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Female Ancestor Number: 234

Name: Montour, Isabelle/Elisabeth (Couc) "Madame"

Dates: 1667-c.1752

Colonial Society: PA

Date added to ROA: 6-21-2025

Service: Interpreter/Negotiator to the Colonial Government of Pennsylvania, c.1727-c.1745

Authority: Hirsh, Alison Duncan. "'The Celebrated Madame Montour': 'Interpretress' Across Early American Frontiers." *Explorations in Early American Culture* 4 (2000), pp. 98-101, 103-106.

Biography:

Many stories have been told about the "celebrated Madame Montour" through the centuries. Those recorded were told by men who held power, several by men who competed with her on the rough and tumble frontiers of colonial America. It is from the detailed research of scholar Alison Duncan Hirsh that we derive the best-known facts of the often-mysterious woman known as Isabelle Couc Montour. Hirsh believes some of the discrepancies surrounding Montour are a direct result of a woman who shape-shifted as she made her way in the new world, compounded by witness accounts with divergent narratives.

Born in present-day Quebec of mixed French and Algonquin ancestry, she was exposed to a multilingual society, which also included those who used Iroquoian in their fur trading partnerships. At seventeen, she was married to Joachim Germano, a man twice her age. Her public identity was that of a Christian Frenchwoman. Germano disappeared within ten years of marriage and Elizabeth Couc had taken on the pseudonym "Madame Montour." The name "Montour" is a mystery, but appears to have come from her brother Louis Couc, who utilized the name first. It might derive from the Algonquian word manitou or "spirit." By this point Madame Montour, now married to another Frenchman named Peirre Tichenet, is thought to have joined two of her sisters and their families in present-day Michigan (later Fort Detroit) which was a multi-ethnic community at the center of the fur trade. It is here she worked as an interpreter for the French explorer Antoine de la Mothe, sieur de Cadillac from 1693 to 1697. It was rumored that she interpreted Cadillac's most clandestine meetings, yet he later claimed her to be a degenerate and a savage. Perhaps he was a scorned lover who did not appreciate that in his absence from Fort Detroit, that Madame Montour had taken up with his acting commander Etienne de Verniard, sieur de Bourgmont, who had also sent Montour's husband off to fight outside the fort. Bourgmont ultimately deserted his post, taking Montour, her brother Louis Couc Montour, and several soldiers with him. They retreated to an island on



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Lake Erie. Montour's exile didn't last long as by 1708 her brother Louis was working as a go-between between the Great Lakes Indians and the English in Albany. Montour's arrival in Albany would help solidify Louis' work, with her marriage to the Oneida war captain, Carandowana ("Robert Hunter"), which made him a literal "brother of the Iroquois." In 1709 Louis was murdered by a French agent and "Montours Sister" stepped in, evidently the only person available who understood English and Ojibway, among other languages. She played a key role as the English worked to line up Indian allies. She appears in an account book in 1711 "Eysabelle Montour interpretress" listing payment in goods for her work from mid-July to mid-October 1711. This same expedition also supplied her with wampum beads to sew nearly six hundred belts at about one shilling each, indicating a side cottage industry among her relatives and contacts. Carandowana—out of respect for NY Governor Robert Hunter—took on his name in 1711. As a well-respected interpreter for the Governor, Madame Montour likely interpreted between the two men with the same name. After the Governor returned to Britain, Madame Montour seems to have reinvented herself as she headed to Pennsylvania as an *educated woman of French parentage, who had learned Iroquoian languages upon her capture at age ten*. Montour's husband became an Iroquois representative in 1714 to the native leaders from Conestoga (present day Lancaster Co.) who presented him as the "newly Elected King" of the Shawnees. Once again Isabelle would have been key in advancing her husband's position through her understanding of the Shawnee language. They settled near their family at the West Branch of the Susquehanna River.

By July 1727, Madame Montour made her first appearance in Philadelphia as *interpreter of record*, translating between PA Governor Patrick Gordon and an Iroquois group in a land dispute issue. Years later Montour would recall that during her frequent visits to Philadelphia she found a warm welcome from the Quaker ladies who "always invited her to their houses, entertained her well, and made her several presents." Her reinvention as a "French lady" would have made this possible. During this time, her role transformed from interpreter to *informant*, and sometimes not always a reliable one. After 1729, Montour's prestige fell after the death of her husband and her advancing age, as well as infighting among the indigenous leadership. She continued to provide information and advice to men like Conrad Weister and James Logan, who respected her opinions and spoke well of her abilities.

In 1744, Montour traveled to a peace conference in Lancaster (PA), the meeting of the Iroquois and their allies of PA, MD, and VA. She continued to host extended family and various frontier travelers, including Moravian missionaries. In her eighth decade, she moved further west, perhaps joining relatives, including a son. Her death was little noticed, except by a trader named John Harris in January of 1753 who wrote, "Madame Montour is dead."

As Hirsh notes, "Madame Montour's life suggests we need to look more closely for the women on the early American frontiers." While she was sometimes reported as an official participant in diplomacy, more often she was an unofficial one, interpreting and providing information privately to colonial leaders. To



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Hirsh, Montour offers us extended knowledge of women's participation in the frontier economy. She lived in a multilingual, multi-ethnic, multi-religious world. Survival meant adaptation.