

Short Sketch of the Archives of Three Rivers¹

By RAYMOND DOUVILLE

*President of the Three Rivers
Regional Historical Society*

IF WE limit the field of our investigations to the period from 1634—the year of Three Rivers' founding,—until 1700, the archives preserved in the Court House of Three Rivers may be classified under three heads:—

1. Records of Civil Status
2. Court Records
3. Notarial Records

A. Records of Civil Status

Copies of certificates of baptisms, marriages and interments prepared by missionaries and parish priests have been turned over to the office of civil status. The originals are preserved in the parishes concerned. In the Three Rivers court house are preserved copies of Catholicity or of civil status originating before 1700 at Three Rivers, Cap de la Madeleine, Champlain, Batiscan and Sainte-Anne de la Pérade.

These records are very incomplete, not only in the archives of the parishes, but also in the office in Three Rivers. The record of baptisms, marriages and interments for the city of Three Rivers begins in 1634. The original is preserved in the palace of the Bishop of Three Rivers and is considered one of the oldest records of the beginnings of the colony [*of New France*]; some persons, indeed, declare it to be the oldest. Records of civil status for Three Rivers seems to be complete from the year 1654. Before that date some records were certainly kept, but they have been destroyed or lost. Thus Monsieur Henri Désilets, former director of the Law Library of Three Rivers, and the Reverend Archange Godbout, O.F.M., have been able to recover records of more than twenty-five marriages of Trifluviens before 1654, whose names do not appear in the registers. Yet one is convinced that these marriages could have taken place only in Three Rivers.

¹ Translated by Grace Lee Nute, Minnesota Historical Society.

The principal registers of Cap de La Madeleine have been lost. There has been found in Quebec a series of certificates of baptisms, marriages, and interments that occurred in Cap de la Madeleine for the period from 1673 to 1680. A copy of these entries has been filed in the registration office at Three Rivers. The first entries at Cap de la Madeleine seem to have been inscribed in 1660.

Records of civil status at Champlain began at least in 1669, and perhaps in 1665, the year of the founding of the parish. A certificate has been found for 1669. But the records now in existence begin in 1679. Batiscan and Sainte-Anne de la Pérade begin with the year 1681. Before that year the rites were performed by itinerant missionaries. Thus it is impossible to verify exactly the dates of certain interments of settlers and of children between 1666 and 1681.

Records of civil status of the parishes mentioned above have suffered somewhat and some are hard to handle and difficult to decipher. The program planned for the preservation of our archives, and of which more will be said a little later, has concerned itself up until now particularly with the archives of notaries. But it will be necessary that the same work be undertaken for the registers of civil status. Meantime these records have been placed in metal boxes and arranged chronologically. Special attention has been given to the oldest documents to prevent complete deterioration. Let us mention another forward step in this field: for some months the archivist, Monsieur Henri Cinq-Mars, N.P., has been classifying by index cards the certificates of baptisms, marriages, and interments in such a way as to facilitate research and prevent needless handling. This precaution will prolong the life of certain manuscripts now on the way to disintegration.

B. Court Records

The oldest record of court hearings, which is also probably the first, dates from 1653. It contains the decisions handed down by Pierre Boucher, then major-general, for civil and criminal cases, as well as copies of ordinances of Governor de Lauzon relating to the government of Three Rivers. This record is in the handwriting of the notary, Sévérin Aneau, who filled the position of recorder. In passing, mention should be made that it is high time that a specialist in the field transcribe these precious documents while it is still possible to read them. To read some of them will be possible only with chemical aids.

Other collections of ordinances and decisions cover certain periods: 1658-1659; March, 1665 to February, 1667. Complete years are lacking and have not been recovered. On the other hand, the Museum of Quebec has a collection of judicial pieces relating to Three Rivers and

entitled "Prévôté des Trois-Rivières." This collection consists of three groups covering the following periods: June 19, 1655 to May, 1657; August, 1660 to February, 1665; and 1668.

The records of criminal and civil hearings preserved in the court archives are not complete therefore. Certain gaps have been filled by notary records. Thus the records of Notary La Tousche include hearings relating to the famous cases of spirituous liquor trade at Cap de la Madeleine in 1666. Another group includes the depositions of the witnesses and the accused, as well as the text of the decision handed down in this case. These documents are very precious for the study of the habits of thought and customs of that period, particularly the relations between fur traders and Indians. Included in certain depositions of witnesses is a narrative of animated scenes in orgies to which the Indians gave themselves, and of native drunkenness in the boroughs of Cap de la Madeleine and Three Rivers.

Similarly, in the notary records one can find copies of the decisions rendered by manorial judges in the seigniories of Champlain, Batiscan, and Ste. Anne de la Pérade. In some instances these are the only documents in existence proving that these seigniories had seignior judges in the first years of their founding.

It is fortunate because of the slight interest shown in these precious documents until recent years that the greater part of them have not suffered too heavily from the ravages of time. Except for the hearings of Pierre Boucher for 1653, which have become practically illegible for all practical purposes, the other groups can be read relatively easily. The Regional Historical Society of Three Rivers, in conjunction with the archivist, Notary Cinq-Mars, and the protho-notary of the Superior Court, Master Adélar Provencher, has worked out a program for the preservation of these precious documents. The objective in mind is the faithful transcription of these manuscripts in several copies, which can be consulted by researchers in place of the originals. The originals as well as a copy can then be deposited in a safe place.

The records of registrations seem to be the documents of this period that have been best preserved, probably because they have been less frequently consulted than the others. These records contain the registrations of numerous marriage contracts, bequests, wills, and so forth. They have the advantage of preserving for us some contracts lost or strayed from the notary records. Thus we have found in a registration entry that the marriage contract of Nicolas Gastineau, Sieur Duplessis, with Marie Crevier was made at Cap de la Madeleine on April 1, 1663, by Notary Laurent du Portail. Yet the records of this notary after 1662 have not been found in his archives and everything indicates

that they have been lost. Similarly we have found that the marriage of the pioneer of Batiscan, Pierre Trottier, with Suzanne Migaud, was notarized by this same notary on January 18, 1663. As it was supposed that Notary Laurent du Portail had stopped performing his notarial functions in 1662, these documents prove that he was still practising his profession in 1663.

There, we believe, lies the chief value of these records of registration. So it is fortunate that they have been preserved in such good shape. Let us add that they sometimes afford the advantage of offering a legible transcription of certain notarial transactions, which are difficult to read in the original, either because the notary had a rather fantastic handwriting, or because they have suffered from the ravages of time.

C. Notarial Records

All historians recognize the great historical contribution afforded by research in the notaries' documents of early times in Three Rivers, now preserved in the archives of that city. Indeed, one finds there records of transactions of tremendous value, some relating to the great explorers, others to coureurs des bois, still others to missionaries, and some to the principal governors of the colony.

Before 1650, notarizations for Trifluviens were performed by the notaries of Quebec. There are preserved here a few scattered acts of these notaries, sometimes the originals, sometimes in collated copies. But the chief records of general interest are those of the notaries Sévérin Ameau, Jacques de la Tousche, Jean Cusson, François Trotaïn, Guillaume de la Rue, Daniel Normandin, and Michel Roy. All of these notaries performed their functions in Three Rivers or in that region before 1700, and their transactions are of first importance for the history of Three Rivers. Some records of other notaries have likewise been preserved, such as those of Laurent du Portail, Claude Herlin, Nicolas Gastineau, Boujonnier, and Adhémar.

It is to the records of the notaries that those interested in the preservation of Trifluvian archives have given most attention. About 1925 the archivist of that time, J. B. Meilleur-Barthe, began a summary classification of the lists and of the transactions of these notaries. He even published a brochure containing the texts of the first acts of Notary Trotaïn.

M. Henri Désilets, for many years, has devoted himself to the task of deciphering and putting in order the archives of Notary Sévérin Ameau. M. Désilets has succeeded in saving from destruction several important documents. He has published a complete list of the known acts of this notary, and has likewise made an intelligent and methodical classification.

After M. Désilets, M. Henri Cinq-Mars concerned himself with classifying the acts of other notaries, one by one, with indexing them, and with helping researchers use them. He put them in metal boxes away from dust and light. At present all the records of three of the most important notaries are classified in this way: Ameau, Cusson, and La Tousche. On the upper lefthand corner of the folder or envelope is marked a number, the date of the act, its nature, the name of the parties, and a short résumé of the contents, especially if they concern grant of concession, sale, exchange, bequest, or so forth. The numbers correspond to the chronological order of the acts. They permit the establishment of a means of control for preventing the loss of items, and also suggest the keeping of a register in which might appear the signature of the researcher, the date of his visit to the office, and the kind of documents that he consulted.

* * *

The many documents that have been lost, either by lack of methodical interest or by the injuries of time, or, again, because they were taken elsewhere after the cession of 1763, ought to incite us to preserve carefully the little that remains and that can still render valuable service to historians. The history of many great explorers and coureurs des bois, such as Radisson, Jolliet, Nicolas Perrot, Pepin, etc., cannot be complete if the Three Rivers archives of notaries and our records of civil status are not consulted. Our documents are equally valuable in other fields. Thus the Reverend Archange Godbout, O.F.M., by consulting them, has been enabled to make a nearly complete list of Trifluvian settlers from 1634 to 1650. An American historian, Grace Lee Nute, has drawn largely on our archives for recovering, year by year, the facts in the lives of Radisson and des Groseilliers. The author of this article, thanks to the records of the notary Michel Roy, has been able to recover the names of all the first settlers of Sainte-Anne de la Pérade before the census of 1681, and to fix certainly the establishment of this seigniory as of February, 1667. Likewise the archives of the notary, Jacques de la Tousche, have furnished us with the text of the concession contracts of probably all the first settlers of Batiscan in 1666.

The local historical society at Three Rivers, whose task is to watch over the preservation of our archives hopes to achieve the complete and methodical classification of all our documents preserved in the archives of the Court House of Three Rivers. The present archivist is accomplishing an admirable work. But he will have to have assistance to bring to a successful conclusion the outlined program. Yet it is consoling to state that during the past five or six years especially we

have the assurance that what remains of our precious archives is the object of an attentive case.

We believe it will be useful to mention in closing that the Seminary of Three Rivers has just furnished a large fireproof room for the preservation of local archives. This Seminary already has these important historical collections: Hart, Montarville Boucher de la Bruère, Fabien Vanasse, and Dusablon. The Regional Historical Society tries to collect among the private families of the region family documents, various contracts, old photographs, to be placed in the archives room of the Seminary. This room is furnished with tables and desks for the use of research workers.