

### **Making Best use of Quebec Church Registers**

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*Church Registers in the Province of Quebec*

A Few Thoughts on Researching Your Protestant Roots in the Quebec Civil Church Registers by Marlene Simmons appeared in *Connections* in March 1994 and was an excellent. My experience with the civil and church registers was similar to hers and this essay expands on her theme adding my insights and perspective. Initially the registration of births deaths and marriages in Lower Canada was the responsibility of the church. When government took an interest in these matters they required the clergy to make duplicate copies of their registers and to file these with government authorities.

If I had known when I started looking at church registers that there would often be differences between the church and the judicial (civil copies), I would have kept separate sets of notes for each source. I would now have a complete transcription of each and could compare them. To be completely honest, when I started I didn't fully understand that there were two separate sources of the same material. The ideal situation would be to have access to both sets of microfilm at the same time with two machines running side by side. It would then be possible to compare the two and note the differences as you worked. Dream on!

An interesting example of what can turn up when the two versions are compared is the baptism of Susanna Smith at Christ Church, Rawdon on 4 July 1839. Her date of birth is recorded as 1 July 1831 and her parents were Joseph Smith and Ann Thomas, widow of John Brennan. The key words "illegitimate daughter of" appear only in the judicial copy. Why did the minister refrain from writing "illegitimate daughter of" in his parish copy but put the phrase in the judicial copy? One can only speculate. Susanna's date of birth was given on the 1901 St. Lin Census, where she was living with her husband, Thomas Holtby, as 14 June 1834 but I doubt that it is correct. Her granddaughter confirmed her year of birth as 1831 in a letter to me.

Curiosity set me to do more research. Christ Church, Rawdon and census records show that John Brennan died on 10 March 1830 and was the father of at least two Irish-born children, Richard and Esther, who lived with their mother and step-father in February 1852. Ann Brennan and Joseph Smith on that date had three more children - Joseph 11, Ann 9 and Theophilus 3. The 1831 census, which was dated at Rawdon on 29 September, mentions Joseph Smith and an unnamed wife but no children. Where were the Brennan children and baby Susanna? The explanation is in Up To Rawdon, Part Two in the chapter - *Henry Smith of Annagharvy & other Smiths at Rawdon*.

Sometimes the clergy was completely discreet if not entirely honest. In the case of Agnes Holtby, born April 1849, both copies of the register say "of parents unknown". She was one day old when presented for baptism by sponsors Elizabeth Holtby, about seventeen and William Holtby. I concluded, as have others researching this family, that the sponsors were the mother and grandfather, Elizabeth's sixty-one year old father. The minister's discretion is, 140 years later, a frustration of our ability to verify this long ago family trauma. Elizabeth and Agnes both disappear from Canadian records without a trace after the 1861 Rawdon census. Read: [Up To Rawdon](#), Part One *Solving an Old Mystery: the Story of Elizabeth Holtby*

It seems evident by the script and style of writing used in some church registers that the minister was copying from another source - notes on scraps of paper, old envelopes whatever. In other cases, it is evident that the entries were made long after the event took place. It is no wonder that errors crept in.

One sometimes finds that one or both parents are named incorrectly. Lilian Jane Purcell was baptized at St. John's Church Kildare on 13 October 1897. The judicial copy says daughter of George Purcell and Amy Jane Johnston. Her mother was actually Elizabeth Johnston and Jane was her aunt which was confirmed to me by Lilian's daughter, Ruth Parkinson. I have not had the opportunity to compare this entry to the one in the church register.

Some individuals were baptized with a single Christian name in according to the church registers although they are known to have had another. In several instances I know that both church and civil registers gave the child one name but descendants insist that the person had a second Christian name. Ann Sarah Holtby, born in 1836 was baptized "Ann". One of my great grandfathers was known as James Ernest Parkinson but baptized "James" in 1846. He had a cousin George William, baptized "George" in 1855. Did these individuals choose their own second names in later life or were they merely omitted from the record? There are children from this time period recorded with several Christian names - Sarah Jane Devine Holtby, 1841 and her brother James Devine Cosway Holtby, 1844. In the latter quarter of the century we find most children were given two or more names. An example of excessive naming is William Alexander Norman George Dyce Robinson who was baptized at Christ Church, Rawdon in 1881. His birth had been registered in 1879 at West Garafraxa Township in Wellington County, ON as William Charles and it was by this set of names that he was known; you will notice that "Charles" was not given him at baptism.

Some tips that may prove helpful:

- If you know the approximate year of an event but can't find it in the register, look far and wide and don't trust the chronological order of the document. Some clergy were very frugal and instead of buying a new register thumbed through existing registers and inserted baptisms, burials and marriages wherever they found blank paper. The Rawdon Methodist church register is a particularly blatant example with events from 1880 found as far back as 1868. It made a complete dog's breakfast of the previous minister's work and a jumble for the researcher.
- Index pages were sometimes included at the end of a year and often have errors. If you can't find an event look on the page indicated look before and page after. Sometimes the event never does appear; a fair sign that it may have been inadvertently dropped from the copy you are researching and be in the other one.
- When the missing event is in neither church nor civil registers try another denomination. In the period 1840 - 1870 Rawdon people jumped back and forth between the Anglican and the Methodist churches. This was a time of revivalism and people were torn between tradition and the evangelistic message of the Methodist preachers. In a relatively short time span I found documentation linking an individual in Upper Canada to four different denominations. One wonders what story this might conceal.

If the event still cannot be found up try a neighbouring community. The baptism for one of my father's sisters and the burial of his grandfather, events which took place at Rawdon are recorded in the New Glasgow Methodist register. One suspects that the minister was covering both charges on a temporary basis and took his own register with him instead of using the register of the local church. As well, people travelled great distances even in early days and Rawdon records can be found at Kildare, Berthier and weddings, in particular, often took place in Montreal as many young people went there to work before settling down on farms in the country. Or perhaps the trip to Montreal was wedding and honeymoon.

- Follow any clue no matter how unlikely. I was unable to find baptisms at Rawdon for Thomas, Jane and Elizabeth Holtby who were born after their Church of England parents William and Hannah Holtby settled at Rawdon c.1825. The couple had spent their first winter in Montreal where they had baptized a daughter and buried a son at Christ Church Cathedral. The only Protestant church functioning in Rawdon was Anglican and many births were recorded throughout this period but none for the Holtby family.

However, there was an 1828 entry for a Thomas Holtby in the index of non-Catholic baptisms for Montreal at the Centre d'Archives which piqued my curiosity. The Holtby surname is unusual; I knew of only two other families and they had settled in Upper Canada. So I decided to look and see who they might be. This led me to the register of the Rev. A.H. Gale of the LaPrairie Presbyterian Church. On the 23rd of March 1828, he baptized twenty infants and young children from ten

families of Rawdon and St. Jacques. Most were Scotch-Irish and perhaps Presbyterian in origin. But included was Thomas, son of William and Hannah Holtby. Why did they have Thomas baptized in the Presbyterian Church? The register for Christ Church in Rawdon shows a baptism took place there on March 23, 1828 so they had that option and did not take it up. One can only suppose it was the temporary influence of neighbours and friends as the Holtbys' later children were baptized in the Anglican faith and the parents burials are recorded at Christ Church, Rawdon. It is my belief that Mr. Gale was a circuit rider and passed through Rawdon and baptized the children there - seventeen in Rawdon, three at St. Jacques and one the following day in L'Assomption.

The indexing of this microfilm purports that it covers 1828 - 1875. My hopes leapt at the prospect of finding other missing Rawdon events including the baptisms of the aforesaid Jane and Elizabeth Holtby. But, here is another problem that one encounters. Despite what the index and the label on the box say, great chunks of material were missing. The years included were 1828, 1838-1842, 1844-1849, 1859, 1866-1872. The only registrations for Rawdon were in 1828. The Archives de Montréal confirmed that they had no additional un-microfilmed material from this church so the challenge was to find the original church copies.

Locating old Presbyterian records is not easy. I had excellent advice and assistance from Presbyterian archivists in Montreal and Toronto and from the United Church Archives (then at Lennoxville) but no luck in locating any other records pertaining to the work of that church in the Rawdon area. Several families claimed to be adherents of that denomination on the census and there was at times a church and a cemetery in the community. Other than my chance discovery of Mr. Gale's mission of 1828, and recognizing some of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century burials in the Methodist register as relating to stones in the Presbyterian cemetery, I have had no success.

Although having two sets of registers creates problems for researchers when the data from one disagrees with the other, one is immensely lucky to have an "extra kick at the can". When checking church registers and registrations from other venues and one is frustrated by poor spelling or handwriting, obvious clerical errors and otherwise doubtful evidence one can often only scratch one's head and wonder what was intended. In Quebec one can at least say "I wonder how this looks in the other set of registers?"