

Piece-by-Piece: Reconstructing the Lives of Women in Missouri
Susan Calafate Boyle
March 2002

Susan Calafate Boyle received her Ph.D in American social history at the University of Missouri. She currently works for the Rocky Mountain National Park as an Interpretive Planner for the Cache la Poudre River Corridor, a heritage area in north-central Colorado. In addition to her interest in the French in the Illinois Country, she has published a book on the Hispanos merchants on the Santa Fe Trail and has completed a Cultural Landscape Report for the White House and President's Park.

During the last quarter century, the study of women in America has flourished. Scholars have produced insightful and innovative studies that suggest that women's lives varied dramatically across regions and cultures and through time. However, women in colonial Missouri have continued to receive limited attention. General histories of the area ably describe the conflict among the European powers and eventually the Americans as they struggled to control the rich Missouri territory during the last half of the eighteenth century. Histories of St. Louis and Ste. Genevieve provide vibrant descriptions of the life and settlers of the Illinois Country, but for the most part they are based on a few well-known, colorful characters. Virtually every scholar addresses the Choteau family, but theirs was likely a unique experience. Our knowledge of the Illinois country is still limited. We know that Colonial Missouri was an ethnically diverse area where Indians, French, African, Spanish and Anglo-American came together. Geographical mobility was high, and from interaction among various ethnic groups a distinct society evolved, a society that depended on the contribution of all its members for survival and eventual success.

Telling the story of French and Anglo women (and most of the men) who resided in the area is challenging because they were illiterate. Even though women played a crucial role in this environment, their lives and their accomplishments are difficult to document since they did not write letters, diaries or reminiscences. We know even less about Indian and Black women. The study of American Indian women has received substantial attention during the last two decades and excellent publications, like those of Sylvia Van Kirk and Tanis C. Thorne highlight the crucial role Indian women played in the evolution of society in the region. However, systematic evidence on this important segment of the Missouri

population is very scarce since we can identify with certainty only a few individual women.

Research conducted two decades ago (based on the examination of censuses, marriage contracts, wills, estate records, land sales and transfers, petitions, and legal proceedings) reveal that some well-to-do French women were able to take advantage of demographic, legal and economic factors to enjoy an uncharacteristic level of control principally over property rights. They also demonstrate that women of limited economic means, even blacks like Elizabeth D'achurut, were able to successfully claim property. Poor women were aware that their lack of assets limited their options. Widowhood appears to have been a preferred status since it offered a degree of freedom married women did not enjoy.

Almost two decades have passed since the research for the article was completed. The conclusions appear still to be valid and are quite similar to those reached by Vaughn Baker when she studied women in New Orleans. However, in the case of the Ste. Genevieve article less than 30 women provide the core of the examples. These women did indeed make decisions, but it is dangerous to generalize from their experience. They were unusual people whose lives differed from those of other women, those who did not participate in transactions, who never sued or made claims, who never came to the attention of authorities. The women who seldom appear in the documents constituted the majority of females in Colonial Missouri and their story is important and worthy of retelling.

What do the documents reveal about these women? Can we fairly assess their lives without understanding their marriages and the society in which they operated? What historic sources can place in perspective the lives of most women in Colonial Missouri? Parish records, such as baptisms, marriages and burials, provide some pieces of information that allow us to reconstitute women's lives and to identify some broad demographic trends. They are important tools to study populations who have left no writings and no oral histories, but their analysis is a very time-consuming. For example, a baptismal entry includes the date of the birth, the name and sex of the infant, the names of the parents, in most cases godparents and sometimes witnesses. By itself this information is not very meaningful. However, when baptismal records are compiled and compared with marriage records, sales, burials, and other documents family patterns emerge that can shed light on Missouri Colonial society and elusive women's lives.

Like all historic sources parish records have to be used carefully. They are very helpful when studying the mostly Catholic French families. However, they tell little about the growing number of Americans who had settled in the area by the beginning of the nineteenth century. It is not clear how effectively they document Indian and Black populations. For example, an analysis of baptismal records of St. Louis, Kaskaskia, and Ste. Genevieve for the second half of the eighteenth century indicates that close to 40% of all recorded baptisms was of an Indian or Black child. The Ste. Genevieve burials for the same period show that almost 30% were of Blacks and Indians. Until January 1773 more than a quarter of all marriages involved Black slaves. After this date, it is not clear if slave marriages were no longer recorded or no longer took place.

Burials are the easiest records to analyze. Of the surviving registers, the first one extends from 1766 to 1784, the second one from 1787 to 1815. The quality of the documents varies. Various parish priests used slightly different formats for the entries. The amount and accuracy of the information they included on the deceased and his/her family fluctuates widely. In spite of these problems these documents unveil interesting population patterns and trends pertinent to women. More than 30 % (30.8) of the deceased were infants or young children under 10. High infant mortality rates continued at least until through 1800. Many of the young mothers of these children also died soon after giving birth. Between 1766 and 1784 over 40% of French women died in their 20s; 67 % died before reaching 40--the average female age at death was 36.02. For males at this time the average age at death was 47.9 while almost 70% of the men died after their 40th birthday. Conditions for women improved as the end of the century drew near. The second book of burials (1787-1800) indicates that the average age at death for French women rose to 44.5 and only 40% died before reaching 40. Male patterns remained unchanged.

Baptisms and burials support the claim that close to half of the population of Colonial Missouri was Black and Indian. A few were free; the majority were slaves. With a few exceptions, tracing the Blacks and Indians who were identified in these records is impossible since only their first names and that of their owners' were indicated. However, two out of 214 church-sanctioned eighteenth century unions included an Indian bride. These mixed marriages provide the opportunity to follow the life of an Indian wife. The best example is that of Marianne, an Osage Indian and Charles Aime, a voyageur native of Quebec. Aime is first identified as the father of Marie Louise, an illegitimate daughter born on December 20, 1767 who was baptized on August 7 of the following year. Marie

Louise's mother is called Anouacou, an Osage Indian woman. Two years later, on December 12, 1770, Aime married Anouacou, who was identified as Marianne. By this time a second child has been born, and he was baptized the same day his parents officially married. The document listed the bride and mother as Marianne, an Osage Indian woman. The entry highlights the tacit approval of the local Commandant who "had nothing to say on the alliance of French and Indians." The Aimes eventually had ten children. By 1774, when their fourth child was born, Marianne was no longer identified as an Osage or an Indian, but gained a last name—Theastimes. The baptismal records of her six next children included no mention of her Indian origin; she was just Marianne. In 1788 when her daughter Marie Louise marries Joseph Perez, a Spanish soldier, Marianne has gained a new last name—Terrein, which was used in her burial in July 1793. Her children Jean Baptiste and Pelagie married and resided in the area, but no further mention is made of their Osage ancestry.

Another legal mixed marriage involved Pierre Blot and Marie, an Illinois Indian woman. Blot was himself the son of a mixed marriage although his mother's tribe was never specified. When Pierre married in 1789, his wife Marie had already born two of the couple's children, Pierre and Catherine, and was pregnant with a third. Pierre Blot died a month after the wedding. A few weeks later, when the Blot estate went for sale, the children were identified as heirs, their mother as an invalid. It would be premature to conclude that assimilation of Indian women and mixed children was a common and easy process on the basis of these two cases. An analysis of baptismal records might yield additional pieces of information, but it is doubtful that enough evidence will ever surface to reach a definitive conclusion. Claims of smooth acculturation for the Indian populations in the area need to be more systematically explored.

Learning about black women is even harder. Only one mixed marriage involved a Black woman. In February 1795 Joseph Marie Mercier, a native of Kaskaskia, married Marie Octavasse. The bride was identified as an octaroon, but unfortunately no additional documentation survives for this couple. The evidence on Black women suggests that even a small percentage of colored blood was a stigma, quite difficult to remove. Although slave manumission was not uncommon, preliminary evidence suggests that concern about female slaves was minimum. Black mothers were separated from their children in the interest of fairness when dividing inherited property.

Black and Indian slave women played a key role in colonial Missouri society. Their contributions to the local economy were recognized when estate property was assessed. Slaves were always the most expensive personal property item. At this moment we cannot hypothesize about their relationship with French women, but it is likely that slaves were instrumental in assisting with the domestic chores. This was an overwhelming task considering that French women had a large number of children.

Another word of caution is necessary at this time. While the baptismal records provide substantial information on birth patterns, the geographical mobility of the population in Colonial Missouri means that generalizing about the average number of children women had is complicated. It is not enough to count the number of children per couple. We need a fairly complete life history of the marriage before the information has merit. If a couple had only one to three children baptized, this could mean that they have just moved in, that they left the area, or that they had an unusually low number of children. A low number of children per couple was often the result of the death of one of the parents. Sometimes widows and widowers remarried; some of them more than once. While spouses who remarried had children, they seldom had as many as those couples who grew old together. The following conclusions are tentative and are based on the examination of the life histories of one hundred women who appear to have been permanent residents of Ste. Genevieve for most of their lives. These women averaged 7.5 children. Controlling for the early death of one of the parents, the average number of children per couple rises to almost nine. Very large progenies were typical of certain families. All members of the Maurice dit Chatillon family who married had 10 children or more. The only exception is Catherine who only had three children when she died at 24, probably as a result of complications from childbirth.

Daughters and sons from families of certain social standing, in some cases as young as six years old, acted as godmothers and godfathers for siblings and relatives' infants. It is not clear if these children had any long-term responsibilities as a result. Analyzing the massive documentation from all the baptismal records will not by itself provide any clear answer to the question that emerges. What were the expectations of a godparent? Were they responsible in any way for the wealth being of the baptized children? In 1811 when Felicite Leclerc was nine years old she became a godmother for the first time. Before she married in 1821 she had been godmother of eight other children. Agathe Bolduc was even younger when she first became a godmother. She was six years old at the time and would be a godmother eleven times more before she married. Like

Felicite, Agathe did not act as a godmother after she married. Some women never acted as godmothers; others did it throughout their lives.

Piecing together pertinent information on the majority of women in Colonial Missouri is tedious and very time-consuming. The results are seldom clear and require the examination of massive documentation. The records so far examined seldom provide colorful vignettes or details that make enticing narratives. However, they probably reflect more closely the lives of the majority of women who lived in the area. While their contributions to the survival and success of these communities are commonly acknowledged, documenting their activities is challenging and will continue to be controversial.

Bibliography

- Andrews, William L., ed. *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990.
- Baker, Vaughn B. "Cherchez les Femmes: Some Glimpses of Women in Early Eighteenth-Century Louisiana." *Louisiana History* XXXI (1), Winter 1990: 21-37.
- Banner, Stuart. *Legal Systems in Conflict: Property and Sovereignty in Missouri, 1750-1860*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000.
- Bannon, John Francis, S.J. "The Spaniards and the Illinois Country, 1762-1800." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* LXIX (2) May 1976: 110-118.
- Belsom, Jack and De Ville, Winston. "The Sauciers in 1726: Year of Decision for a Colonial Louisiana Family." *Louisiana History* XXIX (2), Spring 1988:183-189.
- Berkin, Carol and Leslie Horowitz, eds. *Women's Voices, Women's Lives: Documents in Early American History*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998.
- Berkin, Carol. *First Generations: Women in Colonial America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 199

- Bossu, M. *Travels in the Interior of North America, 1751-1762*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962.
- Boyle, Susan C. "Did She Generally Decide? Women in Ste. Genevieve, 1750-1805." *William and Mary Quarterly*, XLIV (4), October 1987, 775-789.
- Brackenridge, Henry Marie. *Views of Louisiana. Together with a Journal of a Voyage Up the Missouri River in 1811*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962.
- Brasseaux, Carl A. "The Moral Climate of French Colonial Louisiana, 1699-1763." *Louisiana History* XXVII (1), Winter 1986: 27-41.
- Briggs, Winstanley. "Le Pays des Illinois." *William and Mary Quarterly* XLVII (1), January 1990: 30-54.
- Brown, Kathleen M. *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race and Power in Colonial Virginia*. Williamsburg: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1996.
- Clark, Emily. "By All the Conduct of their Lives: A Laywomen's Confraternity in New Orleans, 1730-1744." *William and Mary Quarterly* LIV (4), October 1997: 769-794.
- Corbett, Katharine T. *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History*. St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999.
- Eckberg, Carl J. *Colonial Ste. Genevieve: An Adventure on the Mississippi Frontier*. Gerald, MO: Patrice Press, 1985.
- Eckberg, Carl J. *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.
- Eldridge, Larry D., ed. *Women and Freedom in Early America*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.
- Foley, William. *The Genesis of Missouri: From Wilderness Outpost to Statehood*. Columbia, MO.: University of Missouri Press, 1989.
- Gilbert, Judith A. "Esther and Her Sisters: Free Women of Color as Property Owners in Colonial St. Louis, 1765-1803." *Gateway Heritage*, vol. 17 (1) Summer 1996: 14-23.
- Groneman, Carol and Norton, Mary Beth, eds. *"To Toil the Livelong Day:" America's Women at Work, 1780-1980*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987.

- Haas, Edward F. *Louisiana's Black Heritage*. New Orleans: Louisiana State Museum, 1983.
- Hanger, Kimberly. "Household and Community Structure Among the Free Population of Spanish New Orleans, 1778." *Louisiana History* XXXI (1), Winter 1989: 63-79.
- Hauser, Raymond E. "The Illinois Indian Tribe: From Autonomy and Self-Sufficiency to Dependency and Depopulation." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* LXIX (2) May 1976: 127-138.
- Hodes, Martha. *Sex, Love, Race: Crossing Boundaries in North American History*. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Ingersoll, Thomas N. "Free Blacks in a Slave Society: New Orleans, 1718-1812." *William and Mary Quarterly* XLVIII (2), October 1991: 173-200.
- Ingersoll, Thomas N. "The Slave Trade and the Ethnic Diversity of Louisiana's Slave Community." *Louisiana History* XXXVII (2), Winter 1996: 133-161.
- Kelin, Laura F. and Lillian A. Ackerman, eds. *Women and Power in Native North America*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995.
- Law, John. *The Colonial History of Vincennes under the French, British and American Governments*. Vincennes, Ind: Harvey, Mason & Co., 1858.
- Moogk, Peter N. "Reluctant Exiles: Emigrants from France in Canada Before 1760." *William and Mary Quarterly* XLVI (3), July 1989: 463-505.
- Morrow, Lynn. "New Madrid and Its Hinterland:1783-1826." *Bulletin—Missouri Historical Society* XXXVI (4) July 1980: 241-250.
- Peyser, Joseph L., ed. *Letters from New France: The Upper Country, 1686-1783*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.
- Rodney, Thomas. *A Journey Through the West: Thomas Rodney's 1803 Journal from Delaware to the Mississippi Territory*. Edited by Dwight L. Smith and Ray Swick. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997.
- Rollings, Willard H. *The Osage: An Ethnohistorical Study of Hegemony on the Prairie-Plains*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1992.
- Treckel, Paula A. *To Comfort the Heart: Women in Seventeenth-Century America*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999.

Waal, Carla and Oliver, Barbara, eds.. *Missouri Women Writing About Their Lives, 1820-1920*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997.

White, Richard. *The Middle Ground: Indian, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Winsor, Justin. *The Mississippi Basin: The Struggle in America Between England and France, 1697-1763*. Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1972.