

New Brunswick Repositories: Archives of the Diocese of Saint John

By Peter D. Murphy

The Diocese of Saint John is the seventh oldest Roman Catholic diocese in Canada. Established in 1842, the Diocese originally embraced the entire province of New Brunswick and the Madawaska region of the adjacent State of Maine. Currently, the Diocese of Saint John serves New Brunswick's eight predominantly English-speaking counties: Saint John, Kings, Queens, Sunbury, York, Charlotte, Carleton and Northumberland.

Largely as a result of the explosion of interest in genealogy at the end of the 1970s, Bishop Arthur J. Gilbert established the Diocesan Archives as a publicly-accessible research facility. Peter D. Murphy served as the first Diocesan Archivist. The Archives—currently housed in the Diocesan Services Building in Uptown Saint John—house most of the extant PRE-1900 sacramental records *for the parishes and regions currently served by the Diocese*. Except for records of interment, all POST-1900 records must be obtained directly from the parish or mission in which the sacrament was administered. The oldest extant sacramental records are those of Bartibogue, on the Miramichi, which begin in 1801. Baptismal and marriage records for the Saint John area begin in 1812, for the Fredericton and Charlotte County areas in 1827, the Woodstock region in 1842, and the missions of Kings County in 1845.

Family Group Sheets

Over the course of more than twenty years, Diocesan Archivist, Mary Kilfoil McDevitt, has painstakingly transcribed virtually all pre 1900 sacramental records onto several *hundred thousand* Family Group Sheets. These sheets constitute the Archives' single most consulted source, making it possible—in a matter of minutes—to determine where and when any given couple was married and if that couple had a child or children Baptized anywhere in the Diocese. Even a quick glance at any one of the dozens of meticulously organized binders which line the shelves of Archives' research area make it clear that a very large number of couples left the Diocese shortly after marrying (almost always for the adjacent “Boston States”). As Ms. McDevitt observes, “What has also emerged from this ongoing project could be termed ‘context’, a look at the big picture. It affords not merely lists of names and dates, but glimpses of a culture, of a specific time and place in history. It humanizes the ‘mountain of names.’ ” While many of the records of the Diocese of Saint John are available to on-line researchers as part of the *Drouin Collection*, this invaluable collection of Group Sheets (and the accompanying maiden-name index) remain available only on site at the Saint John facility.

Additional Resources

The Diocesan Archives also houses a complete set of microfilmed editions of *The New Freeman*—the Diocesan newspaper published since 1900—together with a complete card index of “Freeman” obituaries and marriages. The Diocesan Archives also houses the correspondence of all deceased and/or retired Bishops as well as extensive biographical and historical files on the clergy and parishes of the Diocese; numerous pew rent books, subscription and membership lists and minute books (all of which contain valuable biographical tidbits).

The Archives of the Diocese of Saint John, are located on the ground floor of the Diocesan Centre at One Bayard Street—a stone's throw from the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Uptown Saint John. Free parking is available at the front of the building and a large lot at the side of the building provides additional free parking (even for RV's). The Diocesan Centre is within walking distance of uptown hotels and restaurants. The exit into the city off the Saint John thoroughway (Route 1) is Exit 123.

From September to mid-June, the Archives are open 1:30 to 4:30, Monday through Thursday. During those months, the archives are run as a one-person operation and occasional closures are, therefore, inevitable. Though drop-ins are welcome, Ms. McDevitt advises that, if possible, visitors book an appointment for in-office research. While the archives do not charge a set fee for the use of the facility, donations are gratefully accepted.

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