

# Women and Servitude



## Slaves

In addition to married French women, wealthy and otherwise, there were female slaves and servants in New France. Numbers are hard to determine, but at least 1,100 slaves, men and women, lived in New France. (This does not include Louisiana where chattel slavery was common.) Of those in the Great Lakes region, about 55% were Indians captured by Native allies of the colony and sold to the French. Indian slaves were known as *penis*, from the French word for *Penins*, the nation from which most captives first came. The term *penis* is used almost interchangeably with *esclave* (slave) in the records of New France's northern regions. Most African female slaves served as domestics in the homes of the wealthier members of society in Montreal and Quebec and came from French possessions in the Caribbean. *Penis* more often served as domestics in frontier settlements and were sometimes married to French inhabitants of the posts. The baptismal register for Fort St. Joseph lists a number of *penis* at the post.



Artist's rendition of a French servant



Artist's rendition of a kitchen servant with food

## Servitude

Young women in New France also served as servants, many indentured. They were contracted to work for a family for a period of time for often little more than room and board. This sort of arrangement relieved their families of the burden of providing for them and gave them an opportunity, if they were lucky, to acquire some education by associating with the better-off members of colonial society. Most servants, however, appear in the records due to complaints about harsh treatment and even physical and sexual abuse.



Code Noir (Black Code) governed Black slaves in the colonies

"Marie Lesueur (age 17) ...work[ed] at the home of Laurent Renaud for the amount of four livres per month, and left it...because...the sieur de Beaujeu, a lieutenant in the Troupes de la Marine who was living in the home of the said Renaud, constantly asked her to go to bed with him, going to find her everywhere her housework took her, whether in the garret or the cellar or in the upstairs rooms and especially during the night when she was asleep because she slept in a single room where she did the cooking for the household. She declares that one night the said Beaujeu among other nights during the first two weeks or so of the said month of last November had come to find her as she was sleeping wanting to possess her carnally. She awakened and tried to prevent him from doing it by crying out, he threatened to put his sword through her body if she cried out which he did three separate times, and he had her carnally on three different nights." -Testimony of Marie Lesueur, Montreal, 1705

