

Variations in French Names

It is asked why there are so many variation in French names...and there are many, which obviously makes our “task” that much more difficult...but interesting!

The following article (one of the many hundreds on the “In Search of Our Acadian Roots” CD-ROM) has been translated and is reproduced here with thanks to Claude Perrault and the Société Généalogique Canadienne-Française. Translation of SELECTED PARTS of “Les Variances des Noms Propres et des Prénoms et leurs Surnoms”, by Claude Perrault...published by Loisirs St-Edouard Inc., 1981-1982.

Where did the variations of a name come from?

A1. The spelling of names in Canada, from the discovery of Jacques Cartier, in 1534, and in the two centuries following, was not fixed (or stable). We could add that this was so, for part of the 19th Century, as well.

What were the reasons for that?

A1.

Because, at the time, few people were literate. In fact, you can discover in almost every parish register, this phrase: “ils ont déclaré ne savoir signer et ils ont fait leur marque ordinaire, c’est a dire, une croix” (they have declared not knowing how to sign and made an ordinary mark, that is to say, a cross (or “X”).). Is this last phrase 100% true? Surely not, for we have found many acts where the witnesses were physicians, notaries, engineers etc. whom, accord to the officiating minister, were people who did not know how to sign their name?

One can therefore ask why the officiating minister acted in such a way. Was it to save paper? It’s possible, but one thing is certain; the officiating minister did not (always) collect all the signatures of those who could sign their names, nor did he note all the witnesses present at the ceremonies. Besides, the officiating minister, or the person who transcribed the double of the register for civil archives, often did this task at a later date, when the witnesses were no longer there to sign!The same phrase can also be found in notarized acts, and there again, it is not necessarily 100% true (that they were unable to sign their name). You will see this for yourself in your research, when you compare both versions of the register...that of the parish and the double. Similarly, you’ll find the same thing when you compare the originals of the notarized acts and the copies.

A2.

Because people pronounced their names differently, depending on the region they originated from. From there, to write the name according to the sound of it...there is only a short step for the ministers, notaries and all the public officials...whatever their function...who nevertheless had to write down the name. Example: Payet, Peyet, Paillet, Payette or (even closer to home)...Sire, Syre, Cyre, Cyr.

A3.

Because in the registers, the officiating ministers indicated the name that they were “told”, or those that they heard pronounced. In both cases, they wrote the name their own way and according to their knowledge of French. Example: Miet, Millet, Myet, Millette, etc.

A4.

Because some ministers were careless and did not attach too much importance to the registration they were making, be it for baptisms, marriages, or sepultures. Example: Claude Bussot dit Lacouture had 19 children baptized at Lavaltrie. The name of his wife varies at nearly every one of these baptisms!

Why does the variation of a name go all the way to its total transformation, for different reasons?

A1.

The location of the residence, with names such as: Des Rochers, Des Ruisseaux, Des Pères, Durivage, Du chesne, Du mont, Du pont, La vallé, La montagne, La rivière, etc.

Examples:

Houde; became Desrochers
Trottier; became Desruisseaux
Couillard; became Desprs
Estienne; became Durivage
Guret; became Dumont
Perrault; became Duchesnes

A2.

The place of origin, with names like Tourangeau, Poitevin, Champagne, Picard, d'Anjou, Saintonge, Provenal, Bourguignon, Languedoc, etc.

Examples:

Barbeau; became Poitevin
Danis; became Tourangeau
Prillard; Bourguignon
Aubin; became St-Onge
Lacoste; became Languedoc
Foran/Faran/Pharand; became Vivarias

A3.

The occupation practiced; such as miller, blacksmith, well-man (in charge of a “well”), ferry-man (who would transport people, goods and livestock in his ferry), baker, stone carrier, harvester, tanner (selling or working with animal hides), spoon-maker, trader in salt, tailor, etc.

Examples:

miller -> meunier; became Dumoulin
blacksmith -> forgeron; became Laforge
well-man -> puisatier; became Dupuis
baker -> boulanger; became Ptrin
ferry-man -> traversier; became Latraverse
stone-transporter -> transporteur de pierre; became Chartier
nail-maker -> clou=nail; became Cloutier
bread-maker -> four=oven; became Fournier
harvester/reaper -> moissonneur; became Mtivier
worker in hides -> travailleur de peaux; became Pelletier
spoon-maker -> fabricant de cuillers; became Cuillierier
trader in salt -> trafiquant sur le sel; became Saulnier

A4.

The profession; such as lawyer, teacher, constable etc.

Examples:

lawyer -> procureur; became Bailly
teacher -> enseignant; became Lemaitre
constable/bailiff -> membre de la prvt; became Prevost

A5.

By whim or fancy...and even grudge and mockery.

Examples:

Billeron; became LaFatigue

Rocan dit la ville; became Bastien

Ledoux; became Latreille

Seguin; became Ladroute

A6.

Because of one's financial situation, military, or other. Examples: Nicholas Boyer; became Nicholas Argentcourt Perrault; became Chateauguay

A7.

The shame of a personal past...or of one's relatives, after a crime had been committed...or, for any other reason judged sufficiently serious by the person involved, such as exercising the occupation of executioner.

Note: See Andre Lachance's volume on the executioners of New France, entitled "Le bourreau au Canada sous le Regime francais" (the executioner in

Canada, under the French Regime), published by the Societe d'Histoire du Quebec, Cahiers d'Histoires vol. euphonics or the difficulty of pronouncing a name.

Examples:

Cuvillon; became Quevillon

Delquel; became Dziel

How were some of the modifications of the names done by usage?

A1.

By subtraction of certain letters.

Examples:

Houde; became Houd

Pelletier; became Peltier

Rivest; became Rivet

A2.

By modification of the ending.

Examples:

Aur; became Auray

Leclerc; became Leclair

Perrot; became Perrault/Perreault etc.

A3.

By the introduction of certain letters into the name:

Examples:

Houde; became Houlde

Hunault; became Henau

Chalifou; became Chalifour

Guillon; became Guyon

A4.

By the omission of the first syllable:

Examples:

Thiboutot; became Boutot and Bouthat

A5.

By another name meaning about the same thing:

Example #1:

Roquebrune; became Larocque (to express solidity, firmness, hardiness).

Note: The following e-mail message was subsequently received from Robert Black... “Just a short note about the variations of the names. One of the names used was Larocque & Rocquebrune. It says “Roquebrune; became Larocque (to express solidity, firmness, hardiness).” This is totally wrong, the original name is Larocque meaning a tour or keep as the rook in the game of chess. The name Rocquebrune came from a town once owned or controlled by the Larocque family of Larocque-Ordan in the department of Gers in France. Rocquebrune is about 15 km away and still has a tower standing made of redish brown stone hence Roquebrune, I have been to both places. The Chateau of Larocque has the remnants of a tower built in about 1050 as part of the foundation. My mother was born a Larocque-Rocquebrune. Robert Black

Example #2:

To use a factual case, let's take the one of Yolande CYR published in “Cahiers Gen-Histo” no. 1, on page 19. One notes in her lineage, that there is a Pierre CYR married on 6-11-1828 at Ste-Scholastique, to Julienne Larocque, daughter of Antoine and Genevieve Choret. If one looks for this last

marriage under the name Larocque, it is not found! Because Antoine married under the name of Antoine de Rocbrune. Another source of difficulty in your research, will come from variations (or the total cning) of the first name, as in the following examples:

1.

At baptism, the person receives certain first names, where the last listed is usually the one by which he/she is known throughout his/her life....whereas, in France the opposite is customary!

2.

At marriage (or death), if the person has been known throughout his/her life by a first name that does not appear among the ones given at baptism...and he/she marries or is buried under the “usual” name, this will of course, cause difficulties to his descendants and to the researchers.

Example: Wilfred Vzina married to Philomne Payette dite St-Amour.

Translating some excerpts of well-known and respected historians is all well and good, but these tend to give the impression to the readers, that these changes only occurred in New France...or that these names were mutilated only in the United States. Eventhough I (Claude Perrault) will translate several sources, all the reasons for the name changes, are not necessarily found there. Here is a case from my own (Claude Perrault) tree which happened not THAT long ago. It just may give insight as to how some name changes *could* have occurred. My maternal granfather's name was Joseph-Edouard Walsh (now you know where the red hair comes from). In any case, he was the eldest of twelve children. The first six were baptized “Walsh”, as was their father and grandfather. THEN, for whatever reason, the parish (in the county of Portneuf) received a new parish priest. The latter baptized the last six... “Welsh”, When the six younger ones started school, they

had to bring their “birth certificates”. There, the school mistress, seeing the name on the birth certificates, proceeded to admonish the youngsters whenever they claimed their name was “Walsh”. “Obviously”, scolded the teacher, “it is Walsh”...that was what was entered on all their birth certificates! She decided that this was how they should learn how to pronounce and sign their name!

In a nutshell, today I, (Claude Perrault) have cousins whose names are “Walsh” and I have other cousins, whose name are “Welsh”. All are descendants of the same couple.

Military Names (“Noms de guerre”)

In “Les Institutions Militaires de la Nouvelle-France et les Archives” by Louis Lemoyne (published by Loisiers St-Edouard Inc., Montreal, 1981-1982), there are some lists of “noms de guerre”. What is surprising (and this is something that I [Claude Perrault] had not noticed before), is that the officers as well as the enlisted men had “noms de guerre”. Also, I can’t help but notice all the humorous names. In the great, great majority of cases, we will never know the stories behind those names...which is really too bad!. Nevertheless, here are a few...with their meanings...and I’ll let imagine how they came to be! The number in brackets, indicates how many individuals bore that “nom de guerre” in the registers of the invalids found at the hospital called, l’Institut National des Invalides” (France). I’ll just go through the “B’s” and “C’s”, and pick only a few examples, to give you an idea.

Examples:

Bonnenouvelle (10) -> good news

Bonne volont (17) -> good will

Bon Vivant (14) -> enjoys the good things in life

Bristetout (10) -> breaks everything

Brizefer (30) -> breaks everything (iron)

Brulevillage (11) -> burns village

Boit sans Soif (5) -> drinks without thirst

Bouteille (2) -> bottle

Brisemenage (2) -> home-breaker

Brulemaison (2) -> burns house

Cinq Franc (1) -> five francs

Coeur ardent (1) -> flaming heart

Clefs des Coeurs (2) -> keys to the hearts

Cupidon (3) -> cupid

Cur (1) -> priest

And just so Dick Miale doesn’t feel left out...in the company of the 2nd Grenadiers of the Royal-Italian Battalion in 1763, we find that Antonio Risso and Georges Vanetti, both had the “nom de guerre”...”Colosso” (both measured 5’, 8”). In general, the names of this company, resembles very much those of the French soldiers, with “noms de guerre” like Bonvino, Il Terrible, La Vigna, Belamose, Senza Quartier and, of course, Viva l’amore.

Extract from the U.S. Census of 1820 for Madawaska

NOTE: This Census was taken by English-Americans who spoke and understood little (if any) French. The resultant Census shows that:

Alexis Thibodeau became Alevey Tebedore

Joseph became Joseph Markcue

Henri Tardif became Henri Turdey

Louis Ouellette became Lewis Willet

Joseph Sanfacon became Joseph Sanpeshow

Susan Thibodeau became Susan Tibedore

Beloni Martin became Belon Martin
Bartis Maurice became Bartis Morris
Charles Beaulieu became Charles Bolio
Merclure-McClure became Peter PcCure
Germain Morreau became Jerman Morio
Basil Martin became Basil Martin
Larion Violette became Larison Violet
Louis Sanfacon became Lewis Sanpishow
Francis Cormier became Francis Carney
Frederick Theriault became Fredric Tario
Fred Theriault became Sion Fred Tario
Pierre Cormier became Peter Camio
Olivier Thibodeau became Olivier Tibedore
Larion Bellefleur became Lario Bellfley
Nicolas Pelletier became Nicholas Pelkey
Jean Boutot became John Betuhe
Jean B. Thibodeau became John B. Tibedore
Henrie Vasseur became Henry Versier
Larion CYR became Loron Sear
Pierre Pelletier became Peter Pelthey
Germain Soucis became Germain Sourire
Jerome Morreau became Jarom Mario
Barnum Boucher became Barnum Bushiere
Germain Joshia became Jermain Joshia
Jean-Baptiste Joshia became Betis Joshia
Clement Simon became Lems Simirron
Joseph Michaud became Joseph Mashau
Guillaume Chasse became Gruino Chasse
Alorie Leclerc became Alare An L'Clare
Alexis CYR became Elecis CYR
Benjamin Nadeau became Benjamin Nador
Louis Bellefleur became Lewis Belflour
Jean-Baptiste Lausier became Batis Lewsure
Honore Levasseur became Harris Laushiere
Charles Ayotte became Charles Adyet
Jean CYR became John Sier
Joseph Genest became Joseph Jenian
Laurent Genest became Lorent Jenian
Francis Doucette became Francis Dorsett
Firmin Doucette became Pherman Dusett
Paul Thibodeau became Paulet Tibedore
Antoine Gagne became Anthony Gange
Louis Mercure became Lewis Mecure
Levite Leclerc became Levy Clare

Since the above noted (right-hand side) is the *actual* spelling as it appears in the old records, I think by now you must all have a better appreciation as to why researching Acadian/French names, is NOT always an easy task!

“Dit” Names

The following information was obtained from Linda Jones and provides a good explanation (as well as many examples) of “dit names” One thing that can make it difficult to find your ancestor is that he may have been using a different surname from the one that you expect. You will need to make yourself aware of any “dit” names that might be associated with the surname you’re tracing, and if you can’t find someone under the name of his child, you may find him under the dit name.

“Dit” in French means “say” and in this context, it means “called.” In other words, a person might be Pierre Bourbeau dit Lacourse, which means that he had an ancestor named Bourbeau, but he chooses to use the name Lacourse instead. So he is Pierre Bourbeau called Lacourse. People might take a dit name to distinguish their family from another family of the same name living nearby. Often it was a sort of nickname, often picked up during service as a soldier. Or it might refer to the place in France where the family originated. Sometimes it the father’s first name was used, either instead of the surname (for example, Hebert dit Emmanuel) or in addition to it (Jeanbard, Castonquay). In any case, very often the dit name was passed down to later generations, either in place of the original surname, or in addition to it. Some of his children might then keep the original surname (e.g. Barbeau), and some might use the dit name (e.g. Lacourse). After a few generations, it’s not uncommon to completely lose the memory of the original name, or to forget which was the original and which was the dit name. The best example of this is the Hudon dit Beaulieu family, where you will often find people listed as Beaulieu dit Hudon. You sometimes might find a name and its dit name hyphenated, as in François Hudon-Beaulieu. In fact, you can generally assume that a hyphenated surname (before 1950, anyway) is the surname plus dit name. Just remember that any Hudon might be the child of a Beaulieu and vice versa.

Some surnames, such as Roy, have had several different dit names. You should be aware that usually a different dit name indicates a different family. For example, Siméon Roy dit Audy and Antoine Roy dit Desjardins were not related to each other. So it helps us to distinguish who’s who among their descendants if the descendants use a dit name. Pierre Roy dit Audy will be a descendant of Siméon, and François Roy dit Desjardins will be a descendant of Antoine. If you find a source which tells you, for example, that Pierre Audy is François Desjardins’ father, you should be very suspicious. The sources you use may give the name as it appeared in the original document, or may list all the Hudons and Beaulieus together, under either name. Jette has standardized spellings, and leaves out “de” when alphabetizing, but he is faithful to the original surname of the family. So whether you’re looking for a Hudon, a Beaulieu, or a Hudon-Beaulieu, they’re all listed together under “H.” Other sources may list the same person many different places, and some sources consider Beaulieu to be more common, and therefore they place the Hudons under “B.” Don’t assume a marriage or birth isn’t listed until you’ve exhausted all possible names and spellings. And don’t forget to check under the many spelling variations that were common. Any name that starts with a vowel, for example, might also be found with an H in front of it (Emond, Hemond, Ayot, Hayot). And the “o” sound at the end of a name might be spelled ot, eau, au, ault, eault, eau, aux, eaux, aud, or aut.

Following is a partial list of dit names and their equivalents. You can also find extensive lists of dit names in Jette and Tanguay.

Acelin - Asselin	Elie - Breton, Hélie
Agnier - Haguénier	Emery - Coderre
Alarie - Lart	Émond - Edmund
Albert - Beaulieu	Eschambault - Fleury
Allaire - Daillaire	Estiambre - Sansfacon
Amiel - Miel	Etienne - Bourguet, Clérin
Amiot - Lincourt, Villeneuve, Vincelot	Fafard - Boisjoli
Amirault - Mirault	Fauteux - Bonsecours

Ancil -St-Jean

Fleury - Chambeau, Eschambault