

Early Ontario Birth, Marriage and Death Records

Pre-1869 Vital Records in Upper Canada/Canada West

The greatest challenge for most genealogists is locating early birth, marriage and death records for family prior to the beginning of Ontario government registration in June 1869. There are very distinct periods of official record keeping prior to 1869. The purpose of this lecture is to outline how vital records were recorded during the early years of this province. With this knowledge, genealogists searching for the elusive needle in the haystack will have a better understanding of what records were required to be kept and therefore will be better able to make an informed judgement about where surviving records could possibly be found.

Whenever possible researchers should always check the **parish registers** for the Churches in the areas where their families lived/worked. Church records are really the **primary source** of information for any vital records. All other indexes newspaper accounts and even official government records are secondary sources of information. What this means is that the actual details of the event were recorded first and foremost in the parish register. All other information and reports submitted to the government or transcribed by other people are secondary sources of information.

For many of us who cannot travel to every parish connected with our families, government records, newspaper accounts and the generous work of volunteers who undertake to transcribe and index these records are a blessing. It is important to check with the local genealogy group in the area you are researching to determine if they have transcribed and published any of the parish registers you are searching for. In addition check the local newspapers to see if the events were reported. Whenever possible, follow up the information you receive from newspaper accounts or other secondary sources in the parish records. Regardless of the records you are using to research in Ontario; the more you know when you begin, the more productive your search will be.

HINT: SURNAME VARIATIONS

- Last names were often recorded as they sounded or were simply mis-spelt by the local registrar.
- Names beginning with such letters as B & P, V & F, D & T are often the victims of mis-spelling.
- The person giving the information might not have known the correct spelling of the last name.
- Local dialect or a person's accent can prove to be a hindrance in the way names sounded and were then recorded.
- The illiteracy of the clerk recording the information does not help either!

Try alternate spellings of the last name based on mis-spellings and phonetic recording of names.

Always use your imagination!

County Marriage Records (1858 - 1869)

In 1857 legislation was enacted to provide for the registration of all marriages performed by ALL ordained clergymen in the Province of Canada West (Ontario). It was the responsibility of each county to record the marriages performed within their boundaries. As a result of this legislation we now have a series of records called the County Marriage Registers. The Archives of Ontario in Toronto hold the majority of these registers.

County marriage registers were kept from January 1, 1858 until official government or civil registration began in Ontario July 1, 1869. Most often the County Marriage Registers include only marriages performed between 1858 and 1869, however, occasionally there will be marriages recorded that were performed before 1858 and even some marriages performed in the later months of 1869 (after civil registration began). Unfortunately there is a gap in some areas of the province during the 1868-1869 time period because of the transition to official vital record keeping by the province.

The marriage records reported from 1858-1869 will tend to give place of residence, place of origin, names of parents of both Bride and Groom, ages of Bride and Groom & names of witnesses. Caution: always be sure to check the surrounding counties in the event that a marriage was performed by a travelling minister who regularly crossed county boundaries.

There are 42 County Marriage Registers, one each for the counties existing in the period 1858-1869. In addition there are separate marriage registers for the City of Toronto, City of Kingston and the City of Ottawa. A separate register was supposed to be created for the City of London, which does not appear to survive. It should be noted that Dufferin County was not established until a few years after the period covered by these registers and then the territory was divided amongst Grey, Simcoe and Wellington counties.

Please remember that no secondary source of information is perfect (even if it is the official government record). Flaws with the registers/records for this period include the fact that the County Register was a copy of a copy. Even the returns submitted by clergy were copied from their registers (therefore only a copy) but required more information on the form than was generally recorded in the existing parish registers. The returns from the Ministers to the County Registrar sometimes included Births and Deaths that were not recorded in the Marriage Register and can only be found on the original returns or in the original parish registers.

Vital Records Before 1858

The search for vital records becomes even more convoluted as we move into the time period when Ontario was known as Canada West and Upper Canada. One of the main problems with this time period is that significant transitions were taking place. Specifically, prior to 1841 the province of Ontario was known as Upper Canada and after 1841 was known as Canada West. Many people living in Upper Canada continued to refer to the province as Upper Canada well into the 1850s.

During the Upper Canadian time period the province was divided into districts and all regulations and reporting of vital records were sent to the Clerk of the Peace for the each individual District. However, around 1847 things changed dramatically and all official reporting was sent to the County Clerk. In other words, as the province moved from administration based

on districts to administration based on counties a black hole was created in the sense that clergy and others who performed marriages, baptisms and burials did not always know where they should be sending their vital record reports.

Yet another difficulty with this time period centres on the issue of why different counties come into existence at different time periods. Although counties existed prior to 1849, you must remember that the county was not recognized as the administrative unit of local government and therefore had no administrative responsibility for the keeping of vital records. Also, while the legislation allowed for the creation of other counties in 1847, a county could not function administratively until a courthouse was built. Therefore, different counties constructed courthouses at different time periods (for example Perth County - 1853, Wellington County - 1851). By about 1851 when the county was the recognized unit of local government for all administrative issues, the present county distribution of southern Ontario was virtually complete. However, occasionally townships within the counties were moved from one county to another.

All of this discussion of geography and government is essential to knowing where to look when searching for vital records at various time periods. It is always helpful to ask yourself:

“Who was responsible for keeping the records?”

“Where did the records end up being filed?”

In short, after 1850 you must know in what county the event you are looking for took place if you are to have any hope of finding what you seek. It is also important to check the District Marriage Register for the District in which the county was located to be certain the marriage was not recorded in the District Marriage Register.

Vital Records Before 1850 - District Marriage Registers

During the early period of settlement in Upper Canada and Canada West (the province of Ontario), all ministers who performed marriages with the exception of Anglican and Roman Catholic ministers were required to send in returns to the Clerk of the Peace for the District. The majority of returns begin in the 1830s with a few Districts having earlier marriage returns or sworn affidavits from people stating they had been married earlier. The Clerk of the Peace then recorded these returns in a register kept in the office. It is important to keep in mind that the Register is only a copy made by the District Clerk.

There were 20 different districts at one time in Upper Canada. District Marriage Registers survive for 17 of these 20 districts. Missing Registers include the Niagara District, Midland District and Dalhousie District. The time periods covered by the registers depend in large part on when the District came into existence and when others ceased to exist or lost part of their district. In addition the Clerk of the Peace for the County (after 1850) sometimes continued to record marriages in the District register even when the District had ceased to exist.

The returns themselves are the closest record to the original parish record that exists. For some Districts the individual original marriage returns from Ministers have also survived. Occasionally they contain lists of baptisms and burials performed by the minister.

If the marriage you are looking for was performed by an Anglican (Church of England) or Catholic (Roman Catholic) clergy, they are **not** likely to be included in the District Marriage Registers. The reason for this lack of Anglican and Catholic returns is because these

denominations were considered the “official” churches of the country and when the legislation was passed in 1830 (11 George IV, Ch.36) it did not require these two denominations to submit returns of their marriages.

Only rarely, and much later in the District Period did Anglican and Catholic clergy submit marriage returns.

Note: Just because your ancestor was a devote Anglican does not mean their marriage was performed by a minister of the Church of England. When settlers in the woods wanted to get married they were not always willing to wait for months and months for the next Anglican minister to come by on horseback. In many areas it was too far to journey to a church or the weather was too bad to risk a long walk to the nearest church so settlers opted to be married by the next minister that came by on horseback.

It is important to remember the District Clerk who recorded marriage returns from clergy into a register was only human and often made errors in transcribing the marriage returns or sometimes changed a surname that was spelled phonetically by a minister into what he believed was the proper spelling. Also remember that the register was a copy of a copy, even the returns submitted by clergy were copied from their registers (therefore only a copy). Use your imagination in searching all surnames of interest. Try and imagine how the surname would be spelled if the spelling were based on how it sounds.

Online Links and Resources

- Marriage Bonds – Upper and Lower Canada:
<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/genealogy/012/index-e.html>
- Registers of Military Chaplains \$: www.1837online.com
- Ontario Cemetery Finding Aid: <http://www.islandnet.com/ocfa/>
- OGS Cemetery Locator and Cemetery Ancestor Name Indexes: <http://www.ogs.on.ca/>
- Northeastern Ontario Canada Gravemarker Gallery: <http://nocgg.maddoc.net/>
- Scott Naylor's - Cemetery Grave Markers: <http://www3.sympatico.ca/scott.naylor/>
- Thunder Bay and District Rural Cemeteries:
<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~jmitchell/cemeteries.html>
- Canada GenWeb Cemetery Project: <http://continue.to/cgwcem>
- Ontario Cemeteries Resources: <http://www.wightman.ca/~dkaufman/>
- Lanark Co. Cemeteries (Keith Thompson):
<http://www.rootsweb.com/~onlanark/cemeteries/index.htm>
- Funeral Service Association of Canada: www.fsac.ca
- Ontario Funeral Service Association: www.ofsa.org
- Archives of Ontario - How to Find a Will:
http://www.archives.gov.on.ca/english/guides/rg_206_find_will.htm
- Canadian Newspapers on Microform: <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/8/18/index-e.html>
- Paper of Record \$ \$: <http://www.paperofrecord.com/>

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- Ingersoll Chronicle Online Database: <http://www.ocl.net/genealogy/chronicle/>
- Woodstock Newspaper Indexes: <http://www.woodstock.library.on.ca/searchindex/>
- Archives of Ontario - Genealogical Research & Customer Service Research Guides: <http://www.archives.gov.on.ca>
- Hudson's Bay Company Archives: <http://www.gov.mb.ca/chc/archives/hbca/>
- Canada Births, Deaths and Marriages Exchange: <http://www.olivetreegenealogy.com/can/bdm/index.shtml>
- Bill Martin's Early Ontario Records: <http://my.tbaytel.net/bmartin/earlyont.htm> or <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~wjmartin/>
- Historic Wesleyan Methodist Baptisms Index Online: <http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~wjmartin/wesleyan.htm>
- Ontario Vital Statistics Project: <http://www.rootsweb.com/~onvsr/>
- Ontario Marriage Registrations: <http://homepages.rootsweb.com/~maryc/thisisit.htm>
- Local Catholic Church History and Genealogy Canada: http://home.att.net/~Local_Catholic/Catholic-Canada.htm
- Anglican Church of Canada: <http://anglican.ca/>
- United Church of Canada: <http://www.united-church.ca/>
- United Church of Canada Archives: <http://unitedchurcharchives.vicu.utoronto.ca>
- The Presbyterian Church in Canada: <http://www.presbyterian.ca/>
- The Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives and Records Office: <http://www.presbyterian.ca/archives>
- Mennonite Archives of Ontario: <http://grebel.uwaterloo.ca/mao/>
- Canadian Archival Resources on the Internet: <http://www.archivescanada.ca/car/menu.html>
- Canadian Library Gateway: <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/gateway/index-e.html>
- Halton's Historical and Newspaper Records: <http://www.hhpl.on.ca>
- Oxford County Library - Genealogy and Local History: <http://www.ocl.net/genealogy/>
- Ontario Genealogical Records Online (mixed free & \$\$\$): <http://www.genealogysearch.org/canada/ontario.html>

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