How to Tell if Your French-Canadian Ancestors Include Acadians

by: George L. Findlen

Editor's note: George Findlen, Certified Genealogical Records Specialist, is a retired college administrator. In addition to volunteering at the Wisconsin Historical Society Library, he researches and writes articles on aspects of his blended Acadian and French Canadian ancestry. The author thanks Joy Reisinger, Certified Genealogist, for twenty years editor of the journal, Lost in Canada?, *and Patricia Locke, Research Department Chairperson for the American-French Genealogical Society. Both read drafts of the article and made valuable suggestions for its improvement.*

Researchers tracking French-Canadian ancestors back into Canada often make the assumption that all persons having French surnames and French names living in Canada are French-Canadians. For most descendants of French-Canadians, that is true. Most Québecois immigrated there in the seventeenth century and remained there until a descendant immigrated to the US to find work in the nineteenth century.

Upstate New Yorkers and New Englanders of French-Canadian descent often ask me, "Why even ask if some of my ancestors are Acadian? Aren't all French-named people in upstate New York and in New England mill towns French-Canadians? They all came from Québec." Some even ask, "What are Acadians doing in Québec and New England? Didn't all the Acadians go to Louisiana?"

The answer to these questions is *Le Grand Dérangement*, a systematic effort by the British to remove all French from Acadie, today's Canadian Maritimes—Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and New Brunswick. That ethnic cleansing was part of a war between England and France. Started in 1755, it was called the Seven Years' War in Europe, the French and Indian War in the American Colonies, and the War of the Conquest in Québec. It ended in 1763 with the British conquest of Canada.

Most deported Acadians were scattered among the Atlantic coast English colonies, from Massachusetts to Georgia, and some were sent to prisons in England. However, not all Acadians were deported during those war years. A map of the Acadian deportation clearly shows that some Acadians managed to reach Québec between 1755 and 1758. (See Figure 1.) When the war was over, others made their way to Québec as well. Father Pierre-Maurice Hébert's book, *The Acadians of Québec*, trans. Melvin Surette (Pawtucket: Quintin, 2002) details where groups of Acadians settled.

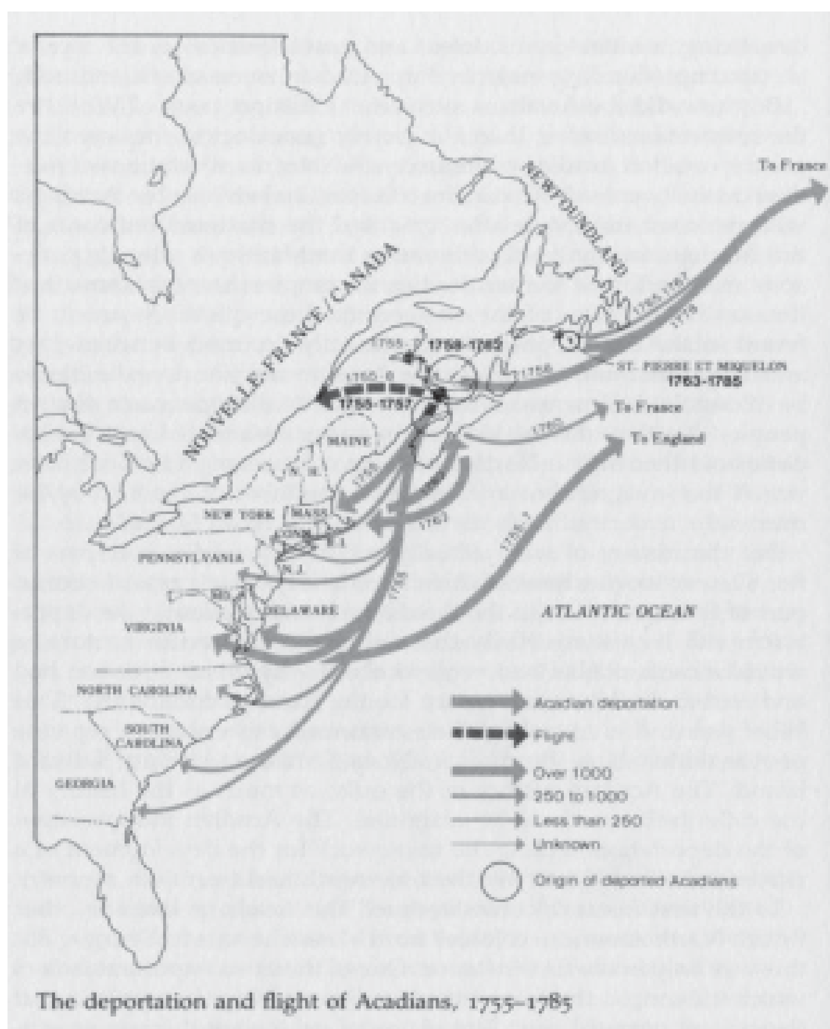

Figure 1: Used by permission of the Centre for Canadian Studies at Mount Allison University and McGill-Queen's University Press

The children of these Acadian refugees intermarried with French-Canadian families already established in Québec, and their descendants are in Québec today. Over a century later, some of the descendants of these Acadians, with other Québécois, migrated to the US.

An effort to trace a family with a French name back into Québec, then, may lead not only to French-Canadian ancestors; for some, the effort may lead back to Acadian ancestors as well. The question for researchers who trace their ancestors from the US back into Canada becomes, "How can I tell if my ancestors include Acadians?" To find out, read on.

What follows is based on two

assumptions. One, your family has lived in upstate New York or in one of the New England states of the US for some years. Two, you are tracking your family back as through the US to Québec. I give these assumptions because researchers tracking French-Canadian families from the Upper Midwest back to Québec will have to use different resources than those used by researchers tracking French-Canadian families from New England back to Québec.

First, two definitions. An Acadian is a person of French ancestry born south of the Notre Dame Mountains which mark the southern edge of the eastern end of the Saint Lawrence River Valley. Any French person who lived in what is today Nova Scotia (including Cape Breton Island), Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and eastern Maine between 1636 and 1755 is an Acadian. A French-Canadian is a person of French ancestry born in the Saint Lawrence Valley. (See Figure 2.)

Now for the steps. Followed, they will tell you whether your French-Canadian ancestor has Acadian roots.

Step One: trace your family back to the border. That involves old-fashioned American genealogy. Get a copy of your parents' marriage certificate, civil or religious. That will usually tell you the names of your grandparents. Interview your parents' brothers and sisters if they are still alive to determine where your grandparents grew up. That will tell you what New England town office or parish church to go to for a copy of their marriage. For French-Canadian families in New England mill towns, their grandparents frequently grew up in the same town or in an adjacent town. Once you have an idea of where your grandparents grew up, go get a copy of their marriage certificate, civil or religious. Repeat the process until you get to the last marriage celebrated in the US. Many New Englanders descended from French-Canadians are the third generation born in the US and the fourth generation to live in the US. Thus, the typical French-Canadian researcher should have to obtain only three marriage certificates before crossing the border. If you are fortunate, the last marriage certificate will identify the immigrant's parents and birth place in Québec.

Step Two: cross the border. This is the hardest task since it requires knowing the names of the parents of the immigrant. Sometimes, crossing the border also requires knowing the immigrant's birth date and village of origin. Taken together, those three bits of information are the Holy Grail for those trying to locate French-Canadian ancestors in Canada. Without the names of the immigrant's parents, researchers cannot look up the next generation in the ancestral line. Without a place of origin, researchers do not know where to look for original documentation of the next link in an ancestral line. Without the names of the parents of the immigrant or a date, researchers cannot confirm which person of many with the same name is the correct one.

In the next several paragraphs, I will mention two sets of books that are the primary tools for helping us track our ancestors once we cross the border In this devoutly-to-be-wished circumstance, the immigrant came to the US not yet married, met a girl in one of the

One set is called “The Blue Drouin” because of the blue binding of the set. The proper reference is to the *Répertoire alphabétique des mariages des Canadiens-français, 1760-1935*, 61 vols. (Longueuil, QC : Services généalogique Claude Pepin, 1989-1990). The set lists marriages only by groom's name, so The Blue Drouin is sometimes referred to as “The Men Series.” A 64 volume set, carrying the same title is referred to commonly as “the Red Drouin” because of the red binding of the set. This set lists marriages only by bride's name, so The Red Drouin is sometimes referred to as “the Women Series.”

Back to the second step.

Let us take the easiest scenario.
mill towns, and married. The civil marriage certificate does not provide the parents' names and says only “Canada” as the place of origin; however, the entry in the parish register of the church in which the marriage was celebrated provides the names of the parents. You are now across the border. In a variant of this scenario, the ancestor married in Québec before immigrating to the US. Family lore has told you consistently what the immigrant's wife's surname was. You cross your fingers and turn to the blue and red Drouin books and find them. You are across the border. In another variant of this scenario, the ancestor married in Québec before immigrating to the US. However, the surname of his bride remains unknown. The civil death certificate of your immigrant ancestor becomes your hope, but it says only “Canada” for the village of birth. However, a search for the civil death certificates of that ancestor's known brothers and sisters is profitable: one of the sisters' death certificate identifies the family's village of origin. Again, you are across the border.

Now, let us take the frustrating scenario. Your immigrant ancestor was single when he came to the US for work, his civil marriage entry names neither his parents nor his village of origin, and his religious marriage entry is one of the few which does not name his parents. Do not yell, “Brick Wall!!” yet. Locate that ancestor's known brothers and sisters. Look for their religious marriage certificates. Canon law required naming a person's parents, and the parish register marriage entry which does not include the names of parents is rare. One of your ancestor's siblings' marriage entries will name the parents. You cannot find an immigrant's brothers and sisters? Look at the baptismal entries in the parish register for the immigrant's children. Parents commonly asked their brothers and sisters to serve as godparents. Once you have the names of the parents of your immigrant ancestor, you have crossed the border.

Note that each major source of an evidentiary document has its pluses and minuses. Civil certificates of birth, marriage, and death are more universal. It is rare not to find a birth, marriage, or death certificate on file for a person who was born, married, and died in upstate New York or in a New England state between 1880 and 1930. That is the plus of civil registrations. They have a minus, however, in that they are more likely than parish register entries to have omitted information. Parish register entries also have their pluses and minuses. They usually record the parents names for baptismal and marriage entries. That is

their plus. But many parishes in New England do not permit searchers or representatives of genealogical societies to examine or copy registers. Thus, there may no published list of abstracts of the marriages that were celebrated at many Catholic parishes in New England. More parishes in Maine and Rhode Island have permitted genealogical societies to make abstracts of marriages than parishes in other states. New Hampshire is close behind Maine and Rhode Island. Massachusetts has some, while Connecticut, Vermont, and New York have few.

Step Three: trace the family back to its progenitor in Québec. Once you have successfully identified your ancestor's parish of origin in Québec and the names of his parents, your task of tracking your ancestors becomes easy. Your first tool of choice is the paper or microfiche copy of Gabriel Drouin et al's published list of marriages celebrated in Québec between 1760 and 1935. Copies of the sixty-one volume Blue Drouin and of the sixty-four volume Red Drouin sets are at the Franco-American genealogy societies in Rhode Island, Connecticut, Maine, and New Hampshire. The New England Historic Genealogical Society in Massachusetts owns a copy as well.

Once you clear the year 1760, use the PRDH to get each preceding generation back to the progenitor of that surname in Québec. The full title of this work is the *Répertoire des actes de baptême, mariage, sépulture et des recensements du Québec ancien* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1980-1990). It is a product of the Research Program in Historical Demography for which the French abbreviation is PRDH. The forty-seven volume *Répertoire* is often referred to as "the RAB of the PRDH" or just "the RAB." The printed set covers the 1621 through 1765 period of the French régime. A CD of the RAB, which contains additions, takes the database through 1799. Both the printed set and the CD are available at the same locations in New England where one can find *répertoires des mariages.* In addition, the database, which now contains some events up to 1850, can be searched on-line at www.genealogie.umontreal.ca for a modest per-record-found fee. The PRDH will enable you to construct your lineage all the way back to the progenitor in Québec.

Step Four: look for Acadian names. After you have finished tracing your line back to the progenitor, it is time to begin checking your growing list of French-Canadian ancestors for those who descend from Acadians. The task is a continuous decision-making loop. Take all the names of your ancestors born in Québec between 1760 and 1810 or who married during those years. If you were born around 1950 and your ancestors each married around age 25, then you have up to 59 surnames of your 64 great-great-great-great-grandparents to look up.

Look up your parents' surnames on the list constructed by Brenda Dunn of Parks Canada and Acadian Genealogist Stephen White. If neither of your parents' surnames are on that list, look up your grandparents' surnames on the list. Repeat this process until you have identified all your ancestors who married after 1755. If none of your ancestors' surnames are on the list in Table 1, then none of your French-Canadian an-

cestors include Acadians. Figure 3 charts the decision-making loop of this step of the process.

On the other hand, if one of your French-Canadian ancestors who married in Canada after 1755 is on the list of Acadian surnames in Table 1, then your ancestry *may* include Acadians. I say “may” because some names, like Martin, have both several Québecois branches and two Acadian branches, none of which are related.

Once you have identified an ancestor whose surname may be Acadian, then look up that person’s ancestors. The tools for this task are Adrien Bergeron’s *Le Grand Arrangement des Acadiens au Québec*, 8 vols. (Montréal: Éditions Élysée, 1981) for persons born to a marriage which occurred after 1714, and Stephen White’s *Dictionnaire Généalogique des Familles Acadiennes, Première Partie, 1636-1714*, 2 vols. (Moncton: Centre d’Études Acadiennes, 1999) will take you all the way back to the progenitor in Acadie.

Now that you have the four steps for determining whether any of your French-Canadian ancestors are Acadian, a caution and a warning are in order.

First the caution. Keep in mind name changes. Most French-Canadian pioneers had *dit* names. Those who research Martins know that at least one line of the descendants of the Acadian Martin-dit-Barnabé, became “Barnaby” in upstate New York. Then there is the problem of spelling variations. Aroostook County, Maine, descendants of Jacques Miville-dit-Deschênes have been recorded as “Manville” and “Mainville.” Then there are translations. Many descendants of the Roy-dit-Bonifaces of Hamlin, Maine, are known as “King,” some Levesques in Caribou, Maine, are known as “Bishop,” and some Paré in Lowell, Massachusetts, became “Perry.” In all three cases, racial prejudice was at play, and the surname changed because its holder needed to become English to order to advance in the world.

Finally, there is the ever possible mangling of name spelling by a town clerk who could not speak French and was unfamiliar with French spelling. American-French Genealogical Society member Patty Locke tells the story of an ancestor named Lanctôt whose surname was recorded as “Long Toe,” a person whose name was Boutin becoming “Button,” and someone whose name was LeBaron becoming “Baron.” Wise searchers will always be on the look out for name changes. In fact, searchers working with civil birth, marriage, and death records should ask an acquaintance who neither speaks nor reads any French to pronounce the family name in French, and then ask the acquaintance to spell the name in English. Do not forget to thank your acquaintance for helping you find your ancestor before you return to the town office.

An invaluable resource for researchers is René JETTÉ and Micheline LÉCUYER’s *Répertoire des Noms de Famille du Québec des Origines à 1825* (Montréal: Institut Généalogique J. L. Et Associés, 1988). The first half of the 201-page book lists every French-Canadian patronymic found in a Québec document between 1621 and 1825. For all surnames having one or more *dit*

names or alternate spellings, those forms of the name are given with the date of its first appearance in an official document. The second half of the book changes the order, listing every *dit* name or alternate spelling followed by its patronymic.

Second, the warning. Do not get misled in The-Name's-the-Same-Error. Too often, the son has his father's name, two first cousins have the same name, and that an uncle and a nephew have the same name. For each marriage found in a list of marriage abstracts made from a New England source, go get a civil marriage certificate from the town in which the marriage occurred. For each marriage found in a *répertoire des marriages* made from a Québec source, go make a photocopy of the entry from the microfilm of the parish register. Look at the witnesses' names. Are the witnesses a parent or other relative? Look at the places. Are they the towns family members have told you that ancestor lived in?

Making sure you have the correct person is particularly necessary for any name given in Adrien BERGERON's eight-volume *Le Grand Arrangement des Acadiens au Québec* (Montréal: Éditions Élysée, 1981) and Bona ARSENAULT's six-volume *Histoire et généalogie des Acadiens* (Montmagny: Éditions Leméac, 1978). We must always be grateful to those who have prepared the comprehensive genealogies that enable us to make a first draft of our ancestries, but we must also be cautious of works published before the wide use of personal computers which find errors and before the expectation that researchers provide sources. Talk to researchers who have worked with Bergeron and Arsenault and also with microfilmed parish registers: each has a story of an error in Bergeron and Arsenault. The way of catching and stopping the spread of errors is to look up each date and name on an original source or an official copy of an original source.

The warning to confirm every marriage in an original record is particularly relevant for French-Canadian research. Monseigneur Cyprien TANGUAY started something wonderful when he undertook his monumental effort to produce his *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles canadiennes depuis la fondation de la colonie jusqu'a nos jours*. His work stimulated the curiosity of many people wanting to know more about their origins, and that is good. However, his work has also had the effect of leading many to do no more than amass nothing more than hundreds of names, and that is not good. Veteran French-Canadian researcher Joy REISINGER says that all too many searchers spend their time researching names instead of researching people. I agree. And that is why I urge readers to ask, for every marriage we find, "Is this really the right person? How do I know? Can I find another document that will confirm this?"

An ancestry – a list of names – should never be an end in itself. It should be the beginning. Census information, deeds, wills and other probate documents, court documents, notarial documents in Canada, photographs, and family heirlooms all have a story to tell. It is the sum and interaction of all those stories that tell us who our ancestors are. It is these stories that help us define who we are.

"The only time you have too much fuel is when you're on fire."