

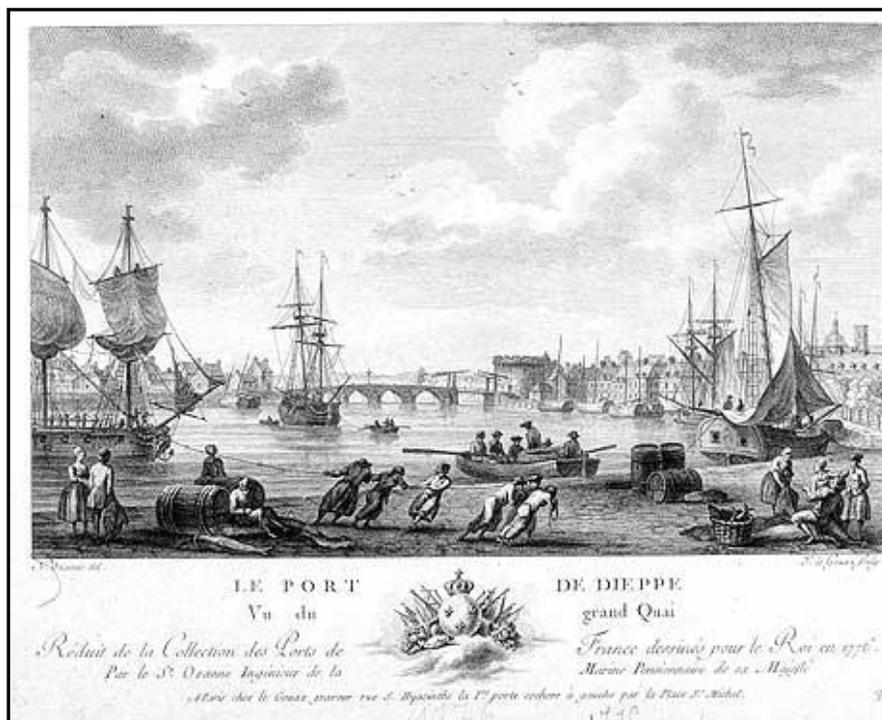
Hélène Desportes of Early Québec Her Years of Exile in France

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(Excerpts from the book *Hélène's World: Hélène Desportes of Seventeenth-Century Québec* by the same author)

Hélène Desportes, born in 1620, was the first child of French parents to be born in Québec and to survive. For nine years, she lived in the *Habitation* of Samuel de Champlain, the founder of the French colony. On July 9, 1629, a fleet of British vessels commanded by Louis Kirke appeared on the river in front of the settlement at Québec.

War had broken out between England and France in 1627. The following year, the English began to harass the French and the Basque fishermen along the St. Lawrence River. There had been an unsuccessful attempt by the English to capture Québec in 1628. Now, the English had come with five large sailing ships, each of three to five hundred tons, well equipped with cannon and other firearms. There were 120 men on each ship.¹ In sharp contrast, Champlain, governor of the French colony, had sixteen men and less than fifty pounds of gunpowder to defend the fort: powder for two or three cannon volleys and munitions for eight to nine hundred shots from the muskets. There were only about one hundred colonists in all of New France. Hélène, along with the rest of the French settlers, was ordered inside the fort. Samuel de Champlain, with no food and little to defend Québec, had no recourse but to surrender. On July 19, 1629, Captain Louis Kirke captured the settlement and raised the British flag.² On July 24, 1629, Champlain, along with the small band of French colonists who had decided to accept the offer of the English to return to the mother country, sailed away from Québec.³ Hélène sailed with her parents, her aunt Marguerite Langlois and uncle Abraham Martin, and her cousins Marguerite and Hélène.⁴ It must have been a very frightening and confusing time for Hélène. She was leaving her birthplace, her homeland. She was leaving behind her childhood playmates: Louise and Marguerite Couillard, as well as Guillaume Hébert. Hélène must have wondered if she would ever see them again.



A view from the Grand Quai of the port of Dieppe, a seaport city in upper Normandy, France (PD)

Champlain and the other exiles from New France reached the English port of Plymouth on October 20, 1629. A week later, those who were returning to France disembarked at Dover for the trip across the Channel. It was in England that the French received the news that peace between England and France had actually been declared two months before Québec had been captured by the English. Before returning to his homeland, Champlain was able to extract the promise that Québec would be returned to the French.⁵ However, it would be years before Champlain and the settlers would again set foot in Québec.

So it was that the young H  l  ne, in the company of her parents, the missionaries and various tradesmen, that is, a majority of the other settlers from Qu  bec, landed in France at the end of three months of trials and tribulations on board ship.⁶ No doubt soon after her arrival, sometime late in the fall of 1629, H  l  ne Desportes found herself in the lively French port of Dieppe. This was the birthplace of H  l  ne's mother, Fran  oise Langlois and her aunt, Marguerite Langlois. Marguerite's husband Abraham Martin, the Scotsman, was also from Dieppe.⁷ Nine-year-old H  l  ne was now three thousand miles from Qu  bec, the only home she had ever known. Her world had been turned upside down.

Dieppe was a walled city situated between two limestone cliffs on the Normandy coast of France. It was only a short distance across the English Channel to Britain. When H  l  ne arrived in Dieppe in 1629, it was already a very old city. Its recorded history dated to the eleventh century, when a fishing village was known to have existed on the site. Vikings discovered Dieppe during their raids southward along the coast of Europe. During the Middle Ages, it became a town of some substance. Dieppe was a battleground in the Hundred Years War between France and England, waged from 1337 to 1453; both sides were intent on claiming its port. In the fifteenth century, sailors from Venice stopped in Dieppe on voyages between the Mediterranean and Flanders. Some settled there and added Italian words to the local dialect.⁸

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, seamen from Dieppe were among the first to set sail for other continents.⁹ The most advanced school of cartography in France in the sixteenth century was located in Dieppe. Privateers from the port city, authorized by the King of France, sailed against Portuguese interests and succeeded in breaking their monopoly on trade with West Africa and the East Indies. From Africa, sailors brought back ivory tusks that would be carved by Dieppe craftsmen, renowned for their skill, into a variety of articles. The wine, brandy, sugar and salt trade of western France was an international concern. Ships regularly came into port from England, Spain, and the Netherlands. Merchants not only engaged in trade with these countries, but they also sent their sons abroad to learn the business of commerce. There were, at the same time, traders from other countries based in Dieppe.¹⁰

Beginning a century before H  l  ne's birth, French fishing vessels sailed from Dieppe to the Grand Banks of Newfoundland for cod fishing. Thomas Aubert of Dieppe had visited the newly discovered fisheries off these banks in 1508 and was the first Frenchman to bring a native back to France. The city was a major port of embarkation for New France. In the seventeenth century, thousands of French citizens would emigrate from France to the New World by way of the port of Dieppe.¹¹

In Dieppe, there was much to take in for a young girl who had never been beyond the boundaries of the small settlement of Québec. Wandering along its narrow and winding streets brought all manner of new sights, sounds and experiences. H el ene had never seen so many people, so many buildings, so many ships in the port. She had never seen a horse or a carriage.¹² A wall with

seven gates had been built around the city in the eleventh century. Five of the gates opened to the sea. Overlooking the city was a massive stone *ch ateau*, or castle complex, with its ramparts and turrets, built primarily in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The time-worn stone pinnacles and buttresses of the Church of Saint-Jacques could be seen rising above the homes and businesses. Dieppe was one of the towns visited by pilgrims making a pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern



An engraving depicting a sea view of Dieppe around 1830, produced by the Scottish engraver William Miller (1796-1882) (Archiv "Deutschland und die Welt," PD)

Spain (El Camino de Santiago).¹³ The Church of Saint-Jacques was built in the twelfth century on this ancient pilgrimage route. The original structure was destroyed by fire, but the church was rebuilt in the fifteenth century in Norman Gothic style. In 1562, the church was pillaged by the Huguenots, but again rebuilt. Now, in the seventeenth century, the oldest part of the church was the thirteenth-century nave. A beautiful stained glass rose window graced the west front of the church. Many beautifully-decorated side chapels lined the nave and these were built with donations from the wealthy shipbuilders of the sixteenth century. Not far away was the Church of Saint-Remy, dating back to the thirteenth century. The city also had a school run by Jesuits and a hospital for the poor run by an order of Augustine nuns. How different Dieppe was from the tiny hamlet on the shores of the St. Lawrence River!¹⁴

This is not to paint a rosy picture of Dieppe. In the late fall of 1629, the air would have a distinct chill. Darkness descended early, before the day's work was done. There is no record of the reception that the Langlois sisters and their families received upon their return to France. It is very likely that they were given, at best, a frosty welcome in Dieppe. Its citizens would not have welcomed a group of bone-weary travelers, sick at heart and quite possibly sick in body from the grueling trans-Atlantic voyage. In his *Voyages*, Champlain had remarked that the returning settlers would be reduced to having to beg for their bread: he foresaw the difficulty the families would have in returning to their homeland.¹⁵ The immigrants to the New World would be dependent upon their families and charitable institutions. H el ene's parents had been gone for ten years. They were returning to France without any assured means of supporting themselves. There is no indication that either the Langlois sisters or Abraham Martin came from well-to-do

families. Life was difficult enough for the working-class families of Dieppe; one can imagine that extra mouths to feed were not welcomed by those already struggling to survive. Unlike in the little settlement of Québec, families could not look forward to ships bringing annual supplies of food and wine to supplement what they themselves could produce or otherwise obtain. Although H el ene's family circumstances are unknown, the reality of their lives was harsh enough that both H el ene's mother and father perished in the years following their return to France. H el ene's mother died on April 20, 1632 and her burial was noted in the records of the Church of Saint-Jacques.¹⁶ According to one record, her father had already died in Lisieux; perhaps he had gone there looking for work to support his family.¹⁷

Qu ebec remained under British rule until March 29, 1632. On that date, the treaty of Saint-Germain-en-Laye returned Canada to the French. The merchant Emery De Ca en and three Jesuits were the first to return to the colony on the St. Lawrence River, leaving Honfleur on April 18, 1632. Two years later, and five years after being taken from the shores of the St. Lawrence River and transported across the Atlantic Ocean, H el ene found herself again in the land of her birth, again in the small settlement of Qu ebec, and again making a big change in her young life.¹⁸ When she returned to the New World, she was an orphan in the company of her aunt and uncle. At the age of fourteen, she was considered a girl of marriageable age. So it was that on October 1, 1634, H el ene Desportes was wed to Guillaume H ebert, the son of Louis H ebert and Marie Rollet.¹⁹ The couple were married by the Jesuit Missionary Father Charles Lalemant in the little chapel of Notre-Dame-de-la-Recouvrance, located near Fort Saint-Louis on the bluff above the settlement. Samuel de Champlain had ordered the construction of the chapel in 1633, in thanksgiving for the return of Qu ebec to the French. H el ene would spend the remainder of her life in the colony. There she would marry twice, have fifteen children, and seventy grandchildren.

¹ Tanguay, *A Travers les Registres*, 16; Champlain, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, ed. Biggar, VI:81-82.

² Champlain, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, ed. Biggar, VI:52-55. On July 24, 1629, the French merchant Emery de Ca en arrived in New France to get his furs. Champlain learned that the French had delayed in leaving France. Champlain bemoaned the fact that if the French had left port earlier, they might have successfully avoided the English, and brought with them the supplies the French sorely needed to withstand the assault from the English. (Champlain, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, ed. Biggar, VI:74-97)

³ Champlain, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, ed. Biggar, VI:74.

⁴ A number of earlier historians, including Tanguay (*A Travers les Registres*, 16-17.) and Sulte, Fryer, and David (*A History of Qu ebec*, 30.), believed that the families of Abraham Martin and Pierre Desportes remained in Qu ebec. It has only been in recent years that documents have been discovered placing both families in Dieppe, France during the years between 1629 and 1632.

⁵ Champlain, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, ed. Biggar, VI:144-150.

⁶ According to Tanguay, four families remained in Qu ebec after the surrender to the British in the summer of 1629: (1) Guillaume Hubou and Marie Rollet with Guillaume H ebert, son of Louis H ebert (deceased); (2) Guillaume Couillard and Guillemette H ebert with their children Louise, Marguerite, and Louis; (3) *Abraham Martin and Marguerite Langlois with their children Marguerite and H el ene. (They also had a girl named Ann, age 25, living with them.); (4) Pivert and his wife Marguerite Lesage, a niece and a young man. Others who remained were Adrien Duchesne (surgeon), Le Bailly, Etienne Brule, Nicolas Marsolet, Pierre Boyer (cartwright) , LeBocq (carpenter), and Gros-Jean. H el ene Desportes and her parents are not mentioned. (Tanguay, *Through the Registers*, 16-17.) *Tanguay's work is incorrect. According to Bernadette Foisset and Gail Moreau-Desharnais in their research for the Fichier Origine Database, Abraham Martin and his family returned to France in 1629, after the capture of Qu ebec by the Kirke brothers. Abraham's son Pierre was baptized in Dieppe in January, 1630.

⁷ Moreau-Desharnais, "Exiles from Qu ebec Found in the Parish of St-Jacques de Dieppe During the Kirke Occupation (1629-1632)."; Moreau-Desharnais, "Langlois, Fran oise" and Foisset & Moreau-Desharnais, "Martin/L'Ecosais, Abraham". *Fichier Origine Database*.

⁸ Hayes, *Canada: An Illustrated History*, 26; Hayes, *Historical Atlas*, x; Rider, *Short Breaks in Northern France*, 154-155.

⁹ The Dieppe citizen, Jean Ango, a wealthy ship owner, funded many expeditions for trade and exploration in the sixteenth century. He became the city's richest man and is buried in the Church of Saint-Jacques in Dieppe. In the twenty-first century, he is a local hero and is commemorated in various ways about town. (Rider, *Short Breaks in Northern France*, 154)

¹⁰ Hayes, *Canada: An Illustrated History*, 26; Hayes, *Historical Atlas*, x; Rider, *Short Breaks in Northern France*, 154-155.

¹¹ Hayes, *Canada: An Illustrated History*, 26; Hayes, *Historical Atlas*, x; Rider, *Short Breaks in Northern France*, 154-155; Trudel, *Introduction to New France*, 9.

¹² The first horse to come to the colony was the one given to Governor Montmagny in 1647. In 1665, a dozen more horses arrived with the Carignan-Salières regiment. (Trudel, *Introduction to New France*, 207.)

¹³ El Camino de Santiago, or the Way of Saint James, is a pilgrimage that has existed since the eleventh century, and perhaps earlier. By the twelfth century, it was an important part of the culture of Europe. In the Middle Ages, there were three important Christian pilgrimages: pilgrims traveled to Jerusalem, to Rome, or to Santiago. A massive infrastructure was created to support pilgrims on their journey to Santiago in northwestern Spain. Roads were improved and bridges were built. Churches and hostels were established along the famous route. The popularity of the pilgrimage diminished in the centuries following its peak, but beginning in the late twentieth century, there has been a resurgence of interest in this pilgrimage.

¹⁴ Rider, *Short Breaks in Northern France*, 150, 154-55. The population of Dieppe at the beginning of the 21st century is 35,000. Although its former grandeur has faded, the old harbor remains and fishermen still ply their trade. The massive stone gateway, the Porte des Tourelles, is all that is left of the walls that were built around the city in the fourteenth century. The thirteenth century Church of Saint-Remy, the fifteenth century Church of Saint-Jacques, and the castle complex built above the town in the fifteenth century (now the Château Musée) remain as historical landmarks. Although the weather is often cold and grey, Dieppe has the closest beach to Paris. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this seaport town became a fashionable destination for Parisians. Many artists, including the likes of Monet, Pissarro, and Miró, were also drawn to Dieppe, drawing inspiration from its landscape, sea, and sky. Today, it has one of the better Saturday markets in all of Normandy. (Rider, *Short Breaks in Northern France*, 150, 154-55)

¹⁵ Champlain, *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*, ed. Biggar, VI:72.

¹⁶ Moreau-Desharnais, "Exiles from Québec Found in the Parish of St-Jacques de Dieppe During the Kirke Occupation (1629-1632)."

¹⁷ Moreau-Desharnais, "Langlois, Françoise," *Fichier Origine Database*. Lisieux is 155 km. south of Dieppe, France.

¹⁸ It is not known for certain whether Hélène was among the French who returned with Champlain in 1633 or whether she came the following year with a group headed by Robert Giffard. Since her parents had died in France, it is assumed that Hélène returned with her uncle Abraham Martin and her aunt Marguerite Langlois. In the Fichier Origine record for Abraham Martin, it states that he returned to New France in 1633 with his wife and son Charles; however, no civil or church record has survived indicating exactly which year this couple returned. There is good reason to believe that Hélène returned in the summer of 1634. One indication may be found in the 1634 marriage record of Hélène and Guillaume. The witnesses to the marriage were Robert Giffard and Henri Pinguet. Since both Giffard and Pinguet arrived from France in 1634, it might well have been that Hélène had made their acquaintance on the ocean crossing. If she had arrived the previous year, she might well have chosen as witnesses other settlers with whom she was better acquainted. Also, as Léon Roy notes in his article, "Pierre Desportes et sa descendance," there were many more men than women in the small colony. A lot of pressure was placed on families to marry their girls at a young age. It was not unusual for girls in early Québec to be married at the age of twelve or thirteen. This would suggest that if, in fact, Hélène had returned in the summer of 1633, she would have been married to Guillaume that fall, when she was thirteen years old.

¹⁹ *Programme de recherche en démographie historique (PRDH) Genealogical Database*, Marriage Record #66320; "Québec, Catholic Parish Registers, 1621-1979" FamilySearch online, Notre-Dame-de-Québec, 1621-1679, Image 128.