Life in New France

Food

The people of New France had to produce as much of their own food as possible. The farmers were called habitants.

They ate a lot of meat from farm animals such as cattle and pigs, and from wild animals such as birds, fish, moose, rabbits, and porcupines.

Two favourite dishes were tourtière (meat pie) and sipaille (wild game pie).

The people of New France were also very fond of eels. Eels are long fish that look a little like snakes. They were caught in baskets in the river. They were often salted, smoked, or dried.

In their gardens, habitants grew such vegetables as corn, beans, peas, asparagus, cabbage, and cucumbers. They also grew fruit trees, berries, and nuts.

Habitants made whole-wheat bread from the wheat that they grew on their farms and ground at the mill. Most families had large outdoor ovens built of stones held together with clay. Once or twice a week these large ovens were heated with wood fires.

The habitants got up early and put in about two hours of work before breakfast. At about eight o'clock, they would have a breakfast that might be bread, pancakes, and milk. They ate again at noon and around four o'clock, but the biggest meal was after they finished the day's work, at about eight o'clock in the evening.

Most meals included milk and cheese.

The people of New France had to learn how to preserve food so they would have something to eat during the winter months.

To prevent it from going bad, meat and fish had to be eaten as soon as the animal was killed, or else smoked, salted, or dried. In the winter meat could be left out in the cold until frozen, then kept in a small shed attached to the house.

Vegetables, particularly peas, could be dried. Root vegetables were stored in underground cellars. Berries could be cooked with sugar to make jam.
Schools

Many habitant children did not go to school at all. If the parents could read and write, they might teach the children at home.

Bishop Laval built the Petite Seminaire, a school for boys, in Quebec.

Sister Marguerite Bourgeoys came from France to open a school for French and Huron girls at Montreal. She taught reading and writing as well as cooking, spinning, and sewing. Boys were allowed to attend this school until they had one of their own.

Sister Bourgeoys’s school ran from April to November each year. It was closed during the cold winter months.
New France

Clothing

In the early years of New France, there were few sheep to provide wool for clothing. Cloth was made of woven linen or hemp, both of which are made from plants that could be grown in New France. This clothing was lined with leather or fur for warmth.

When the habitants began to raise sheep, the women spun the wool and wove cloth. Woollen underclothes kept them warm in winter and absorbed perspiration in summer.

Women wore long dresses. They might wear several skirts for warmth. Over the dresses they sometimes wore aprons and shawls. They wore small white caps or bonnets on their heads.

Men wore leather breeches, woven shirts, and leather jackets. They often wore woollen caps called tuques.

Shoes were leather moccasins or wooden clogs.

In the city of Quebec, some wealthy people wore the fine silks and long wigs that were fashionable in France.

The King's Daughters

There had been many more single men than single women in New France. The intendant wanted the men to marry and raise families on the seigneuries.

From 1665 to 1672, the Filles du Roi or King's Daughters were sent from France. They were young women who were to marry the single men of New France and raise families.

The King's Daughters stayed in convents with the nuns, or at the school run by Sister Bourgeoys, until they were married to one of the young men of New France.

Money was given to families who had many children. People who did not marry had to pay fines. The government was determined that there should be more people in New France.
Homes

Most houses in New France had stone foundations. Walls of houses built in the 1600s were of square-cut timbers. Spaces between the timbers were filled with mortar. Houses built in the 1700s often had walls of stone. Sometimes the stones were covered with pine boards, which were whitewashed. The roofs, made of thatch or overlapping boards, were steeply sloped so snow would slide off.

Until the 1740s, when glass became available, windows were made of greased paper or skin. These windows let in a little light, but no one could see out of them.

The houses of the habitants often had only one room with an attic above for sleeping. The seigneur usually had a larger house.

The most important part of the house was the large stone fireplace, which gave heat and light. Wealthy people might have an iron stove as well.

Furniture

Habitants made their own furniture, usually of birch or pine. This would include a table, chairs, benches with backs, cupboards, and cradles. They often painted their furniture with homemade paint. Red was a favourite colour.

In the 1600s, beds sometimes had walls with doors, making them like tiny rooms. In the 1700s, beds sometimes had curtains.

The floors were usually wood, and might have homemade rugs woven, braided, or hooked from rags.
The people of New France were not supposed to work on Sundays. There were many other religious holidays and saints' days during the year.

Prayers and religious studies were an important part of every school day.
Indians and New France

Hurons and Algonquins

From the time they first stayed over the winter in Quebec in 1608, the French depended on the advice of the Hurons and Algonquins. Many of the French died of scurvy during the first winters in Quebec. The Iroquoians had taught Jacques Cartier how to make a drink by boiling the bark of the white cedar tree. This drink had a lot of Vitamin C, which cured scurvy.

The Hurons and Algonquins taught the French how to make maple syrup and sugar. They gave them seeds for such vegetables as corn and squash. They showed the French how to build toboggans, snowshoes, and canoes. The French began wearing some parts of Indian clothing, particularly moccasins.

The Hurons traded with Indian tribes living farther west and north. They would bring furs from these western Indians to the French fur merchants in Montreal and Trois Rivières.

Iroquois

The Hurons and Algonquins were at war with the Iroquois. This conflict was caused by the attempts of the Iroquois to get more furs to trade with the Dutch and, after 1664, the English. The French began to fight on the side of the Hurons and Algonquins, and this meant that the Iroquois became their enemies.

In the 1600s, the French and the English were enemies. In 1664, the English captured New Amsterdam from the Dutch and renamed it New York. Since the Iroquois became friends of the English, they had even more reason to be enemies of the French.

Throughout the years of New France, the Iroquois and French fought many battles. These battles were often fought close to people's homes. Several Iroquois villages were burned. Habitants were often afraid to go far from their homes for fear of Iroquois attack.

Changes

The French brought many new things from Europe to North America, including guns. However, the few guns traded to the Indians in the 1600s were not very good. The Indians continued to use their own weapons for hunting. Sometimes the French demand for fur-bearing animals, especially the beaver, led to too many of these animals being killed.

Some animals became less plentiful.

The French also brought diseases such as smallpox that the Indians had never had before. These diseases caused great hardships and death amongst the Indians.

The French took over some of the best land. The Indians found themselves moving farther and farther west.