

The Programme de Recherche en D  mographie Historique (PDRH)

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Over three decades ago the University of Montr  al embarked upon an ambitious project that has had a tremendous effect on many areas of research, including history, demography, and genealogy. The Programme de Recherche en D  mographie Historique was founded in 1966. It is commonly known as the PRDH and is one of the most important resources for French-Canadian research in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

French-Canadians have been the subjects of many different studies through the years because of the small, tightly woven population of the area. In comparison to the English colonies to their south, which experienced almost 400,000 immigrants in the seventeenth century, New France had only 15,000 immigrants. Many of these either returned to France or died shortly after arrival. All people of French-Canadian descent today are descended from the 10,000 remaining men and women who settled this stark territory in the seventeenth century.

The PRDH was founded to conduct an exhaustive study of these individuals, as well as their descendants and additional immigrants through the seventeenth century. The program utilized a cadre of college students to abstract hundreds of thousands of records.

Parish Records

One hundred fifty-three parishes in the province were examined for records of baptisms, marriages, and burials. For the period through 1765 all names mentioned in the records were transcribed. For the period 1766 through 1799, only the names of those related to the subject or subjects of the record were transcribed. Other names were omitted. Both the ecclesiastical copies in the churches and the civil copies sent to the provincial government were examined to ensure completeness. Cyprien Tanguay, in his *Dictionnaire g  n  alogique des familles canadiennes depuis la fondation de la colonie jusqu'   nos jours* (Montreal: E. S  n  cal, 1871–90) listed 815 records not found in the original registers, mostly in the parishes of Sorel, Saint-Augustin, and Petite-Rivi  re-Saint-Fran  ois. These records were added to the project database.

Abjuration Records

Parish registers often contain other information besides baptisms, marriages, and burials. Especially in the early years of settlement, many individuals who were not Catholic immigrated to the colony. Upon settling in the colony they were required to abjure their heresy and convert to Catholicism. Hundreds of abjuration records are included here.

Confirmation Records

Upon growing to young adulthood, Catholics are required to confirm their beliefs in church teachings. Confirmation records usually contain just the name of the individual being confirmed, and over 500 confirmations are included in the PRDH.

Annulments

In the wilderness, a priest was not always readily available to perform marriages. Individuals wishing to be married often did not want to wait for the months (or years) it would take for a priest to arrive and bless the marriage. In cases such as this, the couple would compose a marriage contract and proceed to live together as husband and wife, often having several children. When the priest finally arrived, he would “rehabilitate” the marriage, giving it the blessing of the church and making the children legitimate in the eyes of the church. The church rarely offered to annul marriages, but there are four annulments included in the PRDH.

Censuses

In addition to parish records, several other record groups were examined. There were three censuses of New France in the seventeenth century: one in 1666, one in 1667, and one in 1681. Smaller censuses of local areas, such as Mont Louis and Qu  bec City were undertaken in the eighteenth century through the time of the conquest. Many of these censuses listed all members of the family, not just the heads of household.

Marriage Contracts

It was the custom to visit a notary to take out a contract for a marriage prior to the religious ceremony. Thousands of marriage contracts were examined by the PDRH for additional information on individuals whose marriage records were missing or incomplete. For most of these records, only the information concerning the bride and groom and their parents was abstracted. The names of other individuals, including other possible family members, were omitted.

Immigration Records

Lists of immigrants to New France were compiled from various sources, which led to the identification of over 1,200 settlers. Many of these individuals were named in lists published by various archives through the years. In addition, a few individuals chose to become naturalized citizens of France. Many individuals did not come to New France intending to settle permanently. For example, many men came to serve as soldiers. A number of these individuals settled in the colony permanently, married, and raised families. Because these individuals were so far from home, it would sometimes be difficult for them to prove their marital status. Often they would have friends or acquaintances that had known them in France testify as to their ability to be married legally, with no prior family existing back home. These testimonies are rich in details about places of origin.

Publishing the Records

In 1980 the PRDH began publishing volumes of the information they had collected. For the next ten years they published forty-seven volumes of data covering the period through 1765. These volumes are published in several segments by year. Records of each parish are published together, but separated into baptisms, marriages, and burials. Each parish has its own index, and cumulative indexes were published for each time period. These indexes do not standardize surname spellings and there is no master list of variations. One must determine all possible variant spellings of a surname to ensure thoroughness.

Records are presented in a standardized format. The top right side of each entry lists the dates mentioned in the record. While marriages have only one date, baptisms often mention the dates of birth and baptism, while burial records usually include the date of death. Dates are indicated in the standard European format: year-month-day. The left side includes the source for the record. The source is only indicated for those records that did not come from the original parish registers, so in most records this space is blank.

Underneath are listed all of the individuals listed in the record. Each person is given an identification number, starting with number 1 for the individual who is the subject of the record. In marriage records, grooms are always given number 1 and brides are given number 2. The parents are listed after the subject or subjects, followed by other individuals. The relationship between the individuals is given. Then their marital status is given with abbreviations: C=single, M=married, V=widowed, S= separated. The next to last column indicates whether the person was present at the occasion. For example, many women did not attend the baptism of their child as they were home recuperating from the birth. The last column indicates the gender of the individual.

The years 1766 through 1799 were published in 1999 on CD-ROM. For the first time the surnames were standardized, making searching a great deal easier. The search variations were greater as well, with the ability to search on any number of criteria. A full version of the PRDH was released in 2000, covering the years 1621 through 1799.

		B = 1719-10-14	N = 1719-10-14			
01	MARIE THERESE/VACHON			r.C.P.	C	P F
02	NOEL/VACHON/PAMERLOT	r.C.P.	EPOUX DE 03	PERE DE 01	M	P M
03	MARIE JEANNE/BELANGER	r.C.P.	EPOUSE DE 02	MERE DE 01	M	P F
04	NICOLAS/MONGEON			r.C.P.	P	M
05	JEANNE/MAHEU		r.C.P.	EPOUSE DE 06	V	P F
06	PAUL/BELANGER		r.C.P.	EPOUX DE 05	M	D M
07	/BOULLARD	r.C.P.	p:PRETRE FAISANT LES FONCTIONS CURIALES		C	P ~M

Baptism entry as shown in the PDRH volumes

		S	1711-10-22	
01	JEAN BAPTISTE/SILVESTRE	18 JOURS	C	D M
02	PIERRE/SILVESTRE	PERE DE 01		M
03	ANNE/LABADIE	MERE DE 01		F
04	FRANCOIS/LABADIE			P M
05	FRANCOIS/GARNIER			P M
06	J/BASSET	p:PRETRE	C	P M

Marriage entry

			1715-11-28	
01	CHARLES/DROLLET	r:C.P.	s:NON	C P M
02	GENEVIEVE/XINTONGE	r:C.P.	s:NON	C P F
03	PIERRE/DROLLET	PERE DE 01		P M
04	CATHERINE/ROUTTIER	MERE DE 01		F
05	MATHURIN/XINTONGE	PERE DE 02		D M
06	MARIE MADELEINE/FISET	MERE DE 02		F
07	PIERRE/DROLLET	FRERE DE 01		P M
08	JACQUES/DROLLET	FRERE DE 01		P M
09	JEAN BAPTISTE/DROLLET	FRERE DE 01		P M
10	JEAN/HAMEL			P M
11	ETIENNE/GAUVIN			P M
12	PIERRE/GAUVIN			P M
13	FRANCOIS/DUPRE	p:PRETRE	C	P M

Burial entry

Also in 2000 a website was created containing the information from the PRDH database. The database is organized into three sections. The first contains a list of all vital records through 1799. Then there is a genealogical dictionary of families from 1621 to 1765. This section links individuals through their vital records.

The final section contains is called the Repertory of Couples and Filial Relations, 1621-1799. This section links couples to their children. It allows quick linking from generation to generation and lets the user trace ancestors or descendants for two hundred years very quickly. All marriages to 1800 are included.

While it is very expensive to purchase the CD-ROMs (\$580 US), subscriptions to the web database are based on the number of pages viewed. For more details see the website at <http://www.genealogie.umontreal.ca>. The site is available in both French and English.

The PRDH is one of the major resources available for early French-Canadian ancestors. No researcher can be without the useful information they have created. However, like all secondary sources, it should be used as a resource to access the original records, not as a source itself. Errors and omissions did occur, but using the PRDH as an index makes locating original records infinitely easier.