

Angélique Nolin(1787-1869) and Marguerite Nolin (1780-1868): The earliest female Métis educators in a formal school setting.

By Lorraine Freeman and Lawrence Barkwell

Angélique Nolin, with the help of her older sister, Marguerite Nolin, ran one of the first formal schools in the Red River settlement. The school was created under the direction of Bishop Provencher in January of 1829. There had been other schools in the area for Aboriginal boys, but Provencher felt that it was important to educate the girls as well. Angélique Nolin's school provided education to First Nations and Métis girls of French, Cree, Ojibwa and Scottish backgrounds that lived near the Red River settlement. This was the first established school for girls.

Women such as Angélique and Marguerite Nolin and the women of the female religious orders such as the Grey Nuns and the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, made an important contribution to the establishment of an education system for the province of Manitoba.

Angélique and Marguerite were educated outside of Red River. They came from Sault Sainte-Marie to Red River with their parents and sisters in 1819. Their mother, Marie Angélique, was Métis and their father, Jean-Baptiste, was a Canadian fur trader and merchant. He was well respected and held a privileged position in Sault Sainte-Marie, where the family had lived before coming to Red River. Jean-Baptiste Nolin and Marie Angélique Couvret were married in 1770. They had five daughters and five sons. The girls had received an excellent education in Montreal and completed studies with the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre-Dame in Montreal. The Nolin family was a prominent one around Sault Sainte-Marie (they lived in what is now the USA). This is where Lord Selkirk first met them. Selkirk became impressed with the family and frequently suggested to the ailing Jean-Baptiste that he move his family to Red River. Lord Selkirk and Father Joseph Provencher expressed the view that the two young women of the Nolin family could make a valuable contribution to the intellectual life of the settlement.

Provencher initially invited Angélique to come and run the school. At first, her father refused. He said that he needed his daughters to care for him in his old age (he was 82). Women were expected to put their families first, so Angélique stayed home. The priority for women was the home and family life, rather than going out and earning a living. Since Jean-Baptiste had other daughters at home to care for him, it seems likely that he simply did not want Angélique to work.

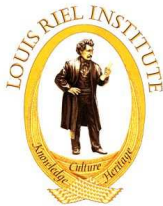
When Jean-Baptiste Nolin died in 1826, Provencher again invited Angélique to come and teach. This time she agreed, which suggests that she was interested in teaching and running the school, but did not immediately accept at first because of the wishes of her father. In 1829 Angélique and her sister Marguerite opened the school to the Métis and First Nations children living nearby. The sisters learned how to sew and weave so that

they could teach the girls these skills. Angélique and Marguerite ran the school for five years, until 1834.

In 1834 they began teaching at Baie St. Paul (St. Eustache). Bishop Provencher assigned the sisters to assist Father Belcourt in learning the Native languages to communicate with the Indians. Angélique and Marguerite were fluent in French, English, Ojibwa and Cree. Both sisters worked for the next decade with Father Belcourt. At the mission the sisters helped with the children as well as helping Father Belcourt prepare an Ojibwa dictionary along with school texts. Belcourt's work would have been set back for years without the help of the Nolin sisters.

Belcourt had a more integrated approach to education. He wanted to combine the Métis and First Nation ways of life with a Catholic education. The Nolins worked with Belcourt for the next ten years, teaching and helping him with translation.

In the 1840s, Angélique and Marguerite left teaching and turned to farming. By 1850, the "Misses Nolin" farmed a few acres with stock of horses, cattle, sheep with carts and a canoe. These two Metis women made a most valuable contribution to the Red River frontier. Marguerite died in September of 1868. Angélique died on March 30, 1869 at St. Boniface.



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