Finding Clues to Immigrant Origins

State: Canada

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One of the most difficult parts of researching your family's origins in Canada is to determine where exactly they came from. In so many frustrating cases, the place of birth is given as just Canada. How can the precise origins be located when the only known information is Canada?

There are two major things to keep in mind before starting your research. The first is the problem of name changes. This is more of a problem for Francophones than any other group. In addition to the usual problems of non-standardized name spellings, English-speaking town clerks had a difficult time understanding many of the French-speaking residents. Names such as Lajoie became Lashua. It is important to sound out names and try different spelling variations when looking for your ancestors.

A common but false assumption is that all French came from Québec and all the Irish and Scots from Nova Scotia. Major migration came into New England from all provinces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Francophones inhabited every province in Canada and many Irish families settled in Québec for generations before descendants moved to New England. Always keep an open mind when looking through records and don't make assumptions without the facts to back them up. Even family traditions should be called into question if no substantial evidence exists to prove them. Just because there was a Hebert immigrant to Nova Scotia in the 1600s doesn't mean that your Hebert family came from Lunenburg County instead of Montréal. That being said, let's take a look at some options.

Vital Records

The first step should be to examine all available vital records in the United States for clues. Often these clues are subtle, and unfamiliarity with the terminology contained in these records might lead to erroneous conclusions. For example, a record might give the place of birth as Canada East. On first glance, this might indicate a place of birth as Nova Scotia or New Brunswick. In reality, this record names the exact province of birth - Québec. Unlike the United States, where most states have kept the same name, the names of the provinces of Canada have changed over time. Lower Canada and Canada East are different names for the province of Québec. Familiarize yourself with the various names of each province so that subtle clues like this one can be detected.

In the New England states, vital records are kept on a local level (usually by the town clerk) and a copy is sent to the state. The information on the state copy may not be identical to the information on the local copy. For example, in the state of Massachusetts, early death records on the state level do not include the place of burial but many of the local copies actually give the cemetery name. It is very important to examine both copies or you may miss a crucial piece of information.

It is possible to find three original records relating to the same event, but copied by different persons and kept in different places. For example, doctors or undertakers would usually create death records, especially in large towns and cities. A "Return of Death" form was filled out and filed with the town clerk. The clerk then copied the information into the local death register books. The record would then be copied yet again, this time into the ledger books sent to the state. Information was not always transcribed completely when moving from one version to the next. Examine all copies whenever possible.

Church Records

Once the original vital records have been examined, take the time to look at original church records. Records of baptism, marriage, and burial may contain vital clues. For example, look at the names of the individuals who

acted as godparents to children at their baptism. These godparents were often brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, or cousins. Check the vital records of these individuals for clues to their place of origin as this may help you locate your own ancestors. At the very least the sponsors may have been close family friends that came from the same village in Canada.

Marriage Records

Marriage records, especially in the Catholic Church, can be extremely helpful. In order to be married in the Catholic Church one had to demonstrate proof of baptism. Parish priests often wrote these places of birth in the margins of the parish registers. Many Franco-American Catholic parishes have had their records transcribed and published over the years. These transcriptions can be very helpful, but do not rest there. Make sure to examine the original records, as the marginal notes may not have been copied when the records were transcribed for publication. Also, when writing to a parish for a copy of the original record, ask if it would be possible to have a photocopy of the original. Marginal notes are often left off of the fill-in-the-blank forms that most parishes currently use for providing copies of birth, marriage, and burial certificates. If that is not possible, ask the priest (or church secretary) to make sure that all marginal notes are included when they copy the record for you.

Naturalization Records

Naturalization records can be quite helpful in identifying an immigrant's place of origin. The National Archives Northeast Region in Waltham (380 Trapelo Road, Waltham, MA. 02452) has one of the best collections of naturalization records in the United States. They hold the original naturalization records for all federal courts in the New England states from 1790 to 1906. They also have dexigraph copies of naturalization records from most non-federal courts covering the same year span for Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont. Original naturalization records (1790-1906) for the non-federal courts in Connecticut are available as well.

The archives also keep a large collection of post-1906 naturalization records. They have the original records from all federal courts in New England and all courts in Connecticut. The time frame of the holdings varies from state to state.

The dexigraph copies were created as a Works Progess Administration (WPA) project during the Great Depression. The intent was to photostat naturalization records from all courts in New England. Unfortunately, not all of the courts had their records copied. A list of all courts that did have records copied is available at the National Archives in Waltham. In addition to the dexigraph copies, a soundex was created for the pre-1906 records held at the archives.

Naturalization records will often (but not always) give the date and place of birth. The place of birth given may not state the specific town but should at least give the province of origin in Canada as well as the date and place of arrival in the United States. If your ancestor arrived in the United States after 1895, their arrival may be documented in the St. Albans Border Crossing records. [See the research article on St. Albans Border Crossings elsewhere on this website for further details on using these records.]

Obituaries

Obituaries can also be a source of information on place of birth. In addition to the place of residence, occupation, and heirs one can often find the place of birth given in the obituaries of individuals who were born in Canada but died in the United States. Daily and weekly newspapers are the most common, source of obituaries and death notices. However, organizational and alumni publications will also quite often have necrology columns. Remember that the information in obituaries is usually given by the next of kin and is therefore subject to the limitations of their knowledge.

Voter Registration Records

One little-used source of information is voter registration records. Most of these records start at the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Information recorded usually includes name, residence, occupation, and

place of birth. Foreign-born residents had to provide proof of citizenship when they registered to vote. The date and place of their naturalization is usually recorded, sometimes including the actual certificate numbers to make locating the original record easier.

In addition to becoming naturalized in their own right, a person could become naturalized if their father became a citizen while the child was still a minor. A woman could also become a citizen by marrying a citizen of the United States, or if her husband became naturalized. All of above scenarios are known as derivative citizenship. When a person registered to vote, they were required to provide the date and place of naturalization of their father (or husband). This can be extremely helpful when trying to establish familial relationships between people who have very common names (like Patrick Murphy). Most voter registration records have not yet been microfilmed and are still available in the local town offices.

Military Records

The draft registration cards of World War I provide a fountain of information on male ancestors. There were three registrations of males in the United States for draft lottery purposes. The first registration took place June 5, 1917, for men who were born between 1886 and 1896 (age 21-31 at the time). The registration card included information on the person's name, address, date of birth, place of birth, age, race, citizenship, occupation, employer, marital status, and dependant relatives. The second registration took place June 5, 1918, for men born between 1896 and 97 (age 20-22 at the time). The registration card for these individuals, in addition to the above information, asked for father's place of birth. The third registration occurred September 12, 1918, for men born between 1873 -and 1886 and 1897 and 1900 (ages 18-21 and 32-45 at the time). This last card also asked for information on the name and residence of the next of kin.

It is important to note that all males residing in the United States, regardless of their citizenship status, filled out the draft registration cards. If you have an individual who never naturalized, these records may provide an excellent substitute to get you back to the place of origin. The next of kin for recent immigrants may actually list the names and addresses of relatives still living in Canada at the time.

World War I Draft Registration Cards are available on microfilm at the National Archives and through the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. The records are arranged state by state. Each state is organized by draft board. It is necessary to know the address of an individual to locate them in the records. In large cities, it may be necessary to look through several draft boards to locate the proper registration card.

In addition to the federal draft registration, the state of Connecticut conducted a military preparedness survey in February1917. All males living in the state, as well as female nurses, were asked to fill out surveys. The information included name, address, occupation, age, height, weight, marital status, dependents, physical disability, and questions about various skills, such as horseback riding, wireless operation, navigation, and so forth. There are also three questions on citizenship: Are you a citizen of the US? If not, have you taken out first papers? If not, what is your nationality? Another question asks about military service "in this or any other country." This question can lead to information in the Canadian Archives if the individual served in the military before emigrating.

These are just some of the ways to pinpoint your ancestor's place of origin. The more precise information you can glean from records in the United States the better off you will be when turning north to continue the search for your family. Search all the records and examine all the information with care, and hopefully you will be amply rewarded.