

Introduction to French-Canadian Research

By Michael J. Leclerc

French-Canadians and their Franco-American descendants interested in genealogy are very lucky indeed. The records of Québec are among the best in the world. With the exception of minor rebellions, no major war has been fought on Québec soil since the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in the mid-eighteenth century. Because of diligent reporting practices, most parish registers have survived. And major genealogical research has been conducted for over a century.

Vital Records

Civil registration of vital records in the province of Québec did not begin until 1994. Prior to that time, the churches were required to keep duplicate copies of their registers and send them to the civil authorities as the official record of births, marriages, and deaths in the province. The Catholic Church was the first denomination to record these events. After the English took control of Canada, other denominations were added incrementally starting with the Anglican Church. The great majority of French-Canadians, however, were Catholic.

While these records were supposed to be indexed every year, not every parish followed this procedure. Some of the indexes were prepared in order by page number, rather than alphabetically. Thus it is necessary to go through the entire index name by name to find individuals you are looking for. Page numbers in Québec refer to the front and back of a page, rather than facing pages as they might in the United States. When scrolling through microfilm images, you will often need to look at two consecutive images to view the entire page.

Québécois naming patterns are important in utilizing these records. Men were often baptized as Joseph and women as Marie. In addition, French-Canadian women by tradition kept their maiden names throughout their lives. Even on their death records, women were recorded by the name they carried at birth.

The copy of the parish registers that the churches sent to the provincial government is known as the *Registre d'État Civile*. Those registers prior to 1900 are available at the branches of the Archives Nationales de Québec or at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City (and also, of course, through your local Family History Center or NEHGS).

It is important when you are researching in microfilms of parish registers to note whether you are looking at the original parish register or the *Registre d'État Civile*. The original parish records were kept for tracking sacraments in the Catholic Church, and nearly all followed the same format. The names of the individuals were written on the left side of the page with the details of the sacrament on the right, which again included the name of the individual. In the margin under the person's name are often notes written by the parish priest. These marginal notes can contain extremely valuable information for your research. For example, a marginal note recorded prior to my grandmother's baptismal record in the parish of St. Norbert d'Arthabaska stated that the infant's grandmother, my great-great grandmother, was at Sanford, Maine. This was the first indication in the history of my research that placed her at Sanford, and it allowed me to find a marriage record that had eluded me for over seven years! These marginal notes, which are in the original parish registers, are only rarely transferred to the *Registre d'État Civile*.

The Drouin Institute

The [Drouin Institute](#) in Montréal began conducting genealogical research in 1899 and continued collecting, transcribing, and selling records and family genealogies for many years. In the 1940s they microfilmed the registers of every parish in the province, whether Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish. The Drouin Institute folded in the late 1990s and their holdings were sold to the [American-French Genealogical Society](#) in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. In 1999, AFGS agreed to sell copies of these microfilms to NEHGS, and they remain the only two repositories in the United States where the entire collection is available.

After microfilming of the parish registers was completed, the Drouin Institute abstracted the marriage records from all of the Catholic churches. These records include the names of the individuals who were to be married, as well as the names of their parents. If one of the parties was married previously, the name of the previous spouse appears instead of the names of the parents. Drouin created two master indexes of marriages; one by groom and one by bride. They are indexed by surname, then by first name, then by surname of spouse. The names of the parents and/or previous spouse, and the date and place of marriage are also included in the index. These indexes are in three series and cover the period

1608-1930. The first series covers 1608-1760 and is available in book form. The second series covers 1760-1880, and the third 1881-1930. These are now available on microfilm in the NEHGS microtext department.

Père Cyprien Tanguay and the *Dictionnaire Généalogique des Familles Canadiennes depuis la Fondation de la Colonie Jusqu'à nos Jours*

Father Tanguay (1819-1902) was a Catholic priest who studied the parish records of early families in Québec. He compiled genealogies of the early families through the mid-eighteenth century. He published the first volume of *Dictionnaire Généalogique des Familles Canadiennes depuis la Fondation de la Colonie Jusqu'à nos Jours* in 1871, and published six additional volumes over the next twenty years.

Father Tanguay's work separates individuals by generation into family groups. The information includes dates and places of marriage as well as names of children, including their dates and places of birth and baptism. The families are in alphabetical order by surname of the husband/father. Because there may be more than one individual with the same name in the same generation, it is often necessary to scrutinize the entries of several families before finding the correct ones.

In addition to these several volumes, Arthur LeBeouf published a volume of additions and corrections to Tanguay in his *Complément au Dictionnaire Généalogique Tanguay* (1957). In addition to re-examining the parish records published by Tanguay, LeBeouf researched additional sources to supplement the original work.

René Jetté and the Programme de Recherche en Démographie Historique

René Jetté is often considered the father of modern French-Canadian genealogy. With a grant from the Québec government, this professor at the University of Montréal started the Programme de Recherche en Démographie Historique (PRDH). The PRDH examined original parish registers, early census records, hospital records, abjuration records, marriage contracts, and other records to create a picture of the early immigrants of New France.

Over the course of time, the PRDH published abstracts of these records in a series of volumes covering the years 1608-1765. These books are separated into different time periods and the records of each place examined are kept together and indexed individually. There is also a master index for each time period. In 1999, the PRDH published a CD-ROM covering the time period 1766-1799, and subsequently released a second CD-ROM containing all of the earlier materials.

In 1983, Jetté published the most important book in French-Canadian genealogical research since Tanguay's work a century earlier. The *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles du Québec des origines à 1730*, published by the University of Montréal, contains biographies of all families in New France through about 1730. In addition to the primary sources mentioned above, Jetté utilized over thirty previously published works to add to the biographies. The work is published entirely in French, but most records are very easily translated. Jetté also suggests over a hundred other secondary sources to use for additional research.

These are the basics you will need to begin researching your French-Canadian ancestors. While many of the sources are in French, most can be translated with little difficulty. Once you have started and get used to the intricacies of the various resources, you should easily be able to work your way through them.