

Did Your Ancestor Get Religion?

I remember when I was young taking the long trip to Boston to visit my great aunt, Sister Florence. I remember playing in the chancery in Brighton, and only when I was older realizing that the impressive man I had met there was actually Richard Cardinal Cushing, the leader of the Archdiocese of Boston. It was only when I started researching my family history that I discovered that Sister Florence was the same woman as the Aunt Vi my mother's cousin always referred to.

When researching your ancestors and their families, it is commonplace to find individuals who seem to disappear. A record of birth or baptism is found, but marriage, death, burial, and other information is elusive. Sometimes these individuals died as children, but it is especially puzzling to find children living with the family to young adulthood in census records only to vanish without a trace. All too easily many make the assumption that the individual died without leaving a record. But there are other possibilities as well. The child may have left home and gone to a distant place or they may never have married. One possibility that is frequently overlooked is that the child entered the priesthood or religious life.

In 1648 Pope Alexander VII created the apostolic vicarate of Québec and François de Laval was named the apostolic vicar for the area. In 1674 the vicarate was elevated to the level of archdiocese, and Monseigneur de Laval became the first bishop in New France. By 1995 there were thirty-five dioceses and eleven archdioceses in Ontario and eastern Canada alone. In addition, there were sixty-six religious orders of priests, fifteen religious orders of brothers, and one hundred twenty seven religious orders of women operating in Canada. And this is just for the Roman Catholic Church! This does not include other branches of the Catholic Church (such as the Melkites or Eastern Orthodox), Anglicans, or other denominations who have their own branches of religious life. An amazingly tangled web of possibilities for disappearing ancestors!

Large numbers of Irish Catholic families sent at least one member of the family into religious life: either a son into the priesthood or a daughter to become a nun. While common among French-Canadians, it was not as frequent as it was among the Irish. Most of the time it was a younger member of the family that entered religious life. The older children were helping to support the family farm (or other family business). In Québec, where most Catholic children went to parochial school instead of public school, there was tremendous pressure to join religious life.

It can be difficult to locate individuals after they joined the clergy or a religious order. After their religious education and formal entry into the priesthood or religious life, many individuals end up stationed far away from the town or village where they were raised. In the Roman Catholic Church these individuals are barred from marrying. Oftentimes those in religious orders adopt names with religious significance. Marie Heloise Houde could become Soeur Jeanne Françoise. Joseph Thivierge could become Frère Jacques. In my own family, Viola Angeline Morin became Sister Florence, i.j.a.

The first step in researching these individuals is to determine what parish they lived in. Once this is known, it is easy to discover the diocese or archdiocese the parish is located in. It is important to recognize when dioceses were created, as the boundaries change over time and you will be researching different dioceses and different areas (much like the changing of county and township boundaries).

Once the area has been located, determine if there is a seminary or convent nearby. Those destined for religious life studied for years before taking their vows. Nuns especially ran many primary and secondary schools. It is important once a school, convent, or seminary has been located to determine the order it was associated with. This is necessary because in many instances, the records are not kept locally, but sent to the mother house of the order. Canadian priests, brothers, and sisters were in charge of many institutions in the United States as well, and it would not be unusual to have to write to Canada to obtain records of these US institutions. Many local groups made note in their records of those who went on to further religious study and take their final vows.

Once you have identified the local seminary, convent, or school, write to it and determine if they have any surviving records of these individuals. Then write to the mother house and ask if they have any records. Ask what the major centers of religious education were in the time period you are researching, to help identify where additional records

may be found. If you know an ancestor was a priest or religious, search for records that mention the order that the person belonged to. If you cannot find the order, check for any mention of postnominals, which will identify the order. For example, Sister Florence, i.j.a. was a member of the Soeurs de l'Institut de Jeanne d'Arc.

Another method of identifying the order is to look at what your ancestor did in religious life. Religious orders are dedicated to specific kinds of service, such as teaching, nursing, and missionary work. Knowing what kind of service your ancestor performed will reduce the types of orders you will need to search. Conversely, knowing which order your ancestor belonged to can tell you what kind of service he or she performed. If you know that your ancestor was a teacher, but you can't identify the order she belonged to, try contacting the [School Sisters of Notre Dame](#). They run many schools throughout the United States and Canada. A male ancestor who was an educator in religious life may have been a member of the [Brothers of the Sacred Heart](#).

Knowing what name your ancestor adopted in religious life can also give insight into his or her personality. These individuals took the names of saints that they wanted to emulate. In some orders the names were given to them by the mother or sister superior, either in recognizance of particular traits or an attempt to curtail other, less desirable habits.

Many churches and other religious institutions published histories, especially around the time of major anniversaries such as centennials, sesquicentennials, and bicentennials. These histories often contain rich biographical information on parish priests and other prominent individuals. Local newspapers also published this information in many instances.

Published biographies are also available. Jean-Baptiste Arthur Allaire compiled the six-volume *Dictionnaire Biographique du Clergé Canadien-Français* between 1908 and 1934. This set, which is available at the NEHGS Library (REF F1005/A4), contains over 3,000 pages of biographical information on priests from the province throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Prominent individuals can often be found in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

To locate parishes, dioceses, convents, schools, and seminaries there are different avenues of approach. A valuable website for Catholics in Canada is www.catholiccanada.com, which has links to dioceses, archdioceses, and other organizations throughout the country. For information on saints' names try visiting www.Catholic.org/saints. The official website in the English language for the Vatican is www.vatican.va/phome_en.htm.

Researching ancestors who entered religious life can be challenging, but it can also be rewarding. There are many clues to give you insight into their personalities that are unavailable elsewhere. And who knows how many "vanished" ancestors you may locate? Sister Florence was born in Connecticut and spent her entire life working in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Vermont. She died in Montréal at the age of ninety-one, after spending her retirement years in the mother house of her order, located in that city. Without knowing that she joined a religious order, other descendants of my great-grandparents might have difficulty determining what happened to this woman. Yet she lived a long, amazing life, the highlights of which included service to two cardinals and to Pope John Paul II on his historic trip to Boston. Having researched Sister Florence's travels in the Institut de Jeanne d'Arc, I am next setting my sights on great Aunt Émerentienne Dubé, a Gray Nun from Brunswick, Maine. I can only imagine the life that she led.