

Tracing French Canadian Ancestors

This research guide has been compiled to assist patrons in beginning the process of researching their French-Canadian ancestors. Many of the genealogical and historical societies are located throughout the United States and Canada where large contingents of French ancestors settled offer useful online tutorials and services to assist researchers in this subject area of research.

When talking about French-Canadian research, one should also be familiar with record types and how they are organized in France as well. Our companion study guides on ***French Genealogical Research*** and ***Canadian Genealogical Research*** will provide many useful details to supplement the information in this study guide. The bibliography at the end of this study guide as well as in our companion study guides will contain materials which will be applicable to research in both France and French speaking areas of Canada which was originally known as New France. For a complete listing of our genealogical holdings on Canada, please check the genealogy collection shelf list which is available at the Fort Myers-Lee County Library reference desk, or visit the Lee County Genealogical Society website at <http://lcsfl.org/libraryRecords.php> .

One other final point is worth remembering with regards to research Canadian ancestors. Canada or New France as it was called historically, was more interested in attracting settlers than “asking questions” so to speak. Even though communication was not as sophisticated or accurate as it is today, word of mouth advertising was alive and well. Immigrants knew going to Canada was easier and cheaper than coming directly to the United States. Canadian civil authorities tended to place little significance in keeping detailed records on individuals as was the case in the United States until after the 1895. This set of circumstances increases the importance of using church records for research. In some cases, church records may be the only source where ancestors appear on a consistent basis.

Beginning Tips and Research Strategies

While the basic research steps are the same regardless of what ethnic group or country is being researched, the following recommendations will enhance your success in tracing French Canadian ancestors.

1. Take the time to do some background reading about the history of New France, the settlement of Quebec, and information related to historical interactions between France and its Canadian colonies which were called New France. The four links listed below are cited in many beginners sources as being excellent starting points for anyone tracing French or French-Canadian Ancestors.

A la French Genealogy

<http://frenchgen.com/>

About Genealogy

<http://genealogy.about.com/od/canada/a/french-canadian.htm>

Cyndi's List

<http://www.cyndislist.com/france>

<http://www.cyndislist.com/canada/provinces/qc/bmd/>

2. Consult online and print how-to books and articles about genealogy in Canada and Quebec. These sources will introduce you to the major records of significance in genealogical research. Two of the best online sources include: Family Search Wiki – Quebec
[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Quebec, Canada Genealogy](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Quebec,_Canada_Genealogy)
 Library and Archives of Canada has a specific page for Quebec. The content provides more detail and suggested links and tutorials:
<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/genealogy/places/Pages/quebec.aspx>.
 with links. The titles listed in the bibliography at the end of this study guide will facilitate this process as well
3. There are multiple online links that discuss the nature and purpose of the most useful genealogical records for research. These sites cover both British and French records on the national and provincial level including links to all the provincial archives. Here are some sample sites:
 - a. American-Canadian Genealogical Society Library
<https://acgs.org/information/>
 - b. Ancestry Learning Center – Canada
<https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/ka215000000TxMbAAK/Tips-for-finding-records-in-Canada-1460088591486-2559>
 - c. Canada Family Search Wiki
[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canada Genealogy](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canada_Genealogy)
 - d. Cyndi’s List – Canada <http://www.cyndislist.com/canada>
 - e. Library and Archives of Canada – Genealogical Resources <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/genealogy/avitus/Pages/avitus.aspx>
4. Familiarize yourself with Canadian holdings of major repositories such as:
 - a. Family History Library in Salt Lake City
 - b. Allen County Library – Fort Wayne Indiana
 - c. Newberry Library – Boston
 - d. Provincial Archives in Canada
 - e. American-Canadian Genealogical Society Library - Manchester, New Hampshire (specializes in French-Canadian research)

Note: Fort Myers Regional Library is a registered borrowing library affiliate for the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. For more information related to borrowing films and having them sent to our branch please visit the following link on FamilySearch <https://familysearch.org/films/>

5. Join a Canadian genealogical society, read its journal, and enlist its help with your research. Here are some useful links to check out.
 - a. Cyndi’s List – Canadian Genealogy Societies
<http://www.cyndislist.com/canada/societies/>
 - b. Family Search Wiki – Canada
[https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canada Societies](https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canada_Societies)

- c. Library and Archives of Canada – Genealogical and Historical Societies in Canada <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/genealogy/Pages/links-related-research.aspx#a>
6. Researchers tracing their French-Canadian ancestors face many advantages in relation to other ethnic groups:
- The Family History Library in Salt Lake City has microfilmed many of the early records.
 - There are many genealogical and historical societies in both the United States and Canada that feature special interest groups and genealogical/historical collections of materials pertaining to this type of research.
 - The existence of these societies and collections means that researchers needing assistance have many options to choose from.
 - Most French-Canadians until recently were Roman Catholic. Roman Catholic Church records tend to be very straight forward.
 - The Roman Catholic Church recognizes a multitude of sacramental observances in comparison to their Protestant counterparts. Most of these sacraments generate certificates and related paperwork.
 - The ability to read and write French is not a necessity; however, it is an asset and will make some aspects of research much easier.
7. Most of the genealogy dictionaries and marriage indexes you will use to begin your research are very accessible to the researchers even if they are not fluent in French. Even the parish registers are fairly straightforward to use. Once you become familiar with some very basic French legal terms, it will be fairly easy to exam any type of common record whether it be a birth, baptism, marriage, or notarial item for information. The book ***Following the Paper Trail: a Multilingual Translation Guide*** by Jonathan Shea is an excellent basic source for this. The chapter dealing with the French language will provide you with a basic overview to facilitate this process. This title is listed in your bibliography. Another good source to have available is a good French-English dictionary.
8. The terms listed below will provide researchers with a very basic listing of terms that are helpful in French-Canadian and French genealogical research. The title ***Following the Paper Trail: A Multilingual Translation Guide*** by Jonathan Shea will go into more detail. Again, this title is listed in your bibliography.

FRENCH-CANADIAN GENEALOGY TERMS

<u>French</u>	<u>English</u>
An	year
Arpent	land measure (0.845 acres)
Baptême	baptism
Baptize, baptisee	baptized
Concession	land grant
Coureur de bois	illegal fur trade
Decede, decedee	died
Dit, dite	alias
Engage	indentured worker

Epouse	wife, bride
Epoux	husband, bridegroom
Etabli, etablie	settled
Famille	family
Feu, feu	deceased
Fille	daughter
Fils	son
Frere	brother
Habitant	resident, settler
Inhume, inhume	buried
Jour	day
Mariage	marriage
Marie, mariee	married
Marraine	godmother
Mere	mother
Mois	month
Naissance	birth
Ne, nee	born
Nom	name
Paroisse	parish church
Parraine	godfather
Pere	father
Recensement	census
Sepulture	burial
Soeur	sister
Veuf, veuve	widower, widow
Voyageur	licensed fur trader

Most Popular Genealogical Records

Since Canada and France have a historic tradition and connection to the Catholic Church, most professional genealogists point to the records maintained by the church as the best starting points for research:

1. The church played a major role as an influence in the lives of most French-Canadian ancestors.
2. Sacramental events such as baptisms, marriages, and burials are well documented.
3. Priests often served as counselors and intermediaries on family matters and disputes between individuals.
4. All churches regardless of denominations kept the most detailed records and reliable records of their parishoners or congregations.
5. Priests and ministers maintained diaries and many details related their parish and congregations appear in their church registers.
6. Some transcribed copies of these parish or congregation records were also sent to civil authorities.

7. The information in church records usually provide specific details on some or all of the following:
 - a. Family members and relationships
 - b. Daily lives and activities (religious and secular)
 - c. Level of education
 - d. Economic status
 - e. Occupation
 - f. Pinpoint clues about places of origin in France.

Catholic Church records are by far the best single source for tracing French-Canadian ancestry. Records such as baptisms, marriages, and other sacramental or church related activities often following a specified or standardized format.

Baptism records usually provide the following pieces of information:

1. Name of the person (usually an infant) being baptized
2. Date of birth
3. Date of baptism
4. Father's name
5. Mother's maiden name
6. Godparents names
7. Signature of the priest
8. Witnesses

Marriage records have a proven track record for successful research in French Canada. Each marriage record usually contains so many details about the couple's parents that you can find the marriages of the bride's parents and the groom's parents with ease. The following five steps recommended by Mr. David Quimette, who serves as the French Research project manager for Ancestry.com, are helpful to tracing your French-Canadian ancestral chart on all lines, back to your immigrant ancestors:

1. Identify a husband and wife in your ancestry who were married in French Canada.
2. Find their marriage in a marriage index. (These are described below.)
3. Record the names of the parents of the bride and groom.
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 for each set of parents, back to the immigrant ancestors.
5. Verify the marriages using parish registers. (Remember that some indexes contain mistakes.)

While the process is simple, you will probably reach a point when it seems that a certain marriage does not appear in the marriage index you are searching. Remember to search for the marriage using *dit* names and other phonetic spellings for both the bride and groom's surnames.

The best sources to consult when beginning your French-Canadian family history are marriage indexes and genealogy dictionaries. Four outstanding compilations deserve special attention as you begin tracing your French-Canadian family history. These secondary sources - the *Loiselle Marriage Index*, the PRDH database, Jette's genealogy

dictionary, and Tanguay's genealogy dictionary - are comprehensive reference works available throughout the United States.

Marriage records usually provide the following information:

1. Date of the marriage
2. Maiden name of the bride
3. Name of the Groom
4. Name of the groom's parents
5. Name of the bride's parents
6. Occupation of the groom and (the bride (when applicable))
7. Ages of the bride and groom (or a statement that they are of age)
8. Names of those in attendance at the wedding
9. Signature of the priest
10. Witnesses
11. If either the bride's parents or the groom's parents did not reside in the parish where the marriage ceremony was performed, their parish was also mentioned in the marriage entry.
12. Usually document the immigrants' parish and province of origin in France.
(NOTE: This piece of information may provide enough details to trace your ancestry back another generation or two in France.

The Family History Library has microfilmed a large volume of these records, both from France, New France (Quebec) and Canada in general. Patrons may search the library catalog at <https://familysearch.org/catalog/search>. Many of these digitized records are available through Family Search, Ancestry, Find My Past and the My Heritage databases. Digitized or filmed records are accessible via through Family Search. If the records have been digitized or filmed, and patrons need to borrow the microfilm of fiche, the Fort Myers Regional Library is a registered library borrowing affiliate of the Family History library enabling us to borrow microfilm and fiche from Salt Lake City. Researchers must establish an account online at Family Search <http://familysearch.org/films> and specify delivery to the Fort Myers Regional Library.

Baptisms and marriages as far back as the 1500s from France exist for ancestors and their families before their immigration to New France.

Burial records provided the least information:

1. Name and age of the deceased
2. Date of death
3. Date of burial
4. Occupation of the deceased
5. Possible mention of parents or spouse
6. Witnesses may be named, as well as their relationship to the deceased

Parish registers for all of Quebec are filmed through the early 1920s. Two other major record sources related to the Catholic Church are:

1. Loiselle Marriage Index

2. Programme de Recherche en Demographic Historique (also known as the PRDH database)

LOISELLE MARRIAGE INDEX

Father Antonin Loisel (1908-86) extracted over 500,000 marriages from over 500 parish churches, recorded from 1621 into the 1900s. He noted the name of the bride and groom, their parents' names, and the date and place of the marriage. All entries are alphabetized by surname and given name. Marriage cards often list the names of the parents of the bride and groom

The Quebec National Archives created another alphabetical card index to supplement Father Loisel's collection, adding entire Quebec parishes missing from the original index and extending the coverage for many parishes well into the twentieth century. All 165 microfilms of the *Loiselle Marriage Index* and all 51 microfilms of the supplement are available at the Family History Library. .

PROGRAMME de RECHERCHE en DEMOGRAPHIC HISTORIQUE (PRDH DATABASE)

PRDH is an online database of baptisms, marriages, burials, census returns, and much more, covering essentially all of Quebec from its origins through 1799. Most families have been reconstructed through 1765. In 1966, the University of Montreal extracted and computerized French-Canadian parish registers and many other documents available from 1621-1799. This effort resulted the most comprehensive single database of early French-Canadian family history in the world. The PRDH database contains 690,000 baptism, marriage, and burial certificates. Another 20,000 records were extracted from early census, marriage contracts, recantations, confirmations, hospital sick lists, lists of migrants, testimonies of freedom to marry, naturalizations, marriage rehabilitations, and marriage annulments.

The University of Montreal has published the PRDH collection in book form and is available online to search the PRDH database at <https://www.genealogie.umontreal.ca/en/leprdh>. Complete access is available at <https://www.genealogie.umontreal.ca/en/home>.

Naming Challenges

Naming customs can be another research challenge. Researchers should take the time too familiarize themselves with the naming patterns and customs used in both France and New France. While naming pattern customs between France and Quebec are similar, some differences developed in French Canada and exist today in Quebec versus the rest of Canada. Later movements across the border to the United States often added to the challenges.

Because of the historical lack of a structured record keeping procedures among the various Canadian civil entities until the late 1880's, having a basic knowledge of naming practices in French Canada is essential for successful family history research. Women retained their maiden names for their entire life, using their birth names in all official church and government documents. This means that it is equally easy to trace male and female lineages in French-Canadian family history research.

Another name related challenge is dealing with *dit* names. Many people went by a called second surname, an alias, known as a *dit* name. These *dit* names were usually derived from places of origin, personal attributes, or professions. You need to be aware of *dit* names when searching for your ancestors in French-Canada who may have used either or both surnames on any particular record. Some excellent online resources that offer assistance in understanding this issue are listed below:

Ancestry – Dit Names

<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~unclefred/DitNames.html>

Quebec Names – Personal

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Quebec_Names,_Personal

As is the case throughout all ethnic groups in genealogy are the endless issues with variations of spellings found in both proper names and surnames. French-Canadian research can be especially challenging in this respect. Even surnames with the seemingly most obvious spellings usually have a number of creative alternate spellings in French-Canadian documents. Learn how to pronounce your ancestors' names so you can begin to anticipate the alternate spellings you might find in indexes and historical documents. The following link can be very helpful for analysis Quebec Names – Personal

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Quebec_Names,_Personal.

When ancestors crossed the border into the United States, many ancestors changed their names. In some cases, the change was subtle, in others it was almost a completely differ variation. The common trend was to adopt an anglicized version.

Professional genealogists, specializing in French-Canadian and French research often point to the following two sources as being the best for genealogical research not only with surnames but a wide variety of related subjects:

1. Jette's Genealogical Dictionary
2. Tanguay's Genealogical Dictionary

JETTE'S GENEALOGY DICTIONARY

In 1983, Rene Jette (1944-) published a comprehensive genealogy dictionary of Quebec, through 1730, under the title *Dictionnaire genealogique des familles du Quebec*. This is considered the most comprehensive source available on early French-Canadian ancestry. Jette discusses the European origin of each immigrant ancestor, provides details about occupation, age, military, service, marriages, and places of residence, and offers vital statistics for each of the children. Each generation is enumerated by family group through

1730. Many public and academic libraries, with large genealogy collections or located in close proximity to states and cities near the Canadian border have this title.

TANGUAY'S GENEALOGY DICTIONARY

Reverend Cyprien Tanguay (1819-1902) is a seven-volume dictionary of French-Canadian genealogy entitled *Dictionnaire genealogique des familles canadiennes depuis la foundation de la colonie jusqu'a nos jours*. This monumental work, published from 1871-1890, was the first comprehensive genealogy dictionary in French Canada. The first volume lists each of the original immigrants and their families through the year 1700. The remaining six volumes document the succeeding generations until about 1765. The seventh volume also lists over 100 pages of surname variations and *dit* names.

While the information has proven to contain errors, most professionals feel it is useful because it extends many family lines a generation or two beyond Jette. A supplementary volume, edited by J. Arthur LeBoeuf and entitled *Complement au Dictionnaire genealogique Tanguay*, contains many additions and corrections to Tanguay's pioneering work.

Tanguay's dictionary has been filmed and can be borrowed through the Family History Library by setting up a borrowing account at Family Search <http://familysearch.org/films> and specify delivery to the Fort Myers Regional Library. Tanguay's dictionary and LeBoeuf's supplement are available in the reference section of many academic and public libraries with Canadian genealogy collections, especially those with an emphasis on the Province of Quebec. Tanguay's dictionary is available on the Internet at www.genealogie.org/tanguay.

Other important record types for French-Canadian research include the following:

1. Census records
2. Notarial records

CENSUS RECORDS

The first census of all of New France was taken in 1666. This census lists the names, ages, relationships, and occupations of everyone in the household, with women mentioned by maiden name. The next census was enumerated in 1667 and contains the same details recorded the previous year, as well as the number of horned animals, sheep and pigs, land acreage, and the number of firearms owned. The 1681 census contains the same information as the 1667 census.

In 1825, 1831, and 1842, heads-of-household censuses were taken for all of Lower Canada. Beginning in 1851, censuses were enumerated every 10 years. All decennial censuses from 1861-1901 named all members of the household, with age, occupation, birthplace, religion, marital status, gender, race, and other details listed for each person.

These later censuses are very similar in format and content to the U.S. Federal censuses. Some indexes exist for portions of these later censuses. Canadian census information is available on Ancestry, Family Search, Find My Past, and My Heritage.

For more detailed information on this topic, please visit the following links:

Family Search Wiki

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canada_Census

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Quebec_Census

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Quebec,_Canada_Genealogy

NOTARIAL RECORDS

Notarial records are considered the second most popular and useful genealogical source for French-Canadian research. Notaries recorded the legal transactions between individuals, writing marriage contracts, estate inventories, apprenticeships, labor contracts, sales of property, farming leases, land grants, and much more. Approximately 5-million notarial records have been preserved, offering a multitude of personal details about our ancestors' social, economic, and cultural dispositions. The most notable notarial records are marriage contracts and estate inventories.

Marriage contracts are sometimes the only official record of a marriage, as some of the early marriages were not written in the parish registers. These legal documents contain all of the information usually recorded in the parish marriage registers. Marriage contracts often contain other financial and social details, such as descriptions of the bride's dowry, listing the value of her furniture, clothing, jewelry, and other personal possessions.

Estate inventories often list some or all of the following types of information:

1. List the items left by a deceased spouse
2. Enumerating houses, barns, stables, furnishings, articles of clothing
3. Firearms
4. Farm animals and implements
5. Stores of grain
6. Legal papers
7. Cooking utensils
8. Land holdings
9. Firewood
10. Animal skins
11. Carts
12. Chests
13. Linens and other possessions

Many Notarial records are available on Ancestry, Family Search, Find My Past, and My Heritage. The following links listed below provide detailed information on their benefits.
Family Search Wiki

https://familysearch.org/wiki/en/Canada_Notarial_Records

Library and Archives of Canada

<https://thediscoverblog.com/2014/08/21/notarial-records/>

FRENCH-CANADIAN GENEALOGY SOCIETIES

American-Canadian Genealogical Society

American-Canadian Genealogical Society

P.O. Box 6478

Manchester, NH 03108-6478

<http://www.acgs.org>

American-French Genealogical Society

A.F.G.S.

P.O. Box 830

Woonsocket, RI 02895-0870

<http://www.afgs.org/>

French-Canadian/Acadian Genealogists of Wisconsin

FCGW

P.O. Box 414

Hales Corner, WI 53130-0414

http://www.genealoger.com/wisconsin/wi_ethnic_groups.htm

French-Canadian Heritage Society of California

417 Irving Drive

Burbank, CA 91504

<http://www.fchsc.org/>

French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan

French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan

P. O. Box 1900

Royal Oak, MI 48068-1900

<http://www.habitantheritage.org/>

New England Historic Genealogical Society

NEHGS

101 Newbury Street

Boston, Massachusetts 02116-3007

<http://www.americanancestors.org/home.html>

Northern New York American-Canadian Genealogical Society

Northern New York American-Canadian Genealogical Society

P.O. Box 1256

Plattsburgh, New York 12901

<http://www.lakestolocks.org/content/northern-new-york-american-canadian-genealogical-society/1f1992DEA089E34EE360>

Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society

P.O Box 65128

Burlington, VT 05406-5128

<http://www.vt-fcgs.org/>

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National Archives of France. **Centre d' Accueil Et De Recherche Des Archives Nationales (CARAN) France.** Paris, France: National Archives Of France, c2000. **Genealogy Ref. 016 CEN (France)**

Baird, Charles W. **Huguenot Emigration to America.** Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing, c1985. **Adult Non-Fiction 929.373 BAI**

Baxter, Angus. **In Search of Your Canadian Roots: Tracing Your Family Tree in Canada.** 3rd Edition. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: McClelland & Stewart,

c1999. **Genealogy Ref. 929.1 BAX (Canada)** or you may use the 2nd Edition which circulates and is shelved in Adult Non-Fiction 929.1 BAX.

- - - . *In Search Of Your European Roots: A Complete Guide To Tracing Your Ancestors In Every Country In Europe.* 3rd^d Edition. Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, c2001. **Genealogy Reference 929.1072 BAX.** NOTE: The 2nd edition circulates and is shelved in Adult Non-Fiction 929.1 BAX.

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Carmack, Sharon DeBartolo. *Discovering Your Immigrant & Ethnic Ancestors: How To Find Your Unique Heritage.* Cincinnati, OH: Betterway Books, c2000. **Adult Non-Fiction 929.1 CAR**

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NOTE: This study guide is meant to serve as an overview or outline for patrons using the genealogy collection at Fort Myers Regional Library. The compiler emphasizes that the information contained in this study guide should not serve as a substitute for taking the time to read one of the books or articles cited in the bibliography, or attend lectures given by the subject specialists cited as authors.

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