

I wrote an early version of the following article as background for my presentation on 11 June 2005 in Lansing, Michigan, at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the French-Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan. It has also appeared on Roots, Racines, Késsinimek, January 2006 <<http://www.leveillee.net/roots/>> While I focus, in part, on the secondary sources for the history of Detroit and Michigan, much the same can be said for the old secondary source histories of other places founded or settled by French Canadians in the United States.

More and more of these out-of-copyright sources and translations of French texts have become (and will continue to become) available on the Internet. To paraphrase the old warning, *Caveat emptor*: Let the reader be aware.

There has been a flurry of scholarship in recent years to remedy the situation, some of which is also appearing on the Web. I hope my discussion will provide you a basis for making judgments about sources you can trust and sources you should treat with caution.

## Evaluating the Secondary Sources for French-Canadian History

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Today is the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the fire that destroyed the French *Ville du Détroit*. What began with the fire of 1805—the eradication of all physical traces of *Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit du Lac Érié*—has continued in the neglect and distortion of the French-Canadian presence in Detroit and Michigan in the published historical record. Even worse, much of what has made it into the published historical record and continues to be perpetuated is incomplete, biased, or downright wrong. This is my basic message to you today.

I have written these words for this seminar celebrating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the French Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan so that during the time I have to spend with you in my presentation I will be able to share with you some of my discoveries that go beyond the standard, published histories. These words are the background leading to my discoveries, some of which have been published in *Michigan's Habitant Heritage*.

If you leave here today with one thought from my presentation, let it be that you cannot trust the account of the French-Canadian experience in the standard, published histories of Detroit or Michigan, not even most of the more recent ones published in 2001 for the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Detroit. These works give token mention to the founding of Detroit (usually getting most of it wrong), touch briefly on the beginning of the Fox War in 1712, and then jump rapidly to the coming of the British in the 1760s. That's fifty years of existence ignored or dismissed without a single shred of detail. And then the "history" of Detroit and Michigan really begins with the arrival of the Americans in the 1790s.

One work that I can wholeheartedly recommend, though, is George Paré, *The Catholic Church in Detroit* (Detroit: The Gabriel Richard Press, 1951), even though some of it is based on incomplete sources. It was published in the year of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Detroit. Unfortunately, it is rarely mentioned as a secondary source in other works, although it refers to primary documents not mentioned by other writers. Brian Dunnigan's *Frontier Metropolis* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001) is another work I recommend, especially for the wonderful maps, and I applaud the research of FCHSM members Tim Kent and Gail Moreau-DesHarnais. Wait till you see what Gail is preparing for us!

Nevertheless, the history of New France in what became the United States, and, in particular, the history of Detroit and other places in Michigan—Michilimackinac, Fort St. Joseph (Niles, Michigan), River Raisin—and the other originally-French settlements in the USA, as well as our Canadian neighbor

Windsor, Ontario, has truly not yet been written. Nor do most writers in English understand the society of the mother colony on the *Saint-Laurent* from which the founders of most of these settlements came. Often their research refers to the society of France, ignoring the fact that *Nouvelle France* was in existence as a society almost one hundred years before any lasting settlements were made in the continental interior.

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I began as a genealogist and student of my own family history, all of it traceable to *Nouvelle France, Canada*. In my desire to flesh out the lives of my ancestors in Canada, I turned to the “official” historians. I quickly learned, more than twenty years ago [in 2005], that my quest would be difficult, at least here in the United States, because the historians writing in English, for the most part, did not know French, and, in particular, they did not know the French of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They used English translations that were commissioned a hundred years ago, and only these sources, or, what is sometimes worse, garbled hand-written copies (transcriptions) of documents.

Even the scholars who edited the *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* in the Thwaites edition have howling errors, and these are not limited to their having had to rely on nineteenth-century **Tanguay** to identify individuals, a serious problem in and of itself. For example, one footnote says **Nicolas Campeau**, was “nicknamed ‘Niagara,’ from having been, when a child, dropped in the water by a voyageur at the Niagara portage.” I found this reference quite recently, but I had already photocopied Nicolas Campeau’s baptism record from the registers of Montréal.

The son of **Jacques Campeau** and **Cécile Catin**, Nicolas was born 18 July 1710 and *ondoyé* at the Niagara portage. Now I have known the meaning of the French verb *ondoyer* from early childhood. It is what my father did for my sister, who was born at home and died almost immediately after, in 1933. Because he feared she would die, Dad gave this new-born baby lay baptism, *ondoyement*, sprinkling her with ordinary tap water and saying: “I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (I’m sure he said these words in French.) If a priest cannot be present to administer the sacrament, anyone can baptize. The parents of the Campeau baby in 1710 continued their voyage from Détroit down to Montréal, where, on 4 August, Nicolas was baptized conditionally, *sous condition*, in case the lay baptism, *ondoyement*, had not been performed properly. He was supplied the formal rites of baptism: the application of holy oils, the renouncing of Satan, *etc.*, and he was welcomed into the Holy Catholic Church with the recording of the act. Nicolas Rose, voyageur, served as godfather and gave the baby his first name; the godmother was Catherine, daughter of Henri Catin. (Photocopy) But he was not “dropped” in the waters of the Niagara River! There are so many more examples of faulty translation.

I was reminded of this phenomenon of partial understanding or changes in the meanings of words over time when a recent cartoon showed a mother character giving her child a book-mark as a present. The child looked at it, thanked her mother, and asked: “What does it do?” If, in the lifetime of one person, the word “book-mark” can lose its original meaning, imagine what can happen over centuries. And, if the child in the cartoon were a little older, the book-mark might mean only a computer “marker” to preserve a “page” in a word processing file, not in a “book”. I recall my history teacher friend’s anguish every time she had to teach the “Intercourse Act” in American History, and I remember having to warn my literature students that the word “gay” in a work of the nineteenth century or earlier did not mean what it tends to mean today. Imagine the potential problems when there is also a transfer from one language to another as well as shifts in meaning.

A word in the title of the French Canadian Heritage Society of Michigan’s journal is a good example: *Michigan’s Habitant Heritage*. I hope you don’t mind, John DuLong, if I quote from your web site, which also uses the word *Habitant*:

### Why Habitant.Org?

I have selected the domain name *habitant.org* for a number of reasons. I like the word *habitant* because of its historical connections. In Canada, the early French Canadians settlers who cleared the land and farmed it were known as *habitants*. They did not take kindly to being called peasants. Humble farmers and fur traders though they may be, they were still a step up from peasants and actually lived quite well in comparison to their cousins back in France. ... Lastly, I like the term *habitant* because it would be recognized, at least in the sense of a common farmer inhabiting the New World, in colonial Acadia, Louisiana, and even the French Caribbean islands.

Well, John, you are right. Our ancestors did not take it “kindly to be called peasants,” but isn’t there just a trace of apology in your citing what you call “a common farmer”?

Now I respect the labor of farmers (and I’m sure you do too), so knowing that many of my ancestors were farmers is no problem for me. To be honest, John, that’s what I thought the word meant until quite recently, within the last ten years. My father was born in 1903 in the Province of Québec. I recall his venting his anger at the “expletive deleted” *habitants!* To Dad, the word evoked a stubborn, unprogressive farmer, probably uneducated, or educated only in religion, to whom farming the land was all, even if the land was useless. His father and many of his father’s contemporaries were not interested in my dad’s plans to rent out the mountainous and rocky paternal land to visitors, who could fish and swim in the summer, and skate and ski in winter. Grandfather said no, but, ironically, that section of the Laurentian Mountains, near Ste-Agathe-des-Monts, and farther north, to Mont Tremblant is now well-developed winter and summer resort property. My father’s meaning for *habitant*—a stubborn backward farmer—or at least a farmer, is what became of the term “*habitant*” by the nineteenth century, but this is not its original meaning, as I learned from the pre-eminent historian of *Nouvelle France*, Marcel Trudel.

In reconstituting the census of 1666, Trudel learned that *habitant* (one of the terms used to classify the status of individuals in the census of 1666) referred to a person who was no longer bound by the hiring contract that brought him or her to New France, nor was he a soldier still serving his required years of enlistment. A *habitant* was a male person, or, if female, *habitante*, who could be granted land or purchase it, who could engage in trade, including but not limited to the fur trade. He or she could also farm, and many did, or they could hire someone else to farm land for him or her, but farmer was not the exclusive meaning of the term, as my examination of hundreds of notarial documents has verified. (Marcel Trudel, *La Population du Canada en 1666*, Sillery, Québec: Les Éditions du Septentrion, 1995.)

Checking the definition of the word *habitant* in the old French dictionaries of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries, available on the Web, further confirms its meaning.<sup>1</sup>

To Clarence Burton’s translators in the nineteenth century, and to others, though, a *habitant* was always a farmer. Recently I’ve been reading the word translated as peasant! In reality, a *habitant* was an **inhabitant** of New France who had chosen to remain and be a free citizen, to pursue whatever occupation or trade that became available. Some individuals are even called *bourgeois habitants*.

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<sup>1</sup>See *Dictionnaire de L’Académie française* at  
><http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/dicos/><

I was aware of the shift in meaning of the word *habitant* long before I read Leslie Choquette's *Frenchmen into Peasants*, *Modernity and Tradition in the Peopling of French Canada* (Harvard University Press, 1997). Her study establishes without a doubt that cities and towns of France contributed to the peopling of New France far more than French peasantry. John DuLong is right when he says the *habitants* of New France refused to be called peasants. This is well-documented. As Choquette concludes:

French settlements in Québec and the Maritimes were more modern than otherwise before 1763 [the beginning of British rule in Canada].” And, she continues: “The irony of Frenchmen becoming peasants [by the nineteenth century] is thus compounded by yet another irony: the archaic traditional society whose epitaph [Francis] Parkman wrote and whose survival beyond the grave Ferland and Faillon celebrated was not really archaic at all, but a **recent** historical development—one that had literally taken place within those historians’ lifetimes. [Emphasis mine.]

My grandfather would have grown up with the histories of these writers, as did my father.

I should add here that Étienne-Michel Faillon (1799? – 1870), a Sulpician priest, and Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Ferland, also a priest (1805 – 1865), are two French-Canadian historians. Our cousins in the modern-day Province of Québec have also had serious problems with having the true story of their *Nouvelle France* ancestors told properly; Lord Durham, in 1839, even wrote that French Canadians were a people without a history or a culture.

Remember this: Every history is a story of the years in which it is written, as much as it is the story of the past. Remember this as well: Gilles Havard, a modern historian I truly admire and respect, writes: “Error and change are part and parcel of the historian’s craft.” (Note: The wonderful *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is now on the Web, but even it is in need of revisions because of more recent scholarship.)

I heartily recommend **Gilles Havard’s** *The Great Peace of Montreal of 1701*, French-Native Diplomacy in the Seventeenth Century, translated by Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001). This peace insured that Detroit could be settled. I hope it will not be too many years before an English translation becomes available for Havard’s award-winning *Empire et métissages, Indiens et Français dans le Pays d’en Haut, 1660-1715* (Septentrion et Presses de l’Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2003,) and for his *Histoire de l’Amérique Française*, co-authored with Cécile Vidal (Flammarion, 2003). I consider him the best historian now writing about *Nouvelle France*.

In my quest for accuracy about my heritage years ago, though, I quickly learned that research in the primary documents of New France by English language historians seems to have ceased with the publications of **Francis Parkman** in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, concerning the early history of Detroit, the documents known as the Cadillac Papers, hand-copied in France, translated, and then published by Clarence Burton in Detroit, as the twentieth century began. Reading Francis Parkman nauseated me, quite literally. With my training in literary analysis, I easily could see his biases and his manipulation of sources to his pre-ordained thesis. As someone wrote me years ago, if today’s African-Americans insist that biased images of “colored” people should be banned, those of French-Canadian descent should lobby for the complete suppression of Parkman. The one English language historian I came to trust years ago was **W. J. Eccles**. I recommend anything he has written. His annotated bibliographies were a burst of fresh air for me. With his sometimes brutal, no-holds-barred analysis of the secondary sources, Eccles verified my misgivings. As Eccles wrote in his *The Canadian Frontier*, originally published in 1969:

On **Parkman**: “In a class by itself is the epic series by Francis Parkman. ... Written with a pronounced Anglo-American Protestant bias, they portray the inevitable victory of the forces of progress over the reactionary French Catholic regime in North America. Since Parkman’s underlying premises were in accord with majority opinion in both the United States and Canada, his interpretation of the history of New France gained instant acceptance as definitive works by both American and English-speaking Canadians. Despite trenchant criticism by scholars, these works emulate the phoenix.” (p. 214) Which is to say that, like the mythical phoenix bird, they keep rising from the ashes of the fire that tried to destroy them. How ironic. The phoenix is an emblem for the City of Detroit! And it is even the source for the name of the Renaissance Center, place of rebirth, after the riots of 1967.

On **Margry**, who collected and published many documents, Eccles says: “[T]his series has to be used with caution as the editor took liberties with the text of some of the documents to bolster his judgments on individuals, notably in extolling La Salle.” (p. 210)

On the English translations of French documents published by O’Callaghan and Brodhead, the “so-called New York records,” Eccles declares: “both the selection and the translation leave something to be desired.” In another of his books, he calls them “slovenly.”

On **Antoine Laumet, alias de Lamothe Cadillac**, Eccles says: “one of the more interesting scoundrels of the period, the articles by Jean Delanglez should be consulted.” (p. 218)

I eventually obtained the Delanglez articles through inter-library loan. They were written in English and all published in the Jesuit periodical *Mid-America* in the years just before the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Detroit; but Eccles also recommended several historians writing in French in Canada. I had to order their books from a used-book store in Drummondville, Québec, *O Vieux Bouquins*, because they are out of print. I thus had a background of reading French language histories of *Nouvelle France* when, about 1999, I began to read the documents Burton collected from France and had translated. They were published in the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections (1903-1904)*, with some in other volumes. I immediately sensed improperly translated words and other errors in understanding, and this before I even laid eyes on my first photocopy of an original document in the original French, for this is what I eventually began to do. One of Burton’s works, *Cadillac’s Village*, is on the list of books available for purchase before this seminar. Believe me, any of you who bought it, you must not take Burton’s work as the final word, as I have already demonstrated in my 2001 articles in *Michigan’s Habitant Heritage* about Étienne Véron Grandmesnil, the younger, and Marie Lepage. Don’t get me wrong. I am grateful that Burton and others commissioned copies of documents from the French archives and had them translated and published; but, I’ll say it again: these documents are incomplete, the transcriptions and translations are faulty, and most of the analysis based only on these documents is outright wrong. It is true that Joseph Peyser has recently translated other documents in *Letters from New France*, and in other recent works, but these are again sets of partial and edited translations of documents. He chose to skip over the documentary material dealing with the interesting period of the beginnings of Detroit under the French, 1701 to 1712, assuming it had been “done,” because of the documents in the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* and in English language translations of selected documents in other publications in New York and Wisconsin and elsewhere. I understand another set of Peyser’s translations will be published soon, and I am eager to see what documents he chose.

Instead of relying on only what has been translated, I have read actual French correspondence and records on microfilm or copies sent from the archives, including documents that have never been translated or printed in English. In addition, I ordered hundreds of **notarial documents**, a source only beginning to be mined for their riches. I must have ten linear feet of documents at my home. Without any pre-conception

of what I would find, I soon made many wonderful discoveries, even some I had never seen explained in any of the specialized articles about aspects of the society of *Nouvelle France*. Long before I read about the Morgan Method, I was practicing it. The historian Edmund Morgan taught that “interpreting the past means laying your own eyes on the primary sources and seeing patterns there that no one else had seen before ... **‘Stop telling me what other historians have said and tell me what you see.’**”  
><http://www.common-place.org/vol-01/no-03/school/><

Of course, I am privileged in being able to read French, the language of my cradle, although I bitterly regret being unable to write it well. The French of my parents descends directly for almost four hundred years from the French of New France. You, however, do not need to know how to read French to be warned about what has occurred, and continues to occur, in the published record. As you explore the printed history of the French and Canadian experience in the history of Detroit, Michigan, and elsewhere, keep these guidelines in mind:

FIRST: Look at the date of publication of a work or of its re-publication. As copyrights expire, older works are now more readily available, even on the Web. (That’s where I found the inaccurate reference to “Niagara” Campeau.) Always remember that sources unavailable to a writer at the time of publication may have since become available. As a continuation of this warning, I ask you to judge for yourself to what extent the writer made guesses about or did not understand the material used to prepare the book, and to what extent biased or loaded language controls a reader’s response. Prejudice and religious hatred abound in the published histories, and even in some of the original documents.

SECOND: Look at the bibliography or list of sources used for the work. If you see only sources published and translated years ago but no original research, even though the work has a twentieth- or twenty-first century publication date, then assuredly you will be looking at a piece of incomplete, if not shoddy, scholarship. In the last several years I have corresponded with others like me who are researching our French, Canadian, and Métis heritage. One of them, FCHSM member John Jackson, e-mailed me: “**but what really depresses me is that authors are blithely writing new studies without questioning the source material, thereby bending history into something it may not have been.**”

THIRD: Are any of the sources French language sources? I have never understood how a writer who cannot read the language of a major study can qualify as a scholar of the topic. Time and time again, I have browsed through the history section of bookstores, examining new works that propose to explain or interpret events in the shared history of New France and the American Colonies. Again and again, I find only the same old French sources translated into English. There is so much more! The correspondence of the governor of New France at the time of the founding of Detroit, Callière, has not yet been published, to my knowledge, let alone translated into English. The correspondence of Vaudreuil, governor from 1703 to 1725, has been published, for the most part, but in French only, except for selected abstracts. And the governors are not the only sources for the period. Fascinating court cases and thousands of notarial records present real, individual, and ordinary people in day-to-day situations, not just political and military situations. Be aware of another unfortunate tendency: Too often a history book is built on a pre-determined thesis that the “facts” are then forced to demonstrate. Peter N. Moogk’s *La Nouvelle France, the Making of French Canada – a Cultural History*, published in 2000, suffers from this syndrome even though he cites hundreds of French-language primary documents.

FOURTH: When you meet patronizing and even insulting references to our French and French-Canadian heritage, remind yourself that the writer knows no better. Take a deep breath. I know I have to! I also know we have our share of scoundrels as well as saints. I love them all. I have been pleased to see Native

Americans / First Nations receiving a much better, more sensitive treatment recently. Our day has yet to come.

FIFTH: The saying goes that God [or the Devil] is in the details. The universal is in the particular. If all a writer gives is generalizations and pronouncements on a grand scale but cannot even respect **the names** of our ancestors, you can be sure that writer has not done any serious study and, therefore, does not deserve your attention or respect.

SIXTH: Do your own research instead of relying on secondary sources. Even the smallest details contribute to the whole. There is much to be done for the years 1712 – 1760.

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In the words of Father Gabriel Richard after that terrible conflagration two hundred years ago that destroyed the French City of Detroit: *Speramus meliora, resurget cineribus*: We hope for better days; it shall rise from its ashes. This is also the motto of the modern city of Detroit, the image of the phoenix that will have a rebirth, *re-naissance* in French. *Renaissance* means rebirth, going back to one's origins, and, in the writing of history, to the original documents that recorded them, all of them that have survived, not just the few currently in publication. Detroit's and Michigan's beginnings and their first century under French influence—the whole period of *Nouvelle France* and its contributions to the North American continent—are truly a wonderful and proud story.

**Dedicated to my parents, Jean Boivin and Anna Dupuis, who proudly continued to speak and sing their native French language at home to pass it on to me, even after they were told not to do so. *Je me souviens!***  
**Suzanne Boivin Sommerville**

Postscript: Do not [always] trust the translation engines available on the Web. In my presentation for the 7 January 2006 FCHSM meeting in Mt. Clemens, I shared the unfortunate results of one such translation. The page I asked to have translated gave basic information about Guillaume Labelle and his wife, Anne Charbonneau, my ancestors. The translation informed me that he was from:

**“Apple brandy” in France; that they married at “Vault of Our Lady” and settled in “St. Francis the dirty on Jesus Island”; and that their marriage contract had been written by “Benign Basset hound.”**

In the original French, the words are *Calvados* (a modern-day *département* in France, not the brandy of the same name. Labelle was actually from the parish of St. Éloy, in *Normandie*, near Lisieux): *La Chapelle de Notre-Dame; St-François de Sales* (*sale* in French means dirty, but not the place name *Sales*), *Île Jésus*; and *Bénigne Basset*, the notary, who was definitely not a dog! If his *dit* name, *Deslauriers*, had been included in the original information to be translated, he probably would have been named “Benign Basset hound of the laurel bushes”! The examples are comical, but the point to be made is that proper names [and place names] should never be translated. Then there are the terms that had a special meaning in the society of New France, like *ondoyement* and *habitant*. True to my expectation, Guillaume Labelle, *habitant*, was called a farmer. It happens that he did farm, growing peas, wheat, and other grains. In fact, with his father-in-law, Olivier Charbonneau, he was also identified in notarial documents as a *fermier*, another word that has been mistranslated as farmer but which really means **agent in charge of an enterprise**. See the biographies of these two men in Michel Langlois's *Dictionnaire Biographique des Ancêtres Québécois*.