

CANADIAN GENEALOGY ONLINE

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Canadians and Americans truly are, as the Peace Arch on the boundary says, “children of a common mother.” But while there are many similarities in the way the countries developed, there are differences as well – and those differences have had an impact on the sources that are used for genealogical research.

First, a bit of history. European settlement of Canada started 400 years ago, with colonies set up by France. Progress was slow, however, because most of the people seeking a new life in North America chose to live farther south, where the climate was milder. In the late 1700s, England took control of Canada, although the French language and culture has remained in some areas, and is dominant in Quebec.

The American Revolution was one of the most important factors in the evolution of Canada. Thousands of people loyal to the British Crown headed north, and the flood of new arrivals changed the face of British North America. The sharp increase in population meant that Nova Scotia and New Brunswick were split into two, and Ontario and Quebec were also separated.

It took several decades, however, before Canada had enough people to be its own country, as opposed to a group of colonies. The country came into being on July 1, 1867, Confederation Day, and at the time consisted of the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Manitoba joined in 1870, British Columbia in 1871, and Prince Edward Island in 1873. Two new provinces, Alberta and Saskatchewan, were created in 1905 from a vast area known as the Northwest Territories. In 1949, Newfoundland (now Newfoundland and Labrador) joined.

In general terms, the earliest non-Indigenous settlement in Canada was in the east. On the west coast, settlement started in the 1850s as a result of a gold rush. The three prairie provinces were settled after that – starting in a large way in the 1870s. As in the United States, there are typical migration patterns, which can help guide research.

Today, Canada has a population of about 37 million people. It is divided into 10 provinces and two territories. Ontario is the most populous province, with about 11 million people; the territory of Nunavut is the smallest jurisdiction, with about 25,000 people.

Researchers might see references to regions, including Central Canada (southern Ontario and southern Quebec); the Maritimes (Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island); Atlantic Canada (the Maritimes plus Newfoundland and Labrador); the Prairie Provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba); Western Canada (the three Prairie Provinces plus British Columbia); and the North (the three territories).

Some family history sources are found at the national level and others are at the provincial level. (Some provinces have counties, but they do not carry the same genealogical importance that you will find with American counties.)

Civil registration (or vital statistics, if you prefer) are handled on a province-by-province basis. Rules pertaining to access vary, with some provinces posting databases online, and others keeping the door shut. Canada does not have a national death index, such as the Social Security Death Index. The closest reference you will find will be Find-a-Grave.

When researching your Canadian connections online, the obvious sites are Library and Archives Canada, Ancestry and FamilySearch. The most valuable resources could be the census, which is available to 1921 (or 1926 in three provinces) and the First World War personnel files. Immigration records are available from 1865 to 1935, with limitations.

But as with research anywhere, it is wise to look beyond those sites to learn what else can be discovered. The best entry point for Canadian research is CanGenealogy.com. (I have a bias here, since I run the site.) CanGenealogy is a free link site that puts sites into order of priority.

The goal of CanGenealogy has been to provide links to key sites, sorted in the most useful order so you can quickly get to the most important resources. Start by searching under province or topic.

Provincial archive sites should always be consulted when doing Canadian research.

Several major resources cover the entire country. Others are devoted to individual provinces or regions. Here are some examples of ones that might help you:

[Library and Archives Canada](#)

The free site is one of the most important repositories of documents pertaining to Canadian research. LAC is the source of many of the images that are featured on Ancestry and FamilySearch, but has a lot of other material. Many of LAC's indexes are based on Ancestry's, but have been updated and corrected. Major collections include:

- Census returns 1825-1921
- Immigration records 1832-1949
- Military records, including First World War personnel files
- Patents
- Land grants and petitions
- First Nations (Indigenous) records
- Early church records

[FamilySearch](#)

More information is available every month, with many of the databases linked to images. It includes two dozen databases, with much more to come. Indexes prepared by volunteers are generally more accurate than the ones found on Ancestry. The massive family tree here can be a great source of clues for further research. As it expands, this site could become the single most important one for Canadian researchers.

[Ancestry](#)

Ancestry's Canadian site is indispensable for serious researchers. Many of its images are found on other sites, but Ancestry's indexing makes them more accessible here. It also offers family trees and DNA testing. Major collections include:

- Census returns
- Immigration records
- Military records, including partial First World War personnel files
- Vital statistics records from different provinces

[Newspapers.com](#) and [NewspaperArchive.com](#)

Newspapers.com has publications from most of the large communities in western Canada, as well as Ottawa and Montreal. Newspaperarchive.com has others, including the Winnipeg Free Press. There are also sites for individual newspapers, and for clusters of newspapers, and most of these sites are free. Links are on the CanGenealogy newspaper pages.

[Canadiana.ca](#)

The Canadiana.ca website is a major non-profit resource filled with historical and genealogical information, usually not found on the established genealogy sites. It is not used as much as it could be, because it tends to be hard to navigate and harder to find material of value.

Canadiana identifies, catalogues, and digitizes documentary heritage – books, newspapers, periodicals, images and nationally-significant archival materials – in specialized searchable databases. The two main collections, Canadiana Online and Héritage, both contain genealogical information.

Some of the resources on this site:

- Upper Canada (Ontario) Land Books
- Early census records for Upper Canada (Ontario)
- British Home Children juvenile inspection reports
- War of 1812 pension files as well as claims for losses incurred during the fighting
- Perth (Ontario) Military Settlement (post War of 1812)
- Militia registers of officers for both Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec), as well as nominal rolls and paylists
- Kingston (Ontario) Penitentiary records (for your relatives, surely not mine)
- Immigration Branch files, taken from almost 600 reels of microfilm
- Parish registers from the old Public Archives of Canada collection
- Newfoundland and Labrador church records
- Parish records from Manitoba, mainly in relation to Métis claims
- South African (Boer) War land grant applications
- Western land grants (mainly for Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta)
- Chinese immigration registers

[Peel's Prairie Provinces](#)

A massive effort to make available a vast amount of published material from the three prairie provinces up to 1953. The site is fully searchable – you can enter the names of people or places, or anything else you choose. It will lead directly to scanned documents. The vast majority of resources here will not be found on any other site.

[B.C. Archives](#) (and other provincial archives sites)

With births, marriages and deaths, as well as images and textual documents. People from throughout Canada moved to British Columbia, so it is a good place to look for strays. Several other provinces, including Saskatchewan, Manitoba and New Brunswick, also have civil registration databases.

[Ontario Cemetery Finding Aid](#)

A database of more than two million deaths, most of them in Ontario. References lead to published cemetery extractions. They might help you to determine the county where you will find your family. A similar cemetery site is available through the Ontario Genealogical Society. Also, there is a cemetery finding aid in British Columbia.

[Canadian County Atlas Digital Project](#)

Based on county atlases published in the late 1800s. Digitized and indexed – great for finding people who owned land in rural areas in the years covered.

[Island Register](#)

Not many people came from Prince Edward Island – for that matter, not many people live there today. But for the few with roots in the smallest province, this site could be a goldmine.

Directories (Many sites, check [CanGenealogy.com](#))

City directories are an important source of information on families. They fill in gaps between census years, confirm addresses and occupations, family relationships and much more. Many are available. Most directories for Montreal have been digitized and placed online. There are others as well – on the Library and Archives Canada website, the Toronto Public Library's website, and many other sites. Again: Check CanGenealogy.)

[The Drouin Collection](#) (on Ancestry)

This represents one of the largest and most valuable resources for Quebec research. The collection ranges from the beginning of European settlement to the 1940s. It includes nearly 15 million records, with virtually all church records of Quebec.

[Programme de recherche en démographie historique](#)

The PRDH (Research Program in Historical Demography) is a gathering of data from the French parish registers of old Quebec. PRDH's database contains the personal history of the Quebec ancestors of all French-Canadians to 1799.

[Canadian Geographical Names](#)

Accurate genealogical research is impossible without an understanding of the area. Use this site to find locations – note that you can search it using current names or former names. (Yes, many place names have changed over the years!)