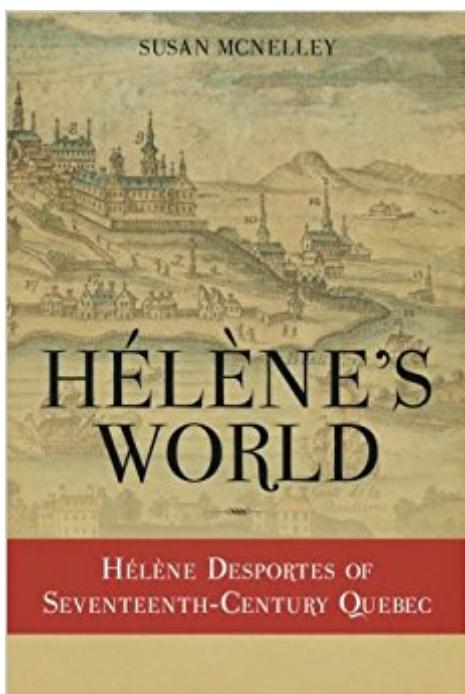


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# HÃ©lÃ¨ne's World: HÃ©lÃ¨ne Desportes Of Seventeenth-Century Quebec



## Synopsis

Hélène Desportes, born in 1620, was the first child of French parents to be born in Quebec and to survive. For nine years, she lived in Samuel de Champlain's Habitation. In 1629, the little settlement was captured by the English. Hélène, along with the majority of the other French settlers, was put on an English ship and taken to France. She returned to Quebec in 1634 and spent the remainder of her life in the little colony. She was married twice, had fifteen children, and seventy grandchildren. No portrait of Hélène exists. There are no memoirs, no diaries, nor any letters to guide the biographer. Nevertheless, there are public records and other primary sources from which we are able to piece together her life. This, then, is her remarkable story, set against the backdrop of France's efforts to establish a colony in the New World along the banks of the St. Lawrence River.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Against a backdrop of the history of the period, customs of the times, contemporary descriptions, and the lives of her fellow pioneers, Hélène's conjectured life takes on form and color. . . . [This book] will appeal as much to anyone with a general interest in the founding colonists of Québec as it will to descendants of Hélène Desportes." - Maryanne R. Legrow, Ph.D., Editor, Connecticut Maple Leaf, French-Canadian Genealogical Society of Connecticut "McNelley does not try to fictionalize her ancestor's life. Instead she paints a rich background and then states what is known about Hélène's life from the available documents for her and her neighbors." - Lynn Johnson, Links, Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society "An exciting journey covering all aspects of [Hélène's] life in the 1600s . . . A book you should have in your genealogical

library." - Lifelines, Northern New York American-Canadian Genealogical Society "Susan McNelley has deftly woven the story of the early settlement of New France, using the life and times of Hélène Desportes as the instrument to tell the history, culture and life of New France (Canada) from the very beginning. . . . While Hélène's life is the main thread through the book, it is really the story of the early colony that is the main subject." - Bill Kane, *Sent by the King, La Société des filles du roi et soldats du Carignan, Inc.*

Hélène's World includes a lot of the history of early Quebec and French colonizing efforts along the banks of the St. Lawrence River in the New World. The stories and traditions of seventeenth-century Quebec and France are relevant. We can better understand Hélène and her French-Canadian neighbors when we know something about the world in which they lived. People are likely to have more in common with their peers than with preceding and future generations. Their daily activities, homes, diet, clothing, and challenges faced, as well as their religious and social values, generally reflect the realities of life and the societal customs for their time and place. Hélène's World is an admittedly imperfect picture of Hélène Desportes. We can only surmise what she was thinking or feeling. In reality, all biographies are incomplete. We can never know all of the hopes, sorrows, and dreams of another individual. Hélène left no diary, no letters. If we limit ourselves to the official records from church and civil archives, we are drawing a stick figure. Seeing Hélène within the historical and cultural context of the world which she inhabited adds substance to her story and rounds out the picture we have of her life.

I was so glad to find and purchase Helene's World by Susan McNelley. The book, tracing the likely life story of Helene Desportes in early New France, was enlightening, enjoyably written, well documented and of special interest to me as a student of history and genealogy. The book filled in and tied together many of the bare facts of history, giving them a narrative and a context. For me, it answered many questions about the pioneer experience, with insights on women, religion, the native population, the situation in France, and conditions of those who survived the first years in New France. Without fanfare, McNelley gives Helene her due for enduring and contributing to the establishment of the colony. I am also a descendent of Helene's, through her daughter Francoise Hebert and her son Alphonse Morin. French Canadians are fortunate to have so much of our ancestry documented, but the actual story remains quite unknown. McNelley has done an impressive job to illuminate the lives and people of early Canada, who lived at such a precarious and yet fascinating time.

This book will appeal to French Canadians researching their family trees because almost everyone has Hélène Desportes in their lineage. General readers who enjoy history will enjoy this book because it clearly presents the founding of Québec. It was so easy to imagine how difficult life was in the New World for Europeans, many who came from urban environments. That there are so many Franco-Americans today is a testimony to their perseverance. The book is well cited, and Susan McNelley also provided a synopsis of what happened to Hélène's children.

This engaging introduction into the world of the first French colonists of Quebec, invites the reader to enter the everyday world of the colonists, the challenges and the triumphs of surviving and flourishing in this new and alien environment. Written from the perspective of the life of the first girl born in the new colony, it makes the adventure of establishing and adapting European culture to the "new world" very accessible to modern readers. Important, but often neglected aspects of the lives of the colonists, namely securing sufficient food, and, extended family relationships and social bonds, are clearly brought out. Since most histories of New France focus on the missionary efforts of the Jesuits among the Amerind population, the fur trade, or the military/strategic aspects of French colonial rule, this is a fresh approach, comparable to a "family history", at the same time introducing the important aspects of Amerind relations, missionary and other religious aspects of 17th century Colonial life, as well as the effects of the fur trade, relations with the Mother Country, and the characters of Colonial administration. I think that "Helene's World" should be required reading in all secondary and collegiate-level Introduction to American History classes. And, as is the case in all really well-written introductions, the reader is drawn to the bibliography and the desire to learn more!

I enjoyed the book especially with breaking the time period into chapters which helped explain the history of what was going on during each time period & in general Champlain's community in New France. However, some of the information on Helene Desportes was sketchy & missing when there is more information out there about her. I also found Ms McNelley gave some erroneous information about Helene & her family. Possibly she did not have this information at the time. One of the facts I do not remember her mentioning in the book is about Helene's parents such as her father Pierre Desportes being in charge of the community warehouse which included all the distribution of the food/supplies/munitions/etc. A very important position & explains how close the Desportes family was to Champlain & why she would become his god-daughter. He was also employed by the

Company of 100 Associates & was able to read & write which made him extra valuable to Champlain. He was also a baker. There is a portrait of Helene which the author mentions numerous times that there was not a portrait. Little things like that unfortunately caused me to give this book a 3 star even though I thought it was interesting & well written.

As I make my way through this book I am impressed with the plethora of details that the author provides about the daily life of early French settlers. It gives the genealogist a vivid picture of the challenges that ancestors overcame. Those who remained in Canada must have been of sturdy mind and body in order to survive in a harsh climate where nothing could be taken for granted. They must have been somewhat open-minded when living alongside native peoples since there was such a great divide between native and European cultures.

Like many other readers of this book, I am a descendant of Helene Desportes. My ancestors kept moving west until they ended up in another part of Nouvelle France -- Michigan. I earlier had learned many names in my family history but was devoid of a sense of who these people were. I am delighted with this book's detail about the daily lives and interconnections of the early settlers of Quebec. I am especially happy that the author added what life was like in France at the time, since the Quebec settlers would mimic it to whatever extent they could, or at least share the same values. I wish only that an editor had found the "it's" which should be "its" and "track" of land that should be "tract" of land, and other small errors, but especially that the writing style would come a little closer to story-telling. That said, the years of research show and are appreciated.

I enjoyed this book very much. Helene Desportes is my 9th Great Grandmother, so to find such specific information about her and some of my other ancestors is fascinating. It also helped me to understand what life was really like back in the day. I wish when I was in school that Canadian history was presented in this fashion then maybe I would have been bitten by the history bug much sooner. Two thumbs up!

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