Researching Your French-Canadian Ancestors

Class 4: Notarial Records, Part II

Rhonda R. McClure, rmcclure@nehgs.org

Notarial records have been recorded in Quebec since the earliest of times when it was known as Nouvelle France. This system of handling all legal matters was brought over with the first immigrants to the area, as it is the method with which legal matters were handled in France.

Understanding the Writing

In addition to many of the notarial records being in French, you will also find several methods of handwriting. Notarial records are not something that can be done quickly. If possible, when using microfilms of the notarial records, you will always want to plan on scanning the images, so that you can zoom in and out as you transcribe the record later on.

Like many records from other countries, the handwriting undergoes dramatic changes as you work back from the 1800s to the 1700s and into the 1600s. You will want to search for words that you recognize in a record to help yourself when deciphering the handwriting.

Tip: Some of the words may be spelled in an archaic form.

Working in the Document

Keep in mind that these are legal documents. The more that you work with them the more you will catch on to standard phrases. Land sales (*vente de terre*) will have certain phrases. A marriage contract (*contrat de mariage*) will list the groom and his information first and then usually the name of the father of the bride followed by her information second.

If possible, you may want to work with more contemporary documents—say from the 1800s—before jumping into the records of the 1600s. Marriage contracts, because of the inclusion of the names of the bride and groom and often the parents and some other family members that you may already be aware of could help you in familiarizing yourself with the handwriting of the notary.

If you must jump into the records of the 1600s and 1700s, then you will want to see if you can take advantage of some aides including Marcel Lafortune's three volume *Initiation à la Paléographie Franco-Canadienne* and BYU's French Record Extraction Guide.

Lafortune's volumes have common words for some of the earliest of the notaries, which can assist you in identifying some words and therefore some letters.

Tip: Consider numbering the lines.

Working with the record will undoubtedly require many passes through each page. One manner of going through the document might use the following steps:

1. Look for names you expect to find.
2. Look for common phrases.
3. Look for words that have letters you recognize.
4. Look at what is missing, can you make sentences?

Tip Take a break and step away.

With the language difference and the elaborate penmanship, it is best to step away from time to time to clear your head. If you find yourself getting frustrated or dismayed, then that is a very good time to put the record aside. A clearer head is always needed with notarial records.

Identifying Additional Names

The marriage contracts often included many family members, especially at the end. These family members are beyond the bride and groom and their parents. It was the "big event" within the family. As a result, there could be many brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and friends for each party. Some of these names may also appear in the marriage record itself.

Because the marriage record is written by the priest, minister or clerk of the parish, it will be in a different handwriting from that of the marriage contract. You can compare the names of the marriage record with those in the contract and vice versa.

Using Other Records by a Notary

If you can find examples of a particular notary in which there is a corresponding transcription, this can assist you in getting familiar with the handwriting. In addition to the common words found in Lafortune's *Initiation à la paléographie franco-canadienne*, he also has one full document which has a side by side comparison of the handwriting and a transcription.

Another resource that might supply you with a transcription is La Société généalogique canadienne-française (https://sgcf.com/). Even if you can't find the exact record of your ancestor in their transcription collection, if you can find a similar record for someone else, you would at least have much of the record's standard phrasing already available as a reference.

If you must order a transcription from La Société généalogique canadienne-française for a different record than that of your own ancestor, it is best then to get the original hand written record as a comparison, and perhaps consider handwriting the transcription above the notary's handwriting to make it easier to compare that record to that of your ancestor.

Tip: Do not try to translate until you have fully transcribed.

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