

Vital Records in Québec

By Michael J. Leclerc

Prior to the twentieth century, the churches of Québec recorded and held the vital records of the province. The churches were required to provide the provincial government copies of all birth, marriage, and death records, which serve as the official vital record. These provincial copies are known as the *Registres d'état civile*. When using microfilm copies of Québec church records, it is important to note whether you are using the *Registres d'état civile*, the original parish registers, or a copy of the registers. The copies and transcriptions often do not contain all of the information from the original parish record.

If you are using microfilms from the Family History Library, you are most likely using the civil registers, not the original parish registers. The Family History Library Catalog classifies both the originals and the civil copies as church records. It is important to read the notes on the title page of any catalog entry to discover which records you are using.

While looking for the registers for St. Norbert d'Arthabaska, Québec, the town where my grandmother was born, I found three entries: *Registres paroissiaux 1888-1900 Eglise Catholique Saint Norbert d'Arthabaska*; *Registres paroissiaux 1845-1884 Eglise Catholique Saint Norbert d'Arthabaska*; and *Registres paroissiaux 1845-1877 Eglise Catholique Saint Norbert d'Arthabaska*. The first two entries contain the words "Microfilm des originaux dans les Archives nationales du Québec à Trois-Rivières, Québec" in the notes field on the title page. This indicates that these entries are from the civil copy of the parish registers that now resides in the Archives Nationales de Québec at the Trois Rivières branch. The last entry reads "Microfilm des originaux dans le Presbytère de St.-Norbert," which refers to the original church records still kept in the church at St. Norbert.

There are several additional reasons why it is important to know which copy of the registers you are viewing. First, when trying to retrace your steps, it is helpful to know exactly which microfilm you are using. And when you are dealing with multiple copies of a record it is critical to ensure that you are looking at the same document time after time. Page numbers may differ from copy to copy. Whenever an item is copied there is the possibility for error. Names can be erroneously transcribed or omitted completely. Words that are illegible in one copy may be legible in another. One of the copies may have become damaged by water, mold, or simply by the aging process. Knowing which copy has already been checked will keep you from having to retrace your steps.

One major difficulty is in determining which is the "original" copy. The priests and ministers were told only that they had to turn over a list of all births, marriages, and deaths in the parish during the course of the year. Some priests kept one set of books and copied them at the end of the year when all the entries were complete. Others kept two sets of books concurrently, sending one off to the government at the beginning of the next year. In this instance, which copy could be considered the "original"?

Corrections may have been made to the registers where incorrect or omitted words were added when copying. If you find a record is incomplete, make sure you check the other copy to see if the missing information is there.

The priests were supposed to prepare an index for the records each year. Unfortunately, some registers were either not indexed or the indexes were lost over time. The arrangement of the indexes varies from parish to parish. Some priests listed all baptisms first, then the marriages, then the burials, putting each section in alphabetical order. Here is an example of one of these indexes from the parish of l'Avenir. [l'Avenir 1].

[Click on image for large view](#)

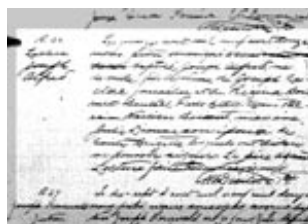
Other times, the names were gathered together onomastically only. This means that all names were gathered together by the first letter of the surname, but they do not appear in strict alphabetical order.

Another common “index” was compiled when the priest listed in chronological order the names of the subjects of the records as they appeared in the register. They would then list the page number that the name appeared on. Sometimes the priest made columns and indicated next to the name whether the act was a marriage, baptism for a boy, baptism for a girl, death of a male, or death of a female. This made it easier to compile statistical information for the parish. Here is an example of this kind of index from the parish of St. Antoine de la Baie du Febvre in Yamaska County. [St. Antoine 1835 Index].

[Click on image for large view](#)

Because of the strict structure of the Catholic Church, the language for baptisms, marriages, and burials varies little from parish to parish. Sometimes the priests used flowery language, but the major points will be immediately recognizable after you have researched the registers for only a little while.

Here is an example of a birth/baptism entry of my grandfather, Joseph Alfred Leclerc, from the parish of St. Zepherin de Courval in Nicolet County.



Le quinze aout mil neuf cent douze, nous prêtre soussigné avons ~~???????~~ baptisé Joseph Alfred , né la veille, fils legitime de Joseph Le-clerc journalier et de Regina Boisvert Central Falls Etats Unis Parrain Narcisse Boisvert, marraine Julie Dionne son épouse de Sainte Brigitte lesquelles ont déclaré ne savoir signer. Le père absent. Lecture faite. Trois mots soyés nuls.

H. Desilets, P^{tre}.

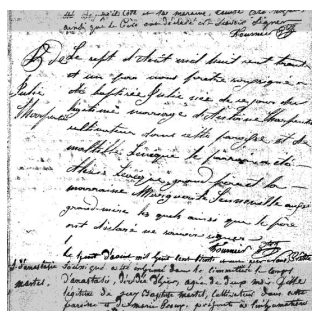
Translated, this reads,

The fifteenth of August one thousand nine hundred and twelve we the undersigned priest ~~?????? danté~~ have baptized Joseph Alfred, born the night before last, the legitimate son of Joseph Leclerc, day laborer, and Regina Boisvert Central Falls United States Godfather Narcisse Boisvert Godmother Julie Dionne his wife of Sainte Brigitte those having declared they did not know how to sign their names. The father was absent. Lecture given. Three words were nullified.

H. Desilets, Priest

There are two major clues in this record: the first is that Joseph Leclerc and Regina Boisvert were living in Central Falls (Massachusetts) in the United States at the time that their son was baptized at St. Zepherin. The other is that Narcisse Boisvert and Julie Dionne were living in Ste. Brigitte. This record confirms my grandfather's story that his parents were visiting his mother's relatives at St. Zepherine when he was born, and that his grandparents served as his godparents (a very common occurrence). His grandmother died soon after his baptism, and the notation of Ste. Brigitte gives a clue as to where her death may have been recorded.

Julie Dionne's grandparents Alexis Lepellé dit Lahaie and Anastasie Chassé were married at St. Antoine de La Baie du Febvre in Yamaska County on August 9, 1831. Here is a copy of the marriage record from the parish registers.



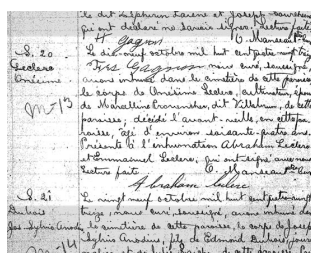
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Le neuf d'aoust mil huit cent trente et un ~~????? Nous Prêtre soussigné a été~~ après la Publication de trois Bans de mariage fait au Prône la messe paroissial pendant trois dimanches consécutifs ____ entre Aléxis Lepellé dit Lahaie, cultivateur dans cette paroisse fils majeur de deffunt Louis Lepellé dit Lahaie et de deffunt Louise Charette ses père et mère d'un parte et Anastasie Chassé fille majeur de François Chassé, cultivateur dans cette Paroisse et de Josephte Corbin sa père et mère d'autre part; n'étant trouvé aucune opposition

Translation

The ninth of August One Thousand hundred thirty-one ~~????? we the undersigned priest~~ after the publication of three banns of marriage made at the sermon at the parish mass during three consecutive Sundays ____ between Aléxis Lepellé dit Lahaie, farmer in this parish son in the majority of the late Louis Lepellé and of the late Louise Charette his father and mother of one part and Anastasie Chassé daughter in the majority of François Chassé, farmer in this parish and of Josephte Corbin her father and mother of the other part having found no opposition

The burial record for Onésime Leclerc, Joseph Leclerc's grandfather, is an example of a typical death record in the parish registers.



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Le dix-neuf octobre mil huit cent quatre-vingt treize nous curé soussigné, avons inhumé dans le cimetière de cette paroisse, le corps de Onésime Leclerc, cultivateur, épouse de Marcelline Provencher dit Villebrun, de cette paroisse, décédé l'avant-veille, en cette paroisse, âgé d'environ soixante-quatre ans. Présente à l'inhumation Abraham Leclerc et Emmanuel Leclerc, qui ont signé avec nous. Lecture faite.

E. Manseau, Ptre Curé

Abraham Leclerc

The nineteenth of October one thousand eight hundred ninety-three we the undersigned curé have buried in the cemetery of this parish the body of Onésime Leclerc, farmer, husband of Marcelline Provencher dit Villebrun, of this parish, died the day before yesterday, in this parish, age approximately sixty-four years. Present at the burial were Abraham Leclerc and Emmanuel Leclerc who have signed with us. Lecture given.

E. Manseau, Ptre Curé

Abraham Leclerc

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