

Researching Your French-Canadian Ancestors

Class 1: Getting Started

Rhonda R. McClure, rmcclure@nehgs.org

In order to effectively work in French-Canadian resources—whether in the United States or in Canada—it becomes important to identify the locality in which a family is residing. If the family is residing in the United States, then it is not only where they are living in America, but where are they coming from in Canada that becomes the ultimate goal. Different records may help you in tracing a family back to Canada.

Census Records

While often not considered the go-to-record for French-Canadian research, it can often save hours of frustration in locating a family. It is also important to remember that while the bulk of our French-Canadian ancestors were in Québec, there are some ancestries that will trace to Ontario, Nova Scotia, and even possibly New Brunswick—though these usually connect back to Acadian origins.

American Census Records

Because of the close proximity of some of the northeastern states including New England and New York, it is not unusual to find that families migrated back and forth between the two countries—often entering the United States for employment. As such, it is necessary to search the federal census records, and if available the state census records for any indications as to where in Canada the family originates. The states of Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island have state census records taken at some time. And Connecticut conducted a military census in 1917, which is sometimes considered a state census of sorts.

Remember that it might be possible for a family to appear in both the U.S. federal census and the Canadian census for a given decade. The U.S. federal census is conducted in the “aught years”: 1880, 1900; while the Canadian censuses are conducted the year after: 1881, 1901.

U.S. federal censuses ask different questions at different times and some may not indicate relationship to the head of the household. Those prior to 1850 are referred to as “head of household” and in most instances will not be relevant to your research of immigrants from Canada. Beginning in 1850 everyone in the household was enumerated, and then beginning in 1880, relationship to the head of the household was indicated. The federal census records begin in 1790 and are available through 1940. Those after 1940 are presently unavailable due to privacy laws.

Canadian Census Records

For Québec there are both Canadian national census records as well as those taken by the province. Most censuses from 1792 to 1842 are those known as “head of household” enumerations, however, they can still assist in identifying areas where a particular surname appears. There are 1851 and 1861 censuses. The national censuses cover the years 1871-1921. Those after 1921 are presently unavailable due to privacy laws.

Keep in mind that Québec was partially enumerated in the Lower Canada census of 1825, 1831, and 1842. Lower Canada then became known as Canada East, and the same southern Québec areas were included in the 1851 and 1861 censuses.

Earlier censuses of New France exist for 1666, 1667, and 1681. These censuses have been indexed in The Programme de Recherche en Démographie Historique (PRDH). But again, sometimes a page-by-page search is a more effective method.

Tip: Remember that searching a name through Ancestry.com or FamilySearch.org is not necessarily exhausting a census.

Immigration and Naturalization

When working with your ancestors in the United States, immigration and naturalization records may prove useful in identifying the town of origin, however, like census records, the amount of information gathered about an immigrant varies as you go back in time. *Note: Border crossings from Canada to the U.S. are not recorded before 1895.*

Naturalization records may assist with a more concrete age. Such information, as found in census records, may not have been supplied by the person who had the most accurate information. Naturalization records may also help in identifying exactly when the immigrant arrived in the United States.

One thing to remember about immigration is that while your ancestor may have immigrated to the United States in a time before detailed information was required, it is always possible that a relative came later and mentioned going to your ancestor. Such an arrival may supply you with valuable information about place of origin.

City Directories and Voter Registration

If your ancestors resided in a larger city either in the United States or in Canada, then it may be necessary to turn your attention to city directories or voter registration records to identify just where in the city he lived. You can then look at the front of the city directories to discover the most logical church for your ancestor to have attended. Additionally, the city directories are a good resource for identifying just what Catholic churches existed in a given year.

A Rose Isn't Always a Rose

When it comes to the names of your French-Canadian ancestors, there can be a number of naming issues that result in struggles in tracing the family:

- Phonetic spelling of French-Canadian names by Anglophones
- Direct, partial and mistranslations of the original French names
- Americanization of French-Canadian names
- Variations of surnames that are recorded from *Dit* names

The result is that names become fluid, often difficult to track into their French-Canadian equivalent if a family has been in the United States long enough.

Understand that a name you believe to be relatively uncommon in the United States could be extremely common in Canada. The importance of exhausting the records from the known to the unknown becomes all the more crucial.

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American-French Genealogical Society: Dit Surnames etc. Surname Index

<https://afgs.org/site/surname-variations/>