

SOME BASIC GENEALOGY

Tracing French-Canadians from Vermont Back to Quebec in the 19th Century

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[A fancier version of this document at RootsWeb](#)

I prefer the narrow definition of "genealogy" which is the account of the ascent of a person to an ancestor. Conversely an "ancestor" is a person from whom one is descended. Some suggest that ancestors are those that came before grandparents. I guess that their thinking is that grandparents are considered "family" as opposed to ancestors. I am interested in all of my ancestors, for instance the mother of my mother's mother's, mother. In fact I trace my maternal lines as far back as I can. However, except for aunts, uncles, siblings of grandparents and anecdotes concerning interesting siblings of other ancestors, I do not research the siblings of ancestors unless it is necessary to locate an ancestor. Neither do I collect names. I could care less that there is a Lesperance in Arizona to whom I am not related.

Most of the French migration to Quebec occurred in the 17th century, much of it in the first half of that century. Compared to most countries, New France (Quebec) did an outstanding job of recording baptisms, marriages and burials. Typically, the parents of the bridal couple were included in marriage records. Often the parish of the parents was also included. Thus if you find a French-Canadian marriage record you'll usually have an excellent start on the preceding generation. The marriage record included at least two witnesses, typically they were male and either related to, or friends of, one of the bridal couple. Also, many of the early Quebec marriages were preceded by a marriage contract which included the bridal couples' parents and usually their origins. In addition to the parents and their parish, baptismal records included the Godparents. Godparents were often the grandparents or other close relatives of the infant. It is excellent practice to record the Godparents at baptisms and the witnesses at weddings.

Most researchers will find that it is easier to proceed from what you know in the near present towards what you don't know in the past. The easiest way to trace ancestors is to proceed marriage by marriage. Throughout the 17th, 18th and most of the 19th centuries, married French-Canadian women kept their maiden name throughout their lives. This eases the task of finding the correct marriage. For instance it is easier to match a John Doe with a Mary Jones than it is a John and Mary Doe.

Since the beginning of the English regime in Canada starting about 1760, the Quebecois have been fiercely protective and proud of their culture, religion and language. Genealogy is a part of their culture. They have gone to extreme lengths to make it easier for people to trace their ancestry. Marriages and often the baptisms and burials of all parish registers have been indexed in repertoires that are readily available. Further, a number of excellent French-Canadian genealogical dictionaries and province-wide marriage indexes have been published. Practically all of the Quebec marriages in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries have been indexed in the blue Drouin series and the Loiselle Index, both of which can be entered with the bride's surname as well as the groom's. In addition to the full names of the bridal couple, the names of their parents and the date and place of the marriage are given in Drouin and Loiselle. These indexes can be accessed for a small fee through the Research Services of the Vermont French-Canadian Genealogical Society of Burlington, VT <http://www.vt-fcgs.org>; the French-Canadian Genealogical Society of RI <http://www.afgs.org> ; or the American-Canadian Genealogical Society of Manchester, NH <http://www.acgs.org>

In both Quebec and the US probably the most difficult century for tracing French-Canadian ancestry is the 19th Century. The Quebecois became more mobile with a shift from rural to urban areas. Emigration to the western provinces of Canada and to the United States, especially New England, accelerated in the 19th Century. Further complicating research is that the Catholic hierarchy banned dual surnames about 1860 with many Quebecois

electing to retain their "dit" or "also known as" name and dropping the original family surname. Also, US border officials usually dropped the first surname of dual-named Quebecois migrating to the US.

I have found that the typical research problem is to locate the marriage of the parents of a child baptized in Vermont or the parents of one or both of the principals in a Vermont wedding. I hope with the guidance given here that this task will be made easier.

MIGRATION TO VERMONT

The French-Canadian migrants to VT came predominantly through the Richilieu valley and the Eastern Townships ...Cantons de l'est in French...in the western part of the Province of Quebec. Quebec was called Canada East by English speaking people during the 19th Century. VT vital records and censuses of that period often used the expression "Canada East" to refer to the Province of Quebec.

There were very few French-Canadians in VT before 1820. When a Quebec Bishop passed through Burlington in 1815 his group estimated 100 Catholics in the area. Probably more than half were French, so we can estimate 60 people or about 10 families and 10 singles. In 1832 there were about 1,000 Catholics in the Burlington area, half of whom were French-Canadians, so we can estimate less than 100 families. In 1840 over 20% of the population of Burlington were of Quebec origin. Chittenden County had about 2,900 French-Canadians in 1850 and about 4,300 in 1860. It is apparent, then, that the migration from Quebec to VT started about 1830. The primary cause for the migration was economic...the French-Canadians were having trouble feeding their families. There was some minor migration after 1837 due to the "Papineau Rebellion". Many French-Canadian patriots who fought the English regime in Canada in 1837 fled to VT after they were defeated by the Canadian army.

I have not seen early population figures for other counties but following is an approximate count in VT counties having more than 400 French-Canadians (all figures rounded to the closest 100):

	1850	1860
Addison	2,100	2,500
Franklin	3,700	4,700
Grand Isle	800	1,000
Orleans	700	1,000
Rutland	900	1,400
Washington	400	800
State of VT	12,100	17,000

Almost 80% of the state's French-Canadians were in Grand Isle, Franklin, Chittenden and Addison counties, which all border Lake Champlain. Over half of the State's increase of 4,900 between 1850 and 1860, probably about 2,700, were from natural increase. Some of the 2,200 gained from migration were from other states, especially NY, but most of the gain was from Quebec.

Until railroads were established in 1848, the usual migration from the Province of Quebec to VT was either the water route of the Richilieu River in Quebec flowing from Lake Champlain in VT, or a land route close to and parallel to the water route. Undoubtedly there were other land routes further east of the Richilieu River. In general Indian pathways which later became wagon trails followed rivers. Unfortunately I have not yet located a good reference on the pre-railroad migration transportation means and routes.

A significant late 1840's railway was the Vermont Central RR connecting Burlington, Essex Junction, Montpelier and White River Junction on a route that roughly parallels today's Interstate Highway I-89. In the early 1850's the Vermont Central RR was linked to the Vermont and Canada RR at Essex Junction and connected to Quebec, Swanton, and St. Albans. At Swanton a branch was built westward to the Northern R.R. of New York which lead to Ogdensburg and the steamer traffic on the Lake Ontario. The Rutland RR system was established in the late 1840's and linked Burlington, Rutland, Springfield and Brattleboro. In the 1880's this system was linked to the Canadian border on a route through Grand Isle County, west of the Vermont and Canada RR. Another railway connected to Canada before 1880 was the Missisquoi Valley RR from St. Albans in a northeasterly direction to the area of Richford. Before 1880, the Connecticut and Passumpsic Railroad made several connections to Quebec border: one near Derby Line; and another branch in an essentially East-West direction which made a loop into Quebec along the Missisquoi River intersecting the border near Troy and near Richford and connecting to the Missisquoi Valley RR. In the early 1850's the Grand Trunk RR reached the Quebec border near Norton. In summary, by 1880, railroads in Vermont connected with the Quebec border in the Vermont counties of Grand Isle (once), Franklin (three times), Orleans (once) and Essex (once). Much of the preceding railroad information came from the article "Railway Centenary" appearing in the Summer, 1948 issue of "Vermont Life" magazine published by the State in Montpelier.

A qualified lecturer at the fall 2000 conference at VT-FCGS showed a map of VT roads at the end of the 18th Century. These roads are quite similar to the highways that exist in VT today.

The various U.S Censuses reveal that many of the French-Canadians were transient farm laborers (farm hands). One of my ancestral families lived in St. Albans, Cambridge, Georgia and finally back to St. Albans between 1840 and 1870.

HOW AND WHERE TO LOOK FOR BIRTHS, MARRIAGES AND DEATHS

Where to look for 19th Century Franco-American vital records is an extremely difficult task. One general rule can be gleaned from the population data provided in the preceding section. That rule is that the earlier an event occurred in the century the more likely it is that the event occurred in Quebec. If I were to look for the marriage of a French couple who had a child born in VT before 1840, I would search first in Quebec records. Not only is it likely that the marriage occurred in Quebec but, as noted earlier, the search in Quebec is much easier than in the US because of two catalogs of Quebec marriages----the blue Drouin and the Loiselle Index. Once the parents are known it is usually possible to go into the repertoires or microfilmed vital records of the appropriate Quebec parish and learn considerably more about the family. The only place I know where to do this in the US is the RI society www.fcgs.org

A word of caution before looking for an event in Quebec records. Many of the French names were significantly changed in the US. It was relatively common before the mid-1800s for Quebecois to add a second or "dit" name to their original family name. Then when the Quebecker migrated to the US the first (usually the original) surname was dropped. In my case the family name was LANDIE in France until a soldier took the nom de guerre, LESPERANCE, when he enlisted in France in the 1740's. For several generations in Quebec the name was LANDIE (or variations thereof) dit LESPERANCE. When the first of my line entered the US in the mid-1800's the family name was dropped so that all descendants in the US carried the LESPERANCE name. In fact the name LANDIE has disappeared in favor of LESPERANCE in both Quebec and the US.

French names were often Anglicized. One that I've seen in VT was a bit weird. The Irish name LAUGHLIN was shortened to LAFLIN by Yankee officials. Then along came a Frenchman named LAFLAMME and he also got dubbed LAFLIN. Most of the French in the early 19th Century couldn't read or write. When the Yankee Census taker or the Yankee town clerk heard the name, for instance, BLONDIN, from a French family it might have been written down as BLODAH or BLOWDAH or BLONDO and the Frenchman wouldn't be able to tell that it was misspelled.

Another cause of name variations was the attempt by some of the Quebec immigrants to Americanize themselves. Another set of my VT ancestors were Louis LEBRUN and Angele WEISS (a German name) who

wanted to be known as Lewis BROWN and Angele WEST in Burlington in the mid-1800's. There are a number of books that are of help with these name changes. One is "French-Canadian Names: Vermont Variants" by Veronique Gassette available from the Vermont Historical Society <http://www.state.vt.us/vhs> and another is "The 'Dit' Name: French-Canadian Surnames, Aliases, Adulterations and Anglicizations" by Quintin Publications, Inc. <http://www.quintinpublications.com>

If the record of an event isn't found in Quebec records then a search in VT vital records ---births, marriages, deaths (BMD)---is indicated. The first place to look is in the Vermont Vital Records Office www.vitalrec.com/vt.html will tell you how to do this. The microfilms up through the beginning of the 20th Century are divided into two sets: 1760-1870 and 1870 to 1905. This web site also leads you to the addresses and other information for obtaining vital records from VT counties, cities and towns. The state files do not contain all of the vital records of all of the cities and towns. So it may be necessary to turn to the city or town clerk for information. The civil vital records are weak in the 18th and first part of the 19th centuries. The American Canadian Genealogical Society of NH also has microfilms of the early VT Vital Records. A note of caution...the Vermont Vital Records are far from complete especially for the earlier part of the 19th Century.

VT-FCGS has the indexed VT-IGI fiche of baptisms, marriages and deaths. Baptisms, marriages and deaths for the Chimney Point (Fort Frederic) Chapel for the years 1732 to 1760 are documented in the book, "Hommes et Choses du Fort St Frederic" by Pierre Georges Roy, printed by "Les Editions des Dix" at Montreal in 1946; and in the book, "La Population des forts francais d'Amerique" by Marthe Faribault-Beauregard printed by "Editions Bergeron" at Montreal in 1982, from page 17 to page 49.

The US Censuses are excellent resources for trying to construct a family. The first Census, 1790, gave: the name of the head of the family; number of free white males 16 years and older; number of free white males under 16, number of other persons, and sometimes town or district of residence. The 1800, 1810, 1820, and 1830 censuses gave the name of the head of the family; number of free males and females in various age categories; numbers of non-whites; and the town and county of residence. The 1850 Census was the first to give the name, age, sex, color, state or country of birth of all members of the household. One has to be quite liberal when using censuses. It is likely that the early Census takers were Yankees with no knowledge of French. So surnames were badly spelled. In fact given names were often misleading. For some reason, our ancestors often changed given names. It is not unusual to fully identify a Quebec family through baptismal records in Quebec then find little resemblance to the baptismal names in later US Census records. Several times in my research, the given names were so different from the baptismal names that I seriously questioned if I had the correct family.

"Vermont City Directories in Vermont Repositories" published by the Vermont Historical Society of Montpelier <http://www.state.vt.us/vhs> lists a few cities that had directories before 1900: Barre starting 1890; Bellows Falls 1894; Bennington 1891; Brattleboro 1871; Burlington 1865; Montpelier 1887; Rutland 1867; St. Albans 1886; St. Johnsbury 1875; and Springfield 1894. The most complete repository for these directories is at the Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont in Burlington [Bailey-Howe Library](http://www.bailey-howe.org). Other good repositories are at the VT Department of Libraries, Montpelier <http://dol.state.vt.us>, the Vermont Historical Society, and VT-FCGS (for Burlington 1865 to 1901 on microfiche). The city libraries at some of the larger cities---Barre, Bellows Falls, Bennington, Brattleboro, Burlington, and St. Johnsbury ---have local city directories. City directories give the name of each head of household and each adult who has a surname different than the head-of-household, the street address, the occupation and the employer.

Others have suggested searching land and notary records for genealogical information. Newspaper announcements of births, engagements, marriages and deaths as well as funeral home records might be productive. I have never obtained any useful information from of these sources. But when you're stuck try them. <http://www.genealogy.com/00000274.html> gives the addresses and phone numbers of the VT County Courthouses and a sense of the archival material kept at courthouses. As mentioned the registers of Justices of the peace are supposed to be kept at the county courthouses.

Continue with [Catholic Church Records](#)

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