

# Researching Your French-Canadian Ancestors

## *Class 2: Church Records and Resources*

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Church records are one of the best resources when working in any time of Québec's history. Many of the church records are available in both church registers and copies—often referred to as duplicate, second, or civil copies—that were deposited in the civil archives. *Note: Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths did not begin in Québec until 1994.*

### **Denominations**

The largest religious group in Québec is the Roman Catholic Church. The first Catholic parish registers were for Notre-Dame de Québec, founded in 1621. Protestant records begin in 1766 with the founding of the first Church of England (Anglican) parishes in Montréal. Presbyterian records come next, beginning in 1770 in the city of Québec and in 1779 in Montréal. Other non-Catholic groups come later.

Most of these parish registers, both Catholic and non-Catholic, are part of the Drouin Collection. If church records are missing, researchers should also check the notarial records.

### **Drouin**

Known as the “Drouin Collection,” the large collection of microfilmed (and now digitized) church records is named after the Institut Généalogique Drouin, which was responsible for the microfilming of the church records in the first place. The collection of records is somewhat divided into four regional groupings and those groupings are also the same on Ancestry.com:

1. Québec, covering the years 1621-1968
2. Ontario, covering the years 1802-1967
3. Acadia, covering the years 1757-1946
4. United States, covering the years 1695-1954

The bulk of the records were microfilmed in the 1940s, so most of the churches' records do not extend beyond this decade, however, you will not know until you begin to search the collection.

Keep in mind that the records may be written in French or English, depending on the locality and the denomination. If in French, the abbreviations in the margins will be:

- B – Baptême (Baptism)
- M – Mariage (Marriage)
- S – Sepulchre (Burial)

Like so many records that are now available online, it is important to remember that when you type a name in to the search form on Ancestry.com, you are not searching the original, handwritten records. Instead, you are searching a man-made spreadsheet of someone's interpretation of those records. As such, to search the Drouin collection truly and effectively, it sometimes requires an actual page-by-page reading of the records.

In addition to the indexes of Drouin available on Ancestry.com, there are two fiche indexes to the Catholic marriages:

- Drouin Marriage Index
- Loiselle Marriage Index

If you are researching in a repository that has the Drouin Marriage Index, and your family is Catholic, then you may wish to begin with this. Each entry offers the names of the bride and groom along with their parents, unless one has been married before, in which case the name of the previous spouse is mentioned. The date of the marriage and the parish in which the marriage took place follows.

Identification of the parish is the most important thing when working in Drouin, especially if you are researching a family with a common surname.

## **PRDH**

The Université de Montréal's Programme de recherche en démographie historique, most often referred to as the PRDH, was begun in the 1960s with the purpose of reconstructing the population of Québec from its beginnings as New France in the seventeenth century. The result was a computerized register comprised predominantly of information on births, marriages, and deaths of those inhabitants as found in church records and some of the earliest of census records. In partnership with the Institut Généalogique Drouin this database now includes many additional church records into the 1800s.

What makes the PRDH so useful is that it often mentions many of the other names found in a record, including godparents in baptisms.

Like all indexes, it is always a good idea to take the information found and look in the original church records. While the university has tried to be as accurate as possible, genealogy is best done using the original records whenever possible. You can conduct a preliminary search of the PRDH, but to see all the individuals of an entry, it is necessary to have access to the subscription. Many repositories with French-Canadian collections may have the database.

The PRDH site states that all the Catholic certificates of baptism, marriage, and burial for Québec along with the Protestant marriages of the province for the years 1621 to 1849 are included.

## Genealogies

Because of the availability of church records, censuses and notarial records, several genealogical dictionaries have been compiled:

- Cyprien Tanguay's *Dictionnaire Généalogique des Familles Canadiennes* in 3 volumes
- René Jetté's *Dictionnaire Généalogique des Familles du Québec; des Origines à 1730*

These compilations have been used by many to research French-Canadian families. While they are certainly valuable compilations, with the availability of the actual church records, it is always a good idea to look at those records and other early records and draw your own conclusions.

## Bibliography

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Genealogie Quebec <http://www.genealogiequebec.com>

PRDH – Programme de Recherche en Démographie Historique  
<http://www.genealogy.umontreal.ca/en/home>