

Shamrocks Among the Fleurs de Lis: The Hidden Treasures of Drouin's™ Acadian French-Catholic Church Records Collection

By Peter D. Murphy

I was a strange child. At ten—while most of my peers could be found playing road hockey or searching for salamanders along the banks of Little River—I spent Saturdays indulging my “morbid preoccupation with the dead” among the tombstones of St. Mary's Cemetery.

St. Mary's was the oldest Catholic Cemetery in Canada's “most Irish city.” The final resting place of many of Saint John's Irish pioneers, Saint Mary's retained a sort of rural ambiance despite its location at the edge of the city's rapidly expanding eastern suburban sprawl. Quite naturally, Saint Mary's was to become the focus of my first serious research efforts after I went to work as an archival assistant for the Diocese of Saint John at eighteen. Thousands of hours spent combing the pages of local newspapers for names and death dates which corresponded with the dates of purchase recorded in the cemetery's “Lot Holders' Book”, did little to make up for the fact that the first twenty-six years of St. Mary's interment records had disappeared years before. Nevertheless, my research continued and ultimately served as the jumping off point for research undertaken by Mary Kilfoil McDevitt for her now celebrated M.A. thesis, *We Hardly Knew Ye: St. Mary's Cemetery, An Enduring Presence* [ISBN 0-9695063-0-9].

Like all serious family historians, I am gleefully aware of the countless ways the internet has transformed genealogical research. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for my most recent on-line find. On April 8, 2008, *ancestry.com* announced the launch of the fully searchable indexes for the historic Drouin Collection. Starting with twenty-nine million names, when complete later in 2008 the comprehensive Drouin index will include a staggering thirty-seven million references linked to scanned images from Quebec baptismal, marriage and burial registers, and from a compilation of church records from Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and various New England states. When I began to access the Drouin collection on *ancestry.com*, I fully anticipated that I would find innumerable references to my various Acadian ancestors. My hopes were fully realized. What I did not anticipate and, what is more, *could* not have anticipated—given that “Drouin” is described as “the crème de la crème of *French* Canadian records”—was that the collection includes nearly four thousand of the missing *Irish* burial records from Saint John's Saint Mary's cemetery. Once I had recovered from the sleep-deprivation which followed my discovery of these missing Saint Mary's records, I became determined to discover how and why they had found their way into the Drouin collection . . . and what other unexpected treasures the collection includes.

As found on *ancestry.com*, the Drouin “Collection” actually contains six separate databases: 1. Québec Vital Records; 2. Ontario French-Catholic Church Records; 3. Acadian French-Catholic Church Records; 4. Early US French-Catholic Church Records; 5. Québec Notarial Records and 6. Various other French Records. Clearly, what these databases have in common is that they contain records generated by Canada's early French settlers and their descendants (whether in Canada or in adjacent American states). This should be no surprise since in founding the Drouin Institute, in 1899, Quebec lawyer Joseph Drouin, defined his mandate as the collection and preservation of French Canadian and Acadian records. Assuming control of the Institute in 1938, Joseph's son, Gabriel Drouin, dedicated himself to the microfilming and indexing of records in French-speaking areas. It appears that Gabriel Drouin conceived of New Brunswick, formerly part of the French colony of Acadia, as a “French-speaking area”. During Drouin's 1943 research visit to the province, he undertook the microfilming of church and civil records not only in predominantly French-speaking areas but also in nearly homogeneously English-speaking communities like Saint John, Fredericton and Chatham.

One might logically expect Drouin's “Acadian French-Catholic Church Records” database to include occasional references to Irish Catholics baptized, married or buried in predominantly Acadian New Brunswick parishes and they do. More importantly for the genealogist of Irish descent, this database incorporates virtually *all* pre 1900 Catholic Church records extant in New Brunswick in 1943, including several hundred thousand references to Irish immigrants and their children. The originals of some of these records—the early interment records of St. Mary's Cemetery, in

Saint John, to site one example—have long since disappeared. Also included in the “Acadian French-Catholic Church Records” database are 1888-1919 civil records embracing every county, every religion and every ethnicity in New Brunswick.

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of the Drouin collection for New England genealogical research. It is estimated that from one-third to one-half of New England residents has a parent, grand-parent or great-grandparent born in the Maritime Provinces of Eastern Canada, a very high percentage of these in New Brunswick. This is to say nothing of the countless New Englanders who descend from a more remote ancestor who arrived in North America at Saint John, St. Andrew’s or Miramichi (or at one of several other New Brunswick ports), many of whom remained in the province at least long enough to marry or have a child baptized before moving on to the “Boston States”.

For much of the first half of the nineteenth century, New Brunswick was *the* recognized route from Ireland to New England. During the Napoleonic Wars (1796-1815), the French blockade of the Baltic had forced the British to turn to their distant North American colonies for masting and so wood quickly replaced furs as New Brunswick’s staple export. In Ireland, farming grew to meet the demand of an English public robbed of its farmers by the ambitions of Napoleon. Following the cessation of war, Irish landlords reverted from tillage to pasturage, replacing corn with cattle and eventually making the growing mass of rural labourers superfluous. Saint John ship owners—their trading ventures already protected by preferential tariffs—were quick to recognize, in the burgeoning Irish passenger trade which resulted, both an opportunity for extra profit and a solution to their ballasting problems. Because of the enormous capacity of timber ships returning to New Brunswick, accommodation could be provided at prices even the average Irish laborer could afford. Saint John’s proximity to the United States border made it a preferred route to North America following passage in Britain of the Passenger Acts of 1816 and 1817, which allowed vessels bound for Colonial ports ten passengers for every three carried in American ships. By the 1820s, ongoing trade links between Saint John and the ports of Cork and Derry provided the tenantry in those districts with regular transportation to “America” and often at half the price of similar passages to Boston. By the 1840s Saint John had become the most Irish town in British North America, notwithstanding the fact that up to seven-eighths of new arrivals eventually left the city. Many of those who remained are buried in St. Mary’s Cemetery.

Accessing the Hidden Treasures:

Ancestry.com offers a free two week trial subscription. In order to search the Acadian French-Catholic Church Records database:

1. Access your *ancestry.com* subscription (or register for a free two week subscription);
2. Choose “Search”;
3. Under browse by location, choose Canada and then New Brunswick;
4. Under New Brunswick go down to “New Brunswick Historical Records”;
5. Choose: “New Brunswick Birth, Marriage & Death”;
6. Choose: “Acadia French Catholic Church Records (Drouin Collection), 1670-1946”;
7. Search using the personal name index or opt to search by location (beware: place names of English-speaking communities like Saint John are presented in French).

St-Jean Cimetiere Catholique:

1866-1883 (Old Catholic)

1879-1899

1883-1899

More than 3700 burial previously unknown

St-Jean L'Assomption

1849-1900, Baptisms and Marriages

1875-1900, Burials

St-Stephen

1887-1899, Baptisms and Marriages

Bureau de Santé, St-Andrews

Charlotte County Births, 1888-1919

Bureau de Santé, Sussex:

Kings County Births, 1888-1919

St-Georges, Charlotte

1863-1886, Baptisms and Marriages

1887-1943 (Marriages)

La Paroisse St-Andrew:

1827-1899

St François-Xavier, Sussex

1871-1899 (Baptisms and Marriages)

St-Jean

1888-1919 (deaths)

1888-1936 (births) (only includes to 1920)

1891-1919 (marriages)

St-Jean Bureau de Santé

1821-1841 (Baptisms, marriages and burials, St. Malachi's)

(Gap 1841-1868)

1840 826 Baptisms

St. Dunstan's, Fredericton, 1827-1900

1840 213 baptisms

Milltown

1838-1899

Woodstock

1842-1900

Newcastle 1862-1899

Nelson 1826-1899 (99 Baptisms in 1840)

Petersville 1866-1900

Redbank 1841-1899

