

Étienne Bontron dit Major, from Montussaint
The first *Doubien*¹ who established roots in Canada
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Originally published in *Mémoires de la Société généalogique canadienne-française*, volume 57, numéro 3, automne 2006, pp. 195-208, republished in this English translation with permission of the author and of Hélène Lamarche, Editor of *Mémoires*.

1706 - 2006: Commemoration of the 300th Anniversary of a Marriage

This research project began with just a little information, according to which a man named **Étienne Bontron dit Major**, son of Claude Boutron and of Blaise Saindo, originally from Montursin (canton of Saint-Hippolyte in the modern *département* of Doubs and the region of Franche-Comté) married **Angélique Proteau** on 3 May 1706 at Québec City.³ We had no idea then of the difficulty we were facing in taking on this subject; the geographic localization was inexact because, in reality, the place [of origin] was Montussaint (Canton of Rougemont in Doubs) and the family name of the immigrant, as well as that



Église de Montussaint reconstruite en 1684 puis rebâtie en 1779. Récemment rénovée.

Church of Montussaint reconstructed in 1684, then rebuilt in 1779. Recently renovated. Photo courtesy of Nathalie Guillaume. Reprinted here with her permission.

¹ Inhabitant of Doubs, according to its current borders. The *départements* were created a little after the beginning of the French Revolution of 1789, with a few later modifications. [Translator's note: My additions to Palvadeau's text appear within brackets. *Doubs* is pronounced /doo/. Étienne and Angélique are my ancestors. Étienne signed his last name BONTRON, both at Fort Pontchartrain and in the mother colony.]

² *Bibliothécaire* [librarian] for children, Médiathèque départementale du Doubs.

³ Normand Robert, *Nos origines en France, des débuts à 1825*, Montréal, Société de recherche historique Archiv-Histo, [13 vols. 1984-1998]: *Alsace, Bourgogne, Champagne, Franche-Comté et Lorraine*, vol. 9, 1993.

of his mother, had been distorted. As for the condition of the conservation of parish records, those of the commune of Montussaint did not begin until 1715 and, at first, with marriages that did not name parents. On top of everything else, research in other types of documents was complicated by the fact that Montussaint was under the jurisdiction of *la prévôté de Montbozon*, especially for the registration of notarial acts, and that Montbozon is, furthermore, in Haute-Saône while Montussaint is in Doubs. This research, therefore, did not begin under the best auspices. As for the name **Bontron**, in order to standardize it, we will use the name without the final /d/ or /t/, both of which endings can be found in the documents of Franche-Comté. (The most ancient documents do not use these final letters.)

Historical Overview

Richelieu had the ambition of reattaching Franche-Comté, at that time under Spanish rule, to France. Thus the province emerged from that terrible war, the Thirty-Years War (1617-1648). Battles, plague, and famine having ravaged the area, certain villages, it is not surprising to learn, had lost two thirds of their population.⁴ Nevertheless, the province would not become French (be transferred to France) until 1678. With the war ended, the seigneurs called for help from outside the province to clear and replant the land. Thus it is that Swiss, Savoyards, Lorrains, Auvergnats... [people from these provinces; author's use of ellipsis (...)] came to establish themselves in Franche-Comté. It would take almost a century for the county to return to its earlier condition. These were certainly not the first exchanges of population between Franche-Comté and Savoie because one out of six inhabitants of Franche-Comté, by 1600, already bore a family name that was common in Savoie. The poverty of Savoie at that time was proverbial; it was said to be: "isolated in its mountains, overpopulated in its valleys, without lucrative industries or commerce, buried under fiscal charges" [taxation].⁵ For these reasons, expatriation was seen as a possible solution; and it is understandable that a man named Claude Bontron weighed in the balance the difficult choice of leaving his roots. In our present state of knowledge, the cradle of the Bontrons may have been near Lac du Bourget.

The first documents we must cite are the censuses of Franche-Comté for the years 1654 and 1657, which had been commissioned for the imposition of the Salt Tax.⁶ We have never had the need to see the original documents because we usually consult the transcriptions that were made.⁷ What do these documents teach us about Montussaint? In 1654, there were only six households [*ménages*] (versus sixteen in 1614) of which the heads of families were the following: Baptiste Perrenel, Pierre Gennin, Anthoine Bardel, a man named Nicolas from the village of Montbozon, Jean Perreal from the village of Lomont, and Abraham Sandot from Switzerland, an inhabitant there for nine years already [by 1654], thus arrived in 1645, at a time when the village must have been practically deserted. In the census of 1657, taken by Abraham Sandot [*sic*], the family names are not cited, although we know that the six households of 1654 were then ten (including the parish priest) and that this figure represented forty-nine persons.

The Father: Claude Bontron

Our most important and oldest evidence⁸ of the couple Claude Bontron and Blaise Sandoz dates from 26 February 1676. It is a payment of rent [*acquiescement d'une rente*] to the seigneur d'Ollans, a village near

⁴ See Gérard Louis, "La Guerre de Dix ans: 1634-1644," *Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon*, 1998.

⁵ See "L'Immigration savoyarde en Franche-Comté avant 1789," *Mémoires de la Société d'émulation du Doubs*, 1959, nouvelle série.

⁶ ADD: C269 à C271. We employ the abbreviation ADD for Archives départementales du Doubs and ADHS for Archives départementales de la Haute-Saône.

⁷ See "La Population de la Franche-Comté au lendemain de la guerre de Dix ans: recensements nominatifs de 1654, 1657, 1666," under the direction of François Lassus, *Annales littéraires de l'Université de Besançon*, 1995.

⁸ ADD: 7E2674 série titres de familles.

Montussaint. The two names of this couple are written very legibly in the margin. In the same year, precisely on 17 November 1676, the commune of Montussaint drew up the charter of rights [*le règlement des droits*] of the parish church.⁹ The parish was made up of the villages of Montussaint, Rognon, and Tallans. Names of the inhabitants of Montussaint are mentioned, probably those of the heads of families: Abraham Sandoz, the younger (undoubtedly a son of the first Sandoz and the brother of Blaise); Jacques Bernard, Claude Henryot, Claude Bontron, Pierre Paris, Pierre Périard, Nicolas Périard, Antoine Orsat, Étienne Bretenière, Pierre Genin, Bastian Sandoz, Vincent Choquey, and Beatrix Rondot. A very good list of thirteen names. We had the unexpected luck to find that the clerk [*rédacteur*] did not notice, at first, that he had inscribed the name of Claude Henryot twice, backtracked, crossed out one duplicate, and entered the correct name, that of Claude Bontron. On 14 July 1686, the said Claude Bontron, called illiterate but perhaps intimidated, was at the château d'Ollans, accompanied by Jean Bernardin d'Avelley. The two of them bought a field in the prairie of Montussaint from Jacques Antoine de Belot, seigneur d'Ollans, de Villette, Larians, and Battenans.¹⁰

The Mother: Blaise Sandoz

Jacques Antoine de Belot, the famous seigneur, sold, on 18 May 1689, a piece of land to Blaise Sandoz, who is said to be the widow of Claude Bontron.¹¹ Even earlier, on a document dated without any doubt in June 1688,¹² is a reference to “the widow and heirs of Claude Bontron.” Claude Bontron was thus deceased within a period of time between 14 July 1686 and June 1688, and Étienne, the future immigrant, while still very young, was already orphaned by his father’s death. Then, we find [further reference to] Blaise from time to time. On 12 February 1696, she sold, with Abraham Sandoz (probably her brother Abraham, said to be the younger) a woods belonging to them at Montagney.¹³ She made other transactions in 1699¹⁴ and in the following years. On 14 February 1708, there is mentioned a property [belonging to] Blaise Sandoz.¹⁵ Thus it seems she was still alive; if she had not been alive, the term “heirs of Blaise Sandoz” or the name of the new owner would have been used. Yet her death surely occurred close to this year of 1708. We have no evidence of a remarriage.

The Children

To identify [*évoquer*] the children we can begin with a very informative document of 3 February 1699. It is a distribution [*partage*] of 1000 *livres* among three brothers, named Antoine, Étienne, and Jacques Bontron of Montussaint.¹⁶ At first, but we are not now as certain, we believed that the order of the names of the Bontron brothers was not just alphabetic but also from eldest to youngest. It is difficult to determine the value of 1000 *livres* in today’s money, but, compared to the pitiful salary of a peasant of that time, it was probably a considerable amount of money. We do not know any more about the source of this distribution of the estate because we have only a summary of the [original] act. The notary Cornet of Montbozon established his practice [*son étude*] in 1698, but only the acts for 1708, 1709, and 1712 have been preserved. We surveyed them without any results.

⁹ ADD: G671 clergé séculier.

¹⁰ ADD: 3E32/132 notaire Thomas de Cendrey.

¹¹ ADD: 3E32/133 notaire Thomas de Cendrey.

¹² ADD: 3E32/132 notaire Thomas de Cendrey, document 31.

¹³ ADD: EAC 2970 CCS archives communales de Rougemont.

¹⁴ ADHS: 2C1687 notaire Cornet de Montbozon.

¹⁵ ADD: 3E32/137 notaire Thomas de Cendrey.

¹⁶ ADHS: 2C1687 notaire Cornet de Montbozon.

Antoine

The existence of Antoine is no surprise because we had already found traces of him: he witnessed a marriage at Gouhelans on 26 October 1688. On 23 March 1699, there is a loan of 200 *livres* to his profit, and, on 12 October 1701, is yet another act concerning him.¹⁷ According to parish registers, he died 10 November 1733. All of this is not very much.

Étienne

For Étienne, traces in the notarial records also exist. We have found him at the notary Cornet with his brother Jacques on 3 February and 12 July 1699, mentioned on sale contracts, or, alone, on 17 May 1700,¹⁸ as well as at another notary, on 17 January 1700, selling a field and signing the act.¹⁹ At this time, the last trace [we have found] of Étienne Bontron in France consists of an act passed 5 June 1700.²⁰ It is a type of transaction with Antoine Sandoz for a sum of 90 *livres* that seems to be nothing else than a modest liquidation [of accounts] before Étienne's departure for the other side of the Atlantic.

The diverse transactions cited involve, essentially, sums of money of 50, 100, at times 200 *livres*. They may place in perspective the amount of 1000 *livres* that the three brothers shared because they never involve, after all, but a little more than 300 *livres* for each.

Jacques

Let us now examine the evidence for Jacques. There are the sale contracts, those already cited and a few others; but, for him, there is an even-more-interesting one. A marriage contract was passed 21 November 1696 between the Bontron and Bretenière families to prepare for the marriage of Jacques Bontron, son of deceased Claude Bontron and of Blaise Sandoz, of one part, and Anne-Françoise Bretenière, daughter of Anatoille Bretenière and of Claudine Perriard, of the other part.²¹ All of these good people are said to be from Montussaint. Jacques was undoubtedly born around 1674 or earlier. Blaise Sandoz agrees, notably, to feed and lodge the couple if she and they combine their labor and revenues. In case they wish to keep their autonomy, she nevertheless proposes to leave them one-third of her old house. Evidently, Jacques would continue to live under his mother's roof. Antoine and Étienne Bontron signed the document, as did Blaise Sandoz, but with much more difficulty. At the beginning of the agreement, reference is made to the paternal property [*biens*] that Jacques inherited (five hundred *francs* old money of this country) and mention of the maternal property [*biens*] that was, it is said, to be shared among the three brothers. Could this refer to the notarial act of 3 February 1699? Hereafter, evidently, we pass through a blanket of thick fog because the parish registers, as has been said, do not begin until 1715. Luckily, we noticed that the years 1715 and 1716 had been omitted from the microfilming. Thus, it is on the paper version that we discovered, at the date of 1 May 1716, the birth of Jacques Bontron, last child of Jacques Bontron and of Anne-Françoise Bretenière. The mother would die in May of 1730. Antoine Bontron was present at the burial. We searched in vain for the death of the father before guessing that he had died in 1717, the missing year in the register.

¹⁷ ADHS: 2C1687 and 2C1688 notaire Cornet de Montbozon.

¹⁸ ADHS: 2C1687 notaire Cornet de Montbozon.

¹⁹ ADD: 3E32/134 notaire Thomas de Cendrey.

²⁰ ADHS: 2C1687 notaire Marand de Bouhans.

²¹ ADD: 3E32/134 notaire Thomas de Cendrey.

Antoinette

After having located three brothers, must one believe there were no sisters? Women certainly leave fewer traces than men in the archives; and, because their descendants do not carry even their family name, one must also guess at the names of their mothers. On 7 June 1695, there is mention of a man named Claude Roy, son [*fils*], certainly an adult; of Gerard Roy; as well as of his wife, Antoinette Bontron, from Montussaint.²² It is very tempting and realistic to unite Antoinette with the three Bontron brothers. She could have been born between Antoine and Étienne. Étienne was born, according to death records in Canada, in 1672 (but probably about 1677 according to other documents). As for the birth year of Antoine, we will return to it.

The Grandchildren

With the next generation, we arrive in dangerous territory [*terrain miné*, mined territory] because we do not know how to attach the grandchildren to their respective parents. Additional research will be required, although it will not necessarily produce results.

In May of 1720, Catherine Bontron married Jean-Claude Balos. Their marriage act, like all of the others, is silent about the names of the parents. Catherine reproduced like a veritable machine. Searching for her last children, I noted a long list [*ribambelle*] of them, in 1729, 1730, 1731, 1732, 1733! According to her marriage act (she would have been born about 1700), she could be a daughter of Jacques Bontron. In 1725, there is a Catherine Bontron, godmother of a child of our Catherine Bontron. In 1729 appears a Pierre Bontron from Montussaint as godfather of one of her children. The same year, in an act otherwise unconnected to the Bontrons, we meet a Jeanne-Marguerite Bontron also said to be from Montussaint (previously noticed as a godmother in 1725 with the first name of Marguerite) simultaneously with a Jacques Bontron and a Catherine Poissenot. We will speak later about this last person.

On 13 March 1742, we have the death of François Bontron at about forty years old, thus born around 1702. We have seen him nowhere else before, not for a marriage nor for the births of children. At his burial, a Jacques Bontron is a witness.

A little earlier, in 1738, Jacques Bontron, son of Jacques Bontron and of Anne-Françoise Bretenière, married Françoise Chappuis at Cognières (Haute-Saône) and gave life to seven children who were born at Montussaint (except perhaps the eldest):

- Pierre, born about 1740 (according to his marriage in 1765 at Besançon)
- Antoine, 1741-1806
- Claude-Antoine, born 1742
- Jeanne-Antoine, 1744-1769
- Catherine, born 1747
- Antoine, born 1749
- Germaine, 1751-1838

These, then, must be great-grandchildren. In the second half of the eighteenth century, one can find the whole family established at Besançon. Jacques holds the profession of carriage driver [*voiturier*]. His children abandoned farming for work in the city: Pierre became a shoemaker; Antoine, a carriage driver, like his father. Françoise Chappuis died in 1768 and Jacques died, without any doubt, 22 November 1776. He is then said to be widower of Françoise Simonin.

²² ADD: 3E32/133 notaire Thomas de Cendrey.

They had been preceded to Besançon by an Antoine Bontron, who married 15 October 1742 with Élisabeth Magdeleine Rosel, thirty-four years old, and he remarried 10 September 1748 to Anne Gauthier. He died 24 March 1768. Of his two unions, there do not appear to have been any children. Antoine would have been born at Montussaint about 1704.

As will be seen, the departure [of the family] from Montussaint was definitive.

An Unusual Document [*hors du commun*]

It must, nevertheless, be proven that Antoine Bontron, the son of Claude Bontron, actually married! There must have been some opportunities to do so, but a chance to marry was determined by the place [*rendez-vous*] where one could meet a future spouse. In the village of Lizine in Doubs, a strange *curé* [parish priest], Claude-Antoine Monnier, achieved notoriety. The villagers complained about him. He was involved in an illicit relationship with a young girl from Lizine; he drank and ate at the cabaret; and he was accused of other transgressions. With a good defense, he escaped fairly well: forty days of penance at the seminary and dismissal to another parish far from the first.²³ This next parish was Montussaint. He was *curé* of this parish from July 1716 to the end of 1727. But, in 1728, a new problem with the *curé* arose.²⁴ A complaint was filed. He was accused of having made pregnant poor Barbe Sandoz, a young woman in the village of Montussaint, twenty-three years old. He had hoped to silence the affair by giving her a *louis d'or* [a gold coin]. The inquiry revealed his odious behavior, unseemly for a man of the Church. It was also learned that Barbe Sandoz had not been his first victim. He had already impregnated his domestic servant, a woman named Garnier, then Barb Genin, and next her first cousin, Jeanne-Baptiste Genin. The investigation was pursued very seriously in all of the homes of Montussaint. In this way came to pass the interrogation of Antoine Bontron, laborer, sixty-three years old, and of his wife, Catherine Poissenot, fifty-six years old. Antoine Bontron, who signed his name very well: *A. Bontron*, could have been born in 1665, although we cannot tell whether he was the first child in the family. There may very well have been a daughter born earlier or a son who died young. At any rate, Claude Bontron married, at the latest, in 1664 and seems to have arrived in Montussaint, at the latest, in 1663.

A document dated 1660 cites several inhabitants of Montussaint: Jean Paris, Jean-Baptiste Perriard, Pierre Gaudey, Claude Grisot, and, also, Étienne Orsat, Jean-Baptiste Nachim, this latter from Savoie.²⁵ There were no Bontrons listed. It is also true that no Sandoz were cited although they were most certainly in the village. We can note that Pierre Gaudey, the husband of Beatrix Rondot, was also a notary at Montussaint and that his acts, surely of extreme importance for our research, have disappeared forever. This is true also for another notary, Jacques Gaudey, perhaps his successor.

Blaise, Was She Born in France?

From the above, we can deduce that there is very little probability that Blaise Sandoz was born in France. Her father arrived in 1645; he would have had to marry immediately for Blaise to be the eldest, born almost at once [after the marriage]. If this is true, she would have been only eighteen at the time of her marriage, without doubt a common occurrence in Canada but not very usual in France. When she was a godmother for an act at Mondon in 1655, she would have been only nine years old, which is also very rare. She would have been, at the most, thirty years old at the birth of her son Étienne Bontron, the immigrant. Yet she had ten years left before the death of her husband, during which years she could, logically, have had more children. But we have not found any. I might as well say it: I do not believe that Claude Bontron, who died about 1687, was a very young man at his marriage, and I do not believe at

²³ ADD: G802 clergé séculier.

²⁴ ADD: G806 clergé séculier.

²⁵ ADD: G2310 clergé séculier.

all that Blaise Sandoz was born in France. If we suppose that Blaise had her last child at the age of forty in 1677, she would have been twenty-seven at her marriage in 1664, eighteen when she served as godmother in 1655, and eight in 1645 when she arrived in Montussaint. She would have been in her fifties when her husband died, a little old to hope to remarry, and about seventy at her death.

A Breakthrough in Research [*La recherche rebondit*]

Having learned the name of Antoine Bontron's wife, we could not stop there. We then discovered Catherine Poissenot's will [*testament*], opened on 23 January 1747, shortly after her death.²⁶ Catherine was at that time an inhabitant of Baume, and she had written this *testament* ten years earlier, before Maître Isabey, notary of that commune. And wonder of wonders! [*Et la stupeur!*] She willed her property: sums of money, a field [*un pré*], her clothing... [author's use of ...] to her niece, to her nephew, to her sister Luce Poissenot of Montussaint... Nothing to her children. Because she would not have been permitted to disinherit her own children, only one conclusion remains: in 1737, she had no living children born of Antoine Bontron. Searching even deeper, we found a donation between living persons (personal and real property) [*donation entre vifs (bien meubles et immeubles)*] concerning Antoine Bontron and Catherine Poissenot with the date 26 February 1717.²⁷ This is a precious document for several reasons. For one, Antoine is said to be in charge of land at Tallans [*fermier à Tallans*] and residing there, which confirms a similar reference on 7 April 1706.²⁸ For another reason, the date of their marriage contract is given: 2 November 1692. This contract will most likely never be found because it was probably drafted by the notary Thomas, for whom documents are missing from 1692 to 1694. We note the presence [in the document] of this enigmatic clause: "The donation will nevertheless not take place if one or more children from their marriage are alive": *La donation n'aura cependant lieu au cas ils aient un ou plusieurs enfants vivants de leur mariage*. Must we deduce that, in 1717, there were no living children of the marriage? At any rate, Catherine was no longer of an age to have children (she was forty-five years old). Nevertheless, she had been only twenty at her marriage. Sterility? Children deceased because of the harsh conditions of the time?

Moving on from this breakthrough document [*sur notre lancée*], we bring forward the testament of Antoine Bontron, grandson of Claude Bontron, the one who left for Besançon.²⁹ We will cite here several details from the document. Antoine was a renter of horses. He willed his wagon with its ten horses to a son from his wife's, Anne Gauthier's, first marriage. He also left property to his wife; to his brother Jacques, another renter of horses, in Besançon; and to his sister, an adult, Marguerite. Antoine, Jacques, and Marguerite Bontron (without a doubt the Jeanne-Marguerite cited in 1729) are therefore brothers and sister. Jacques being the son of Jacques Bontron and of Anne-Françoise Bretenière, the other two are also [their children]. Marguerite died 8 March 1775 at seventy years of age, apparently unmarried. She would thus have been born in 1705. We must remember that this is an approximation because ages recorded at deaths are often erroneous by several years. Jeanne-Marguerite Bontron, by her *testament* opened 1 April 1775 (but deposited 1 December 1771), designated as her universal heir [*heritière universelle*] Germaine Bontron, her niece, and forbade the father, Jacques Bontron, from enjoying the property that she had left Germaine.³⁰ Germaine Bontron was born 8 April 1751 at Montussaint; she was only twenty years old when the *testament* was deposited.

²⁶ ADD: B8837

²⁷ ADD: 3E32/142 notaire Thomas de Cendrey

²⁸ ADD: 2C1689

²⁹ ADD: B10397

³⁰ ADD: B10400

Not only did one unique son of Claude Bontron appear to have left descendants in France, but, in addition, three of his grandchildren, Antoine, Jeanne-Marguerite, and François, left no posterity.

To be continued...