The Name Game â€“ Tips for Finding the Real Names of French-Canadian Ancestors

By Michael J. Leclerc

One of the most difficult areas many researchers face when tracing their French-Canadian roots is discovering the actual names of their ancestors in Québec. How many would guess that a man named John King would actually be a French-Canadian formerly called Jean Roi? And once back in Canada, what naming practices there affect research?

French-Canadian Surnames in the United States

First let us discuss the subject of French-Canadian names in the United States. French-Canadians were among the first explorers of the American West. The Lewis and Clark expedition employed French-Canadians to help lead their party. American entrepreneurs built fortunes in the fur trade with the assistance of French-Canadian trappers. When the United States made the Louisiana Purchase many of their descendants became Americans.

In addition to these early individuals, thousands of immigrants came into the United States from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. Among the biggest fallacies about immigrant name changes in the United States are that “the name was changed at Ellis Island” or “the name was changed when they crossed the border.” The reality is that United States immigration agents stationed at border crossings spoke the native languages of immigrants. It was only after the immigrants had settled here that their names were changed.

When their names were changed, some were simply translated literally. Jean Roi became John King. Etienne Lariviere became Steven Rivers. Michel Roch became Michael Stone. These individuals can be very difficult to locate, as their anglicized names often give no indication of their previous French origins. It takes detailed analysis of sources, such as church, census, and vital records, for clues to a French origin. If you do come across an individual with an English-sounding name, but there is reason to suspect that they might be French, look to see if there is a translation of the surname that would be a common French-Canadian surname.

In addition to literal translations, names were often anglicized. English-speaking individuals often changed names by recording them as how they were heard, as opposed to how they were actually spelled. For example, the name Roch can become Rush, Ouellet can change to Willet, and LaJoie (pronounced la-zhwa in French) often becomes Lashua. When researching a Franco-American individual, sound out their name and spell it phonetically. Try substituting different letters and you may discover your actual French surname.

As a side note, not all immigrants to New France were French. Settlers came from Germany, England, Scotland, Portugal, Spain, and even Romania, as well as other European countries. The infamous Battle of the Plains of Abraham, at which the English conquered the French, took place on the lands originally owned by Abraham Martin, a seventeenth-century immigrant from Scotland. As these individuals came to Québec, their names would often be gallicized, just as French-Canadians had their names anglicized in the United States. Thus Simon Greenleaf of England became Simon Vertefeuille and Joao Rodriguez of Portugal became Jean Rodrigue.

First Names in French-Canada

The second area that can be difficult when tracing your Franco-American ancestors back into Québec is that of first names. Most French-Canadians carried two or more names in addition to their surname. French-Canadians were almost universally Catholic. Although many of the early settlers were French Protestants, most of the lands of New France were granted to Catholic orders, such as the Jesuits. Once these Catholic orders arrived, they forced the Protestants back to Catholicism.

In order to honor the church, many males carried the baptismal name of Joseph. Many females were baptized as Marie. These names were carried to honor Joseph and Mary, the parents of Jesus. In addition to these names, people would carry one or two additional names, i.e., Joseph Pierre, Joseph Louis, Marie Laura, Marie Alma, and so forth.

As a rule, individuals would use the name closest to their last name for everyday use. The first and middle names could also be switched over time, especially after immigrants left for the United States. As an example, my grandmother was

Yvette Céa Ruel. This is the name on her marriage certificate, death certificate, and the one engraved on her gravestone. Obtaining a copy of her baptismal certificate showed that the name given her at birth was Marie Céa Yvette Ruel. When I mentioned this to my mother, she stated that her mother had always hated the name Céa, and rarely mentioned it at all. This would explain why she used Yvette her entire adult life.

This is, however, a general rule for research, and not a mandatory practice. For example, my paternal grandfather was named Joseph Alfred Leclerc. Throughout his life he was known as Fred. To my knowledge, he was never called Joseph. His father was Joseph Pierre Leclerc. He was called Joseph or Joe his entire life, never using the name Pierre.

Sometimes the names would run together. For example, Marie Anne could sometimes become Marianne. The two names could also be used together and not separated. For example, Marie Louise would always be known as Marie Louise, not Louise or Marie. Names that in English are traditionally masculine or feminine can also be used in different ways in French. Jean-Marie is a common name for men. And in early Québec, many women were known as Marie Josephe instead of Marie Josephte.

Remember these naming practices as you trace your family back to Québec. When looking for baptismal records, or even for marriage records, look for the first names of Joseph and Marie in addition to others. This may be the clue that unlocks the hidden records.

“Dit” Names

In contrast to the English colonies to her south, New France had a very small number of immigrants. With a limited number of immigrant surnames, and with so many individuals being baptized as Marie or Joseph, it would quickly have become difficult to differentiate between ancestors with identical names. It is not uncommon at all to have, say, a Joseph Lebrun, who was son of Joseph Lebrun, with a nephew, cousin, and grandson all named Joseph Lebrun as well.

The practice of using “dit” names is one that was carried over from France to their colony in the New World. Dit literally means “called in French.” These names are used to differentiate between individuals who have the same surname and often the same first name. These names were appended onto the surname. Over time, some descendants can end up dropping the original surname and the dit name becomes the surname.

For example, my surname is Leclerc. My patrilineal immigrant ancestor was a man named Louis Houde. One of his descendants was a man named Gabriel Houde who married Jeanne Petitclair. Their descendants were called Houde dit Clair. Their great-grandson was Abraham Houde dit Clair. He married as Abraham Clair. During the course of his life Clair became Leclair, and eventually Leclerc. Some descendants still use the Leclair spelling variation.

Dit names came from many different sources, among them:

- Military service
- Land name or location
- Place of origin
- Descriptives (such as hair color, personality, weight, etc.)

The good news is that most of the dit names are known. Several compilation of dit names have been published, among them one co-authored by the great French-Canadian genealogist René Jetté, *Repertoire des noms de famille du Quebec des origines a 1825* [**CS88/Q4/J47/1988**]. This book is available in the NEHGS Research Library.

Tracing your ancestors back to Canada can be difficult. French-Canadian and Franco-American naming patterns can contain major clues to finding your ancestors in their home of Québec. When tracking these individuals, make no assumptions about their names and variations that might exist between their original form and their final form in the United States. You may indeed find yourself in the middle of a “name game,” but one that you are likely to win if you know the rules of play.