

Tides of History: Tracing Family History in Atlantic Canada

Class 1: Introduction to Atlantic Canada

Judy Lucey judy.lucey@americanancestors.org

Objectives

1. Brief overview of the history and very early settlements of Atlantic Canada.
2. The Peopling of Atlantic Canada:
 - a. First Nations and Maritime Archaic Indians.
 - b. Major European groups.
 - c. Pre-1775 settlers to Atlantic Canada
3. An introduction to each province's Provincial Archives and other repositories for research.

16 and 17th Centuries: Voyages of Discovery, Cod Fishery, and Struggle for Control

Timeline of key events of exploration of the region leading to early settlements:

- 10th and 11th century Norsemen (Vikings) establish settlements at L'Anse Aux Meadows, Newfoundland.
- 1497 John Cabot claims Newfoundland for England and establishment by British of the cod fishery.
- 1534 and subsequent explorations by Jacques Cartier proclaims Canada for France.
- Establishment of Acadia:
 - 1604 at Ile St. Croix, settlement fails after first winter.
 - 1605 Champlain moves to Port Royal (Annapolis). Becomes capital of Acadia.
 - 1632-1653 first core group of settlers from France
- 1690-1763 Colonial wars between France and England in their struggle for control of the region.

18th Century: Deportation, British Dominance, and Settlement

Timeline of key events:

- 1713 Treaty of Utrecht ended Queen Anne's War between France and England.
 - France gives up Nova Scotia (Acadia, Newfoundland (except some fishing rights) and Hudson Bay Company territory.
 - France retains control of Cape Breton and Ile St. Jean (Prince Edward Island).
- 1755 first wave of deportation of Acadians begins in Nova Scotia.
 - Some 7000 people are deported to the American colonies.
 - Some 2000+ escape to Ile St-Jean (PEI) and New France (Quebec).

- 1758-1762 second wave of deportation includes 3000 from Ile St. Jean to France. A group of 1500 from Halifax to Boston are turned back.
- 1763 The Seven Years War ends between France and England. The signing of the Treaty of Paris resulted in England obtaining possession of Cape Breton and Quebec.
- At the close of the 18th c. the Atlantic Canada region except the islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon (NL) is under British control.

19th and 20th Centuries Atlantic: Confederation, Economic Woes, and Out Migration

Timeline of key events leading to the partition of Ireland.

- 1867 New Brunswick and Nova Scotia become part of the Dominion of Canada along with Ontario and Quebec.
- 1873 Prince Edward Island becomes a province in Canada.
- 1855 Newfoundland becomes self-governing and for the next Dominion with its own elected prime ministers.
- 1927 Labrador becomes part of Newfoundland, and the province is renamed Newfoundland and Labrador.
- 1949 Newfoundland joins the Dominion of Canada. Joey Smallwood, Newfoundland's first premier, coins the phrase 'Atlantic Canada'.
- Economic recessions plague region during the 19th and early 20th centuries Atlantic Canadian provinces from mid 19th century

The Peopling of Atlantic Canada

Native Peoples of the region:

- Maritime Archaic Indians
 - Lived roughly 7,500 years ago in the Newfoundland and Labrador regions.
 - Hunting and fishing culture.
- First Nations of Atlantic Canada
- Belong to the Algonquin and Abenaki tribes.
 - Algonquin speaking groups include Mi'kmaq's, Maliseet, Passamaquoddy, Innu (and Beothuk's (Newfoundland only).
- Lived a nomadic lifestyle in primarily coastal communities living off resources in and around the sea.

Major European settlers:

- English to Atlantic Canada:
 - 1600s to Newfoundland from southwest counties of England to work in cod fishery.

- 1749 Gov. Cornwallis to Nova Scotia and founding of Halifax and establishment of local government.
 - Yorkshire settlers to Nova Scotia 1772-1775.
 - 33,000 Loyalists to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick with 3,000 Black loyalists.
- New England Planters, 1759-1774, to Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (Sunbury and Cumberland Counties).
 - Migrating from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.
- Foreign Protestants to Nova Scotia, 1750-1752:
 - Arriving from Montbéliard (France) and Switzerland.
 - Settle Halifax and Lunenburg, Nova Scotia.
- Scottish to Atlantic Canada
 - Earliest settlers in 1620s to Cape Breton and Bay of Fundy
 - Settlers from the Highlands, peak period of migration 1770-1815.
 - Group of Scottish Catholic families to PEI in 1772.
- Irish and Scots Irish to Atlantic Canada:
 - 17th and 18th c. seasonal workers in the Newfoundland fishery.
 - Majority came 1815-1830s from southeast counties of Ireland (Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny)
- Scots Irish
 - Alexander McNutt brings settlers to Shelburne, New Dublin, and Pictou Co. from Londonderry, NH and Ulster.

Researching Atlantic Canadian Ancestors

General research strategies

- ✓ Focus first on research in records in the country (U.S., other parts of Canada, etc.) your ancestors emigrated to. Work from the known to the unknown.
- ✓ Begin your research online and use a wide variety of both primary and secondary sources.
- ✓ Study local community history to learn about the people and families who lived there.
- ✓ Identify surrounding communities and their records.

Tip – Consult secondary sources to learn more about the history, migration, and settlement patterns of the community your ancestors settled in.

Additional tips for getting started:

- Start with province-specific guides.
- Focus on church, land, and probate records.
- Use journals and periodicals for problem-solving.
- Expect fragmentary records, especially in early periods.

Getting Started Online

Many records were once difficult to access without visiting the region or researching at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. The sources one needs to begin to fill out the family tree such as census, church, and vital records are at your fingertips.

Tip - FamilySearch.org has a strong church record collections for Atlantic Canada. Consult their catalog for county specific records.

Go to websites:

FamilySearch.org has scanned all their microfilmed records. While some films continue to be indexed and added to their searchable databases, many more have been uploaded to their library catalog.

<https://www.familysearch.org/en/>

American Ancestors. Explore our databases, online research guides for Atlantic Canadian Provinces and our library catalog <https://www.americanancestors.org>

Ancestry. "Canada Genealogy & Canada Family History Resources."

<https://www.ancestry.com/search/places/canada>

Library and Archives Canada. "Genealogy and Family History." Government of Canada.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/library-archives/collection/research-help/genealogy-family-history.html>

Core Research Guides

Campey, Lucille H. *Atlantic Canada's Irish Immigrants: A Fish and Timber Story*. Toronto, Ontario: Dundurn Press, 2016.

Campey, Lucille H. *"Fast sailing and Copper-bottomed": Aberdeen Sailing Ships and The Emigrant Scots They Carried to Canada, 1774-1855*. Toronto, Ontario: Natural Heritage Books, c2002.

Campey, Lucille H. *Planters, Paupers, and Pioneers: English Settlers in Atlantic Canada*. Toronto, Tonawanda, NY: Natural Heritage Books, c2010.

MacDonald, Duncan K. *Guide to Genealogical Research in the Maritime Provinces of Canada*. Toronto: Ontario Genealogical Society, 1987.

National Institute for Genealogical Studies. Atlantic Canada Courses. National Institute for Genealogical Studies. Accessed July 26, 2026. <https://www.genealogicalstudies.com>

Punch, Terrence M. *Genealogist's Handbook for Atlantic Canada Research*. Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1997 2nd Ed.

White, Stephen. *Dictionnaire Généalogique des Familles Acadiennes : Première Partie, 1636 à 1714, en deux volumes*. Moncton, N.-B. : Centre d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton, 1999.

Newfoundland & Labrador

Newfoundland Ancestor. St. John's, NL: Newfoundland and Labrador Genealogical Society. All issues are viewable online at the Family History Society of Newfoundland and Labrador with paid membership.

<https://www.fhsnl.ca/>

Ryan, Shannon, and Harold Smallwood, eds. *The Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*. 5 vols. St. John's, NL: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1981-1994. Now free online with browsable images

https://dai.mun.ca/digital/cns_en/

Seary, E. R. *Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland*. St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1998. Corrected edition.

The Rooms Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador <https://therooms.ca/>

Tip - Key sources: church records, census substitutes, records related to the cod fishery.

Nova Scotia

Campey, Lucille H. *After the Hector: The Scottish Pioneers of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton, 1773-1852*. Halifax, NS: Nimbus, c1998. New rev. ed.

Punch, Terrence M. *Genealogical Research in Nova Scotia*. Halifax, NS: Nimbus, c1998. New rev. ed.

Wright, Esther Clark. *Planters and Pioneers: Nova Scotia, 1749 to 1775*. Beaver Bank, N.S.: Justin Wentzell, 2007, ©1982.

Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia <https://archives.novascotia.ca>

Genealogical Association of Nova Scotia <https://novascotiaancestors.ca/>

Memory Nova Scotia <https://memoryns.ca/>

Tip - Key records: probate, land petitions, township books.

New Brunswick

Vital Statistics Committee, New Brunswick Genealogical Society and Johnson, Daniel F. *Vital Statistics from New Brunswick Newspapers*. Fredericton, N.B., Canada: The Society, c1982-2005., Searchable online at [Provincial Archives of New Brunswick](#)

Wright, Esther Clark. *Loyalists of New Brunswick*. Fredericton, NB: Brunswick Press, 1955.

Provincial Archive of New Brunswick <https://archives2.gnb.ca/Archives/Default.aspx/?culture=en-CA>

Loyalist Collection at University of NB at Fredericton <https://loyalist.lib.unb.ca/home>

Tip - Key sources: probate, land grants, county histories.

Prince Edward Island

Lee, Eileen, and Brenda Taylor. *Prince Edward Island Genealogical Research Guide*. Charlottetown, PE: Prince Edward Island Genealogical Society, 1990.

Master Name Index. <https://peigs.ca/search-records/>

Provincial Archives of PEI <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/education-and-early-years/genealogy-at-the-public-archives>

PEI Genealogical Society <https://peigs.ca/>

Tip - Key records: church records, land, census and Master Name Index.