. Nonetheless, ten years after her death, her convent was forced to accept a new constitution that removed references to evangelization of natives. The convent changed its focus from teaching and Catholicizing native girls to the education of upper-class French girls. Even after this transformation, there continued to be a few Indian students in Ursuline schools, who, like the captive girls, were sponsored by wealthy patrons of the convent.

In the struggle to avoid being cloistered, some women sought to form new kinds of religious communities that employed lay sisters. In 1653, Marguerite Bourgeoys formed the secular community known as *Congrégation Notre-Dame*, patterned after the order of the same name in France (Choquette 646). She provided a free education to the children of both Indians and French settlers and eventually established schools and missions in frontier settlements throughout French Canada, recruiting Canadian-born sisters to teach and minister to the needs of all classes of people. The bishops tried repeatedly to induce Soeur Bourgeoys to combine her congregation with the Ursulines, which would have required that they take solemn vows and become cloistered (Crowley 114-117). Although the sisters were able to resist these efforts successfully, they adopted the wearing of habits and took religious names like the ecclesiastic orders. They were accepted as true nuns by the entire community, including the cloistered sisters. By the time the British conquered Canada in 1763, the *Congrégation Notre-Dame* was the largest women's monastic group in Canada with more than twice the number of members as any of the other Canadian orders (Choquette 654).

The nuns of New France, through their combined resistance to the power of church leadership, established prestigious and dynamic communities. Although they accepted the patriarchal and hierarchal structures that permeated society, they found ingenious ways to exploit the cracks in the structure of institutions they lived within. Even cloistered women led predominantly self-directed lives. One reason is that cloistering, as practiced in New France, was less repressive and rigid than in Europe. In addition to the exceptions associated with travel, frontier conditions often made it impossible to separate nuns from the rest of society. Frequent fires, epidemics, and other challenges created conditions that sometimes required the nuns to share quarters with other religious groups (including men) and to travel from place to place (Kenyon 152-170). As the women's monastic communities became increasingly vital to the

colony, rules were adapted to allow the nuns to practice their vocations. The indispensable nature of the services they provided resulted in employment opportunities that gave women notable authority, including the oversight of male labor (*Captors*' 2-4).

Women entering convents went from nuclear families overseen by a *patresfamilias* to exclusively feminine families distinguished by close bonds of affection and oversight by maternal heads. The confidence, energy, sense of purpose, and widespread acceptance these women gained in society likely appealed to the captive girls entrusted to their care. Ten out of the 70 captive women who stayed in Canada became nuns, a proportion more than three times that of French Canadian women.<sup>2</sup> The most famous of the "English nuns" is Esther Wheelwright, great-granddaughter of the famous Puritan minister John Wheelwright. Esther was taken from her home in Wells (now part of Maine) in 1703 when she was seven years old (Baker 48). She spent five years with the Abenakis before being taken to Quebec by a Catholic priest and put in the care of the French governor and his wife, the two of whom accepted her into their household. When the governor's wife took a position in the French court, Esther and their daughter Louise were entrusted to the care of the Ursulines at the *pensionnat*. Soon Esther expressed a desire to become a nun herself. Becoming an Ursuline nun required payment of a considerable dowry, which in her case was provided from the personal resources of the priest who had negotiated her release from the Abenakis. The year after she became a novitiate, the Treaty of Utrecht was signed and remaining captives in New France were free to go back to New England. Esther's family worked diligently to facilitate her return and wrote numerous letters encouraging her to come home. This may be the reason the Ursulines dispensed with the required probation period and allowed her to take solemn vows on April 12, 1714, the only time in their history this exception to the rules was made.

Esther eventually re-established contact with her family and they accepted her decision to become a nun. She spent over 70 years in her vocation and twice was elected to the position of Superior. Over the years she received numerous visitors from New England, including her nephew Nathaniel Wheelwright, who bestowed gifts of a silver flagon, utensils and linens to the convent (Baker 60). He returned home with a painting of Esther in her veil and wimple, as a gift from Esther to her mother (Baker 63).

2. According to Allen Greer (96) a good estimate of the percentage of Canadian women who became nuns is 3.7% compared to 14.3% for the captives.

## Wives

Although a sizeable group of captive women became nuns in New France, the majority, like their New England counterparts, married and had families. Most of them married Frenchmen, a few married fellow captives, and several married Indians. Despite many similarities in the marriage customs of New France and New England, there were a few significant differences. Living farther north, Canadian men were less sedentary than New England men and were often involved in economic activities that required spending long periods away from home such as trading, trapping, and military ventures. As a result of the time spent separated from their husbands, some women were freed from the constant cycle of pregnancy and childcare characterized by wives of more stationary men. In the cases of absentee husbands, families were smaller and women often occupied themselves with entrepreneurial ventures that supplemented the household income. Of the captive women who are known to have married and had children in New France, only about one-third had 10 children or more. A third had from five to nine children and another third had four children or fewer. Historian David Hackett Fischer (71) has compiled birth rates for a number of New England communities, yielding rates ranging from a low of 6.1 to a high of 8.6 for complete families. The derived rate for the captives' marriages is 6.8.

The marriage norms embraced by the families of New England captives were characterized by strictly-defined gender roles. The male roles corresponded with economic production and the female roles with domestic and childrearing functions. Generally, men spent most of their time outside the home and women spent theirs inside. This division of labor resulted in the economic dependency of women on men. However, there are notable exceptions where women played major roles in the business ventures of their husbands. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich uses the term "deputy husbands" (36) to describe women who assisted their husbands or filled in for them in their business concerns when it was impractical for them to conduct their own affairs. In New France, this was especially true of husbands who had occupations that took them away from their bases of operation for extended periods of time. In particular, the wives of fishermen and merchants who lived in coastal New England towns were more active in their husbands' business affairs (41). Notwithstanding their involvement in their husbands' economic pursuits, women of New England could only form their own business ventures if they fell within the narrowly defined scope of women's work that could be performed at home, such as spinning.

The French colonial settlements were more amenable to women engaging in their own economic ventures. The example of Agathe Saint-Père is a case in point. Saint-Père is significant, not only as an example of a female entrepreneur who started several of her own businesses, but for her known connections with several New England captives in Montreal (*Agathe* 132). In 1705, she operated a textile manufacturing enterprise in her home that employed nine captives who she ransomed from the Indians. Several of the captives were skilled adult male weavers. At this time, there was a shortage of textiles in the colony, a condition that drove the price of imported woolens to a level that many working-class Montreallers could not afford. Saint-Père profited from the scarcity by producing in her factory an affordable, strong, coarse cloth that could be made into the warm capes that Canadians wore over their clothes (Noel 27). At the time, her family consisted of a husband and five children, four of whom were girls, the youngest in her teens. She was energetic and ingenious, inventing new kinds of textiles from plants native to the St. Lawrence valley as well as developing new dyeing methods (*Agathe* 130). She is considered the founder of French Canada's textile industry and was encouraged in her business activities by colonial authorities, to the extent that she received royal subsidies for years (Noel 27).

Saint-Père's status as a member of the nobility undoubtedly contributed to her success. Indeed, of the known women who started lucrative businesses for themselves, there is a preponderance of women from the upper classes. Saint-Père was in a position of authority over male captive employees who in New England had rarely, if ever, seen women entrepreneurs giving orders to men. During their stay with her, the New England weavers trained Canadians who continued the vocation after the captives returned to their homes. Although none of the captives under her authority chose to stay in New France permanently, one captive couple had two children while living in her home. In both cases, Agathe Saint-Père was the godmother to the babies, who both died in infancy. Her textile workshop was adjacent to the *Congrégation Notre-Dame*, the Superior at the time was her stepsister (*Captors'* 164). The female captives boarding at the *Congrégation* would certainly have been well acquainted with her, since she was one of the primary patrons of the community.

The captive women who married in New France married into all social classes. As would be expected, most families they married into were of the same general class as the ones they were born into in New England. However, at least two of the captive women married into families at the highest

levels of French society. Mary Scammon, whose captivity and introduction to her maternal aunt were profiled at the beginning of this paper, married Louis Joseph Godefroi, Sieur de Tonnancour, son of the only Canadian to receive the title of marquis (Coleman 149). However, she came from one of the most prominent families in Maine, her aunt and mother being granddaughters of the Anglican minister Robert Jordan, who through his own advantageous marriage became owner of an enormous tract of land in coastal Maine. Arabella Jordan, her aunt, is one of a few captive women who remained unmarried and did not become nuns. The fact that she did not wed may be an indication that she had her own economic resources.

The other captive who married into upper French society was Esther Sayward, who at age 27, after spending a number of years as a lay schoolteacher in the *Congrégation Notre-Dame*, married Pierre de Lestage, a wealthy merchant and *seigneur* in Montreal (Austen 35). They had a son and a daughter who both died in childhood. Her husband died in 1743 and with his death Esther became a wealthy widow and businesswoman. In her old age, she built herself a townhouse adjoining the *Congrégation Notre-Dame* where her sister and fellow captive Mary had died in 1717 as a sister of the order. Esther lived the remainder of her life as a benefactor to the community. Among other charitable projects, she funded the building of a chapel within the *Congrégation* compound (*Captors'* 166).

Most of the captives were not so fortunate to marry into prominent families, as Mary Scammon and Esther Sayward did. The majority became wives of *habitants*, those who were assigned parcels of land to farm in *seigneuries* in exchange for annual payments of cash and crops. Virtually all male *habitants* served in militias for most of their adult lives (See 44). During the periodic intercolonial wars, these men would often be called on to fight the English.

One of the ways a woman's agency can be measured within the context of the society she lives in is in her ability to remove herself from an unsuccessful marriage. In New England, marriage was not a sacrament but a civil contract. Therefore, theoretically at least, the contract could be dissolved and a divorce granted in cases where the marriage covenant had been broken (Fischer 78). In reality, divorces were rare and usually only allowed in cases of adultery, fraudulent contract, desertion, cruelty, and failure to provide for the household (Fischer 82). Despite the legal provisions allowing divorce, courts often tried to intervene in cases of physical and mental abuse in an effort to save the marriage. Divorces were easier to obtain in cases where it was likely

the wife would remarry or the economic family unit would benefit from the divorce.

In New France, marriages performed in the Roman Catholic Church were sacramental and divorce was not possible. However, legal separations were granted in certain cases, usually when the husband was violent to the extent that the wife's life was in danger or when he squandered their community property or her dowry (Savoie 479). During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the French Canadian courts received 163 applications for separation. The complaints of the wives generally fell into three categories: alcoholism, physical abuse, and financial irresponsibility. As in New England, a woman without a husband was often unable to support herself and her children. This was frequently taken into consideration when granting separations, especially if the complaint involved physical abuse rather than financial waste. However, Puritan New England had better options for women to escape difficult marriages because civil rather than church law governed the marriage union.

There is one example where captivity in New France provided a refuge to a New England abused wife that apparently was not available for her in her home colony. Abigail Willey was one of only four women captured as adults who chose to stay in New France. Her case is notable because in the years before her capture she repeatedly asked the court in New Hampshire to intercede on her behalf to end the physical abuse she was suffering at the hands of her husband (Coleman 256; Ulrich 209). In one instance when she left him to go to relatives after a severe beating, she was treated as a runaway. She was punished and humiliated by the court even though her husband's brother testified on her behalf, saying that he had intervened when her husband had tried to attack her with an axe. In 1689, Abigail and her four children were captured and eventually settled in Quebec, where she spent 20 years as a single woman raising them. She refused to return to her husband although a son and daughter eventually returned. In 1710, she finally married a fellow captive, having learned of her husband's death. The couple spent their remaining years in New France.

Willey's case and the examination of divorce and separation laws of New England and New France suggest that it was less difficult to obtain separations or divorces in New England than in New France. However, in both places, the most important consideration was the economic viability of the family without the husband's financial assistance. Courts seemed reluctant to saddle the community with the burden of poverty stricken women and children in all but the most

extreme cases of physical abuse. In Willey's case, she was able to support her children in New France by entering the service of a wealthy family in whose home she and her children remained until she learned of her husband's death and later remarried.

Although laws allowing divorce favored New England women, there were some advantages to women in the marriage customs in New France, including women keeping their premarital identities by continuing to use their maiden names in addition to their husbands' names. However, the most significant advantage in the marriage customs of New France dealt with marital property law. In New France, the law known as the *Coutume de Paris* was based on principles that were unlike those used in the development of English law. The most important difference is that property acquired during the marriage was considered community property owned by both husband and wife in New France, whereas in New England the wife's portion was combined with the husband's as a single unit (Greer 94). Although in New France, the husband was by law the "the master of the community," and the primary decision maker, property conveyances required the wife's signature and agreement.

## Widows

Community property laws are also an important consideration in evaluating widowhood in New France because their widows retained half of the community estate after their husbands died. Furthermore, those with minor children were allowed to continue their husbands' businesses after their deaths. A number of widows took over their deceased husbands' mercantile ventures and gained considerable wealth and power. Kathryn A. Young compiled a list of merchants conducting transatlantic trade from Quebec in 1720, of the 76 merchants she counted, five were women (390). Further, she found a total of 35 female merchants who were traded actively in the whole of New France. The majority of these women were widows. Generally, these wealthy widows were less likely to remarry. Rather, they worked with family members and other female merchants in networks that included sharing insurance costs, reducing risk by splitting cargo between separate voyages, and giving each other advice on pricing.

In New England, while widows were sometimes allowed to continue their husbands' businesses after their deaths, this usually only continued until minor children attained the age of majority. As a rule, a widow was usually only bequeathed a life estate that was passed on to her husband's heirs upon her death. This life estate, known in New England as the



“widow’s third,” represented one-third of the estate of her deceased husband, the rest being divided among the children, with the eldest son receiving a double portion (Karlsen 155). If the widow remarried, her third usually went to the children immediately upon her remarriage or when they reached adulthood. The practice of leaving the widow’s third appears to have come about in response to demographic pressures facing New England including decreased mortality rates and a shortage of land to be passed on to younger sons. Prior to 1650, there were as many widows who inherited property outright as those who inherited life estates (Karlsen 157). The trend in inheritance patterns with respect to widows created an environment where most were compelled to remarry in order to survive. Those who did not remarry (usually women past child-bearing age) often lived in poverty.

When Esther Sayward’s husband Pierre de Lestage died in 1743, she received a large share of his estate outright and without restriction, although he also bequeathed property to his sister and nephew in France. She took control of the *seigneuries* and the trading business (*Captors’* 165). She chose not to remarry, but rather spent her twilight years in the company of the sisters of the *Congrégation Notre-Dame*. Surviving her husband by 26 years, she surrounded herself with women of the social network that she had developed over the span of her life, many of whom, like her, were previously captives.

## Conclusion

No matter what gender roles the captives assumed in New France, they maintained bonds of friendship over the course of their lives. These ties combined to form networks that linked most of the captives who stayed in New France, even the men. The importance of these networks is pivotal, covering the three gender roles discussed in this paper. They gave captives a link to their past lives, enabling them to maintain connections with family and friends. Earlier captives helped later arrivals cope with the trauma of their capture, which sometimes included the deaths of family members. They also helped the newly arrived learn the language and assimilate. These bonds were undoubtedly strong, sometimes enduring beyond the captive generation when children of captives married each other.

The captive networks, although an essential ingredient in the incidence of women staying in New France, only partially accounts for the increased likelihood that women, more often than men, chose to remain. The other critical factor is that there were empowering options presented to

women through their interaction with nuns in convent schools and missions. While men sought to return to their home colony where they enjoyed more dominant gender roles and relations, women found additional opportunities that were not available to them in New England. Captive women, some of whom were members of the upper level of their native society, like Arabella Jordan and Mary Ann Scammon, chose to stay in New France even though their families exerted pressure on them to return. Their experience and connections to both colonies offer us a window through which we can compare the empowerment of women in the two colonies. Although captive women’s decisions to remain were in all probability not based on overt comparisons of the achievability of power in the two colonies, the empowerment of Canadian women, including nuns, offered attractive role models for them. The power monastic women claimed for themselves was the product of years of resistance to the authority held by patriarchal constituents of French society, particularly the Church. Contemporary concepts of power dynamics, like those postulated by Michel Foucault, help us to understand that power is constantly changing. However, within the context of the 40-year period encompassed in this study, one sees a snapshot of the power structure that existed in French colonial society which offered women increased agency in exchange for the essential services they provided. This is not to say that women wielded the same level of power as men; they did not. Rather, society allowed them this agency because of the unique demographic characteristics of New France, including a male labor shortage. Further, the degree of power, although considerable in comparison with contemporary societies like New England, based on today’s standards would be considered minimal.

This study covers the period just prior to the British conquest of New France in 1763. Thus many of the New England captives like Esther Wheelwright and Esther Sayward ended their lives as subjects of the British Empire for the second time. During the Seven Years War that decided the fate of their adoptive country, Esther Wheelwright and the Ursuline nuns helped care for sick and injured English as well as French soldiers (Baker 61). Yet when she wrote to members of her order in France after the defeat, she lamented the loss of the colony to Great Britain (64). As shown in this study, power is not static, but exists in complex relationships and networks that are subject to rapid change as the environment alters. The conquest of New France by the English brought about just such a sea change.

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