Guylaine Spencer looks at daily life in New France in the 17th century.

The City of Quebec will celebrate its 400th birthday in 2008. What was life like in the capital of New France during its first century?

The textbooks that many of us recall from childhood depicted New France as a world populated by romantic coureurs-de-bois (fur traders) and fun-loving peasants. The inhabitants seemed to have just stepped out of a painting by Cornelius Krieghoff. Although Canada of the 1600s did include fur-traders and farmers, the citizens of its main town lived a life that was urban and even, on occasion, urbane.

European-style town
In the 17th century, Quebec was the capital of France’s empire in North America and it echoed the ambitions, tastes and customs of its parent country. Even the first fort built by Champlain’s crew in 1608 had the appearance of a miniature European town. It consisted of three timber buildings two stories in height and a courtyard with a watchtower, surrounded by a galleried wooden wall, a moat and a drawbridge. The buildings boasted glazed windows from France — a far cry from the log cabin many imagine when picturing early Canada.

By the end of the century, Quebec had developed into a bustling seaport of nearly 2,000 citizens. It was a two-tier town in more ways than one. In the narrow, twisty lanes of the Lower Town, squeezed between the river and the cliff, merchants, inn-keepers, soldiers, prostitutes, artisans and general laborers worked and lived cheek-by-jowl. Meanwhile, on the cliff above, powerful institutions lined the straight broad streets of the Upper Town — the Bishop’s place, the cathedral, the colleges and convents, the Chateau Saint-Louis — along with some of the homes of the wealthy. Stone fortifications encircled the elite.

A steep track linked the two levels. Streets in both sections were unpaved and flooded in the spring and blocked by snow in winter. Despite official injunctions, cows and pigs escaped from back courtyards and roamed freely. Speeding horses threatened the safety of pedestrians who had to pinch their noses as they picked their way through piles of rotting rubbish. The government prevailed upon people not to throw rotting food and human and animal waste into the streets, but to no avail. Starting in 1694, a cart went around once a week to remove garbage and take it to the dumps (one on each level of the town). However, the carts couldn’t get through in the winter.
because of the snow, and even in good weather, the removal service was unreliable. People threw waste into the river. No one worried about water pollution but authorities believed that the stench in the streets from the rotting garbage and the animal waste caused sickness. In 1673, the government ordered all new home-builders to install latrines. Private houses varied in size and style. Those of the poor were the church facing the square. Here, blasphemers, drunkards and those who missed mass on Holy Days paid for their sins.

Population
When Champlain founded Quebec City in July 1608, he brought with him 28 settlers. Twenty years later, the colony still numbered only 70 permanent residents, almost all men. For more than half a century, New France was managed by a series of fur-trading companies with scant interest in settlement. The flow of immigration remained glacial until 1663, when Louis XIV, King of France, took over direct rule and encouraged colonization. By 1700, the population of the town had quadrupled.

The Filles du Roi were the most famous immigrants of the era. The "Daughters of the King" were so called because most of them were orphans raised by the French state, which was embodied by the king. More than 700 women, most under the age of 25 years, came to New France between 1663 and 1673. The authorities, assisted by the nuns who chaperoned the women, arranged their marriages within a few weeks of arrival. Many of the new couples immediately left to farm their holdings along the St. Lawrence, but some stayed to swell the population of the capital. The government gave each couple a dowry of livestock and a small amount of cash. Baron de La Honton, a visitor during this period, remarked that the most popular women were the plumpest. The bachelors, he claimed, wanted hardy wives who would be able to shoulder their share of the work—or perhaps, as he noted wryly, "more than their share".

As for the male immigrants, many were craftsmen or semi-skilled laborers from France's cities. Very few were farmers. Frequently they signed up for three-year contracts as engagés. They worked for merchants and civic and religious leaders, unloading ships, constructing buildings and working on plots of land. Half of them returned permanently to France when their contract ended. Although the town was predominantly French, the population included Native people, African slaves, English-American prisoners, Scots and Irishmen. In 1668, Mother Marie de l'Incantation described those who had just arrived on the ships as "mixed merchandise. There were Portuguese, Germans, Hollanders, and other (men)... also Moorish, Portuguese and French women... The first woman to marry was the Moor, who wed a Frenchman."

Left: Samuel de Champlain, undated. Right: Even though the majority of the Filles du Roi were of humble origin, the term used to describe them inspired some artists to paint them in the dress and attitudes of ladies of the court, as this painting by Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale shows.
Power and Order
The people of Quebec City looked to the administrators of the colony and the religious leaders for authority. Although these two powers occasionally came into conflict, usually they worked in harmony.

The colony had imported its legal system, land holding rules and mode of government directly from France. No police existed but when a crime was committed, the military tracked the suspect. As in Europe, officials resorted to torture during interrogation. Punishment for crimes could include seizure of property, exile or, in extreme cases, the death penalty. Hanging was the most common method of execution.

One of the most important jobs of the administrators was to provide security for the city and part of this was managing the colony’s rocky international relations with the Iroquois and the English. In 1669, Louis XIV ordered the Governor to set up a militia. Able men from 16 to 60 years provided not only unpaid service but their own weapons, clothing and food. During the war with the Iroquois in the 1660s, France sent 1,300 regular troops to Quebec. After the war, around 400 of the soldiers chose to remain in the colony.

The Church arrived early in Quebec — the Recollets in 1615, the Jesuits in 1625 and the Ursuline nuns in 1639. There was no “Wild West” period in New France. Religious leaders cared for the souls of the community, punished transgressors, attempted to convert the Huron people to Catholicism and French ways of living, and provided health care, shelter and schooling to citizens.

Making a Living
The economy of New France was based on fur, but the townspeople of the capital weren’t all courriers-de-bois. Quebec attracted shop owners, artisans, servants and general laborers. Its port was the most important in the colony. Ships with goods for the whole colony stopped here. Merchants from Montreal and Trois-Rivieres came to Quebec to conduct business. Spin-off industries, such as warehouses, shops, inns and taverns, sprang up near the port.

In construction, the years from 1690 to 1697 were buoyant; the king spent 180,000 livres on the fortifications alone. Carpenter, stonemasons, tanners, armourers, bakers and butchers plied their trades. Apprenticeship usually lasted three years; a child lived with his master while he learned the business.

Wealthier citizens often complained that servants were in short supply. When they did obtain help in their homes, it was usually a girl aged between four and 13 years old. It was difficult to attract day laborers too, because land was cheap, and able young men preferred to farm for themselves.

Slavery was a fact of life in a society that mingled brutality with gentility. The French bought Pawnee prisoners of war and slaves of African origin as much for status as for household work.

Caring for the Unfortunates
Town officials banned begging more than once during the 17th century, but they didn’t turn a blind eye to the needy. In 1688, the town officials established an Office of the Poor and appointed advisors who reviewed applications for aid. They hired two women to go from door to door asking for alms in money or in kind. Many of the people they served were widows with children. Officials gave out bushels of wheat, quarts of milk or small amounts of cash, depending on need. They arranged apprenticeships for orphans and found jobs for able-bodied men. They opened a small shelter. The Office of the Poor was not a new idea; some French seaports had them as early as 1626.
In 1693, the Hôpital-Général, an almshouse, opened. In the beginning, it housed the marginalized, although later it expanded to serve as a hospital for the general public. Able-bodied beggars were sent here to work on the farm and to care for people with disabilities and mental illnesses, and elderly people who were unable to care for themselves.

School Days
Boys and girls in Quebec went to separate schools. Children attended primary school until the age of 12. The Jesuits opened a primary school for boys in the Upper Town in 1635, and in 1639, the Ursulines opened a school for girls. Children learned to read (in Latin at first), to write and to count. Girls also studied compartment and needlework. Priests and nuns ran the schools and religion was a large part of the curriculum.

Although the schools were divided by gender, there was no ethnic separation. Published letters written by nuns and priests refer to students of Huron and African origin.

In the 1600s, higher education was for boys only. The Jesuits operated a trade school for cabinet makers, sculptors and gilders. In addition, their college, North America's first classical college, trained boys destined for the professions. It involved three years of letters and grammar and one each of humanities and rhetoric, then two years of philosophy for those planning to enter religious orders.

Fees for full-time boarding students equaled a skilled worker's annual salary, but bursaries were available. The fees helped the institutions cover the costs related to the day-school, which was free.

Health Care
Nuns cared for the sick in hospitals that treated all walks of society and every type of illness, physical and mental. Wards housed the insane, the alcoholics, the intellectually disabled and even those who were supposedly "possessed of the devil".

Doctors were rare, but residents relied on other practitioners. Barber-surgeons treated wounds, removed tumors and dead fetuses, and performed bleedings and purges. Midwives attended births and also acted as early social workers, as they often had to find wet nurses for orphaned or abandoned babies.

Epidemics took many lives. In 1685, the nuns looked after 300 patients suffering from typhus and scurvy. The sick filled the hospital, barns, chicken coops and tents. During the years 1687-1688, smallpox devastated the town. Ships from France often brought infection; officials soon learned to quarantine them and disinfect them with tar smoke.

The French adopted Native remedies like spruce gum, which made a syrup for colds and beaver kidneys for the treatment of nervous conditions.

Family Life
Along with immigration, a high birth rate fuelled the growth in population in the last quarter of the century. Today's birthrate in Canada is roughly 11 births per 1,000; back in the 17th century, New France's was five times this rate. Women tended to marry young and have babies every two years until menopause. About one in five babies died in their first year. Widows remarried quickly.

The state paid a baby bonus to fathers with more than 10 children. Encouragement was hardly necessary though; in time before pension plans of any sort, people welcomed children as future sources of labor and support. Abandoned infants soon found homes. When couples grew too old to work, the family would hold a meeting before a notary and decide who would take care of the parents and how much each sibling would contribute. In the rare cases where the children failed to provide for their parents, officials enforced support.

Lifestyle
Townspeople ate moose, caribou and venison and many kinds of birds — bustards, duck, pigeons, partridge, snipe and teal. Storehouses or icehouses kept the meat and milk frozen in winter. Fish and eel were common, especially during Lent. A popular dish was pie tourtiere, a poultry pie. Bread was such a large part of the diet that the government imposed price controls during times of shortage. In 1656, it was estimated that the average workman ate two or three loaves of wholemeal bread a week, each loaf weighing six or seven pounds. Maple sugar did not come into fashion until the English administration. From 1634 on, the city had a brewery.

The wealthy imported cheese, sweetmeats, lemons, oranges, olives, figs, spices, sugar, molasses, wine and brandy from France. No doubt many of these delicacies appeared at the Governor's elegant parties on New Year's Eve. Gift-giving was a popular tradition during this festival; in 1646 the Jesuit Relations records some of the gifts exchanged that year — a small book, a telescope, two pies and a holy picture done in enamel. The books came from France, as there was no printing press in the country at the time. Books were rare and prized. The Jesuit College owned the largest collection and their library operated as a reading room for the town.

Another festive occasion, more exciting even than New Year's, was the arrival of the first ships from France every spring. The ships brought friends and family, intriguing strangers, longed-for letters and treasures, like the latest fashions from Paris. Old-timers and new arrivals celebrated with parties, outings by calèche (a type of early two-wheeled carriage) or canoe, picnics and card games.

Some newcomers warranted greater acclamation than others. When the Governor d'Argesson arrived in 1648, locals wrote and staged a play. The dialogue was multi-lingual: French, Huron and Algonquin. On other special occasions as well, audiences enjoyed plays, ballets and readings in Greek and Latin. In such ways, the townspeople could pretend that they were in the heart of Paris; for a few hours at least, they kept the wilderness around them at bay.
Quebec City in the 1600s
HIS30S

1. Explain the pun in the following quote, “The citizens of its main town lived a life that was urban and even, on occasion, urbane.”

2. How is Champlain’s fort built in 1608 described?

3. If Quebec is so far inland, how can it lay claim to being “a bustling seaport”?

4. What architectural evidence would convince you that wealthy people lived atop the cliff while the lower classes lived along the river at the base of the cliff?

5. How did the square serve the community?

6. As long as the fur trading companies ran the settlement, very little population growth occurred. Why did it remain so small under this form of government?

7. The king was so anxious to increase the colony’s population that he sent over “les Filles de Roi”. Why was an increase in the population in the colony so vital to the king?

8. Contrary to popular belief, the French were not the only settlers in the colony. Describe the ethnic mix of the colony.

9. Each seigneur (landlord), noble or person of wealth could buy a commission in the French military. They did, however have to raise their own militias. What disadvantage(s) were there to commanding a militia? What was/were the advantage(s)?

10. How did the wealthy rationalize the taking and keeping of slaves?

11. Compare the care and treatment of the poor in New France to the care and treatment of the poor in Canada today.

12. How do the educational opportunities given to the boys and girls reflect the society in which they were raised?

13. What was the value of children within the New France society generally, and the family specifically?