Researching families of Rideau Canal workers in the Ottawa, Canada area

Using resources available at the OBOGS Library

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With the arrival of our public computer at the Library of the Ottawa Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, there are many new sources where we are able to research our early ancestors who began coming to what is now the City of Ottawa area in the year 1800. This paper will outline sixteen main sources of printed material and machine-readable material which is available for the first eighty years of colonization in what is now Ottawa, Canada and its hinterland townships.

Almost all of the canal labourers were of either Irish (both Catholic and Protestant) or French Canadian origin. Today there are many thousands of their descendants throughout Ottawa and the Valley.

As an example of researching families of canal construction workers and their descendants, we will follow two Irish families -- Michael STACKPOLE and Patrick CHRISTOPHER from 1828 to 1928 in what is now the City of Ottawa.

1. First Nations families in early Bytown

Many members of the Algonquin and Iroquois Nations are recorded in the records of Notre Dame Cathedral beginning in the late 1820’s. Most of these families were involved in the Fur Trade along the Ottawa River from Montreal to Lake Superior. They often stopped in Bytown to perform a marriage ceremony or to baptise their children. In most cases, First Nations People in the records of Notre Dame are transcribed phonetically from the sound of the spoken name. This results in many long surnames.

Beginning in 1829, one of the best sources for genealogy of the canal workers are the DROUIN records at ancestryinstitution. Researchers must first go to this web site in order to access these records which cover almost all of the Catholic Churches births, marriages and deaths, in the Ottawa area. These records are available on the public computer in the OBOGS Library. The Oka records, for the period 1721 to 1850, begin in 1721 and are more likely to show Indian surnames translated into English. The priests at Oka had studied and knew the First Nations languages to a much greater extent than those from Notre Dame Cathedral in Ottawa.

Here is a sample record from Notre Dame Cathedral in 1830:

22 Jan 1830
Baptism of Sophia, aged 12 days, lawful daughter of Amable Faubert / Foubert and Mary Agathe Caoutshecowotch
Godparents: John Baptiste Bertholet and Sophia Laurent
Angus McDonell, Parish Priest, (a Scottish priest).
All of the records from OKA are also available. The Godparents shown above were also found in the DROUIN records for OKA, prior to their arrival in Bytown.

And another record, not politically correct:
29 Oct 1835
Baptism of Michael, son of Simon Antony Outanke, Indian, and Catherine Osquiscocoa, Indian
Michael Jotowa & Christine Sincanicoa

From these church records, it is possible to construct genealogical data for some individual First Nations couples and their children. In general, Metis families in the Notre Dame records show intermarriages between the Algonquin peoples and both Irish Catholic and French Canadian families. The Oka Metis records show a preponderance of marriages between Mohawk families and Scottish fur traders from Glengarry County, south-west of Ottawa, many of whom also took “country wives”.

First Nation traders in furs began to set up informal business relationships along Sussex Drive by the 1820’s. There was a great demand for fur coats and robes among the new settlers for our hard winters. Also, there was a great demand for native builders of birch bark canoes and snowshoes. These canoes were the earliest and most practical means of transportation. First Nations men were also employed as guides along the waterways.

2. Earliest settlers with Philemon Wright in 1800

The earliest settlers to the Ottawa area came to Hull Township in 1800 and settled on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River at Chaudiere Falls, later called Wrightville, then Hull and now the city of Gatineau. Philemon Wright brought several hundred settlers with him from Woburn, Massachusetts. By the time of the beginning of the Rideau Canal construction in 1826, he had behind him a quarter of a century of experience pioneering in the wilderness. He and his settlers knew how to build dams and mills and in about 1827 he was called on by Colonel John By for assistance in repairing a major rupture which had occurred in the large dam at Hog’s Back. For this project, he brought in mostly French Canadian labourers to work for him and the dam and locks were permanently constructed.

3. French Canadian Canal Labourers

French Canadian workers played a major role in building the Rideau Canal. They came mainly from the seigneuries near Montreal and along the north shore of the Ottawa River. By the 1820’s, the seigneuries were suffering population pressures and there was a scarcity of new land suitable for an upcoming generation of young farmers. The result was a surplus of landless labourers who were available to work on canal projects such as the Lachine Canal in Montreal, the Carillon Canal and the Grenville Canal on the Ottawa River between Montreal and Bytown and then on the Rideau Canal. In 1805, a major seigneury called La Petite Nation, began to be settled at Montebello; the seignor there was Louis Joseph Papineau. Almost all of the arable land in this seigneury was located in a narrow strip along the Ottawa River, south of the Canadian Shield. Many of these French-speaking habitants stayed in the Bytown area
after the canal work was completed in 1832. They tended to settle on recently surveyed lots in Gloucester Township, often acquiring lands which had previously been granted to United Empire Loyalists and on Crown Reserves and Clergy Reserves.

One of the prominent French Canadian families in early Bytown was that of Jean Baptiste St. LOUIS. By 1827 he had built a mill on a creek in Lowertown which flowed past where St. Bridget’s Church is today on Cumberland Street. Jean Baptiste St. Louis was called upon by Philemon Wright to build a dam between where the “boathouse” is located today on Dow’s Lake and today’s Preston Street. This dam created a reservoir (now Dow’s Lake), and eliminated Dow’s Great Swamp along what is now Preston Street. See map showing the original drainage of Dow’s Great Swamp along Preston Street to the Ottawa River, above the Chaudiere Falls.

The Francophone families who lived around Dow’s Lake in 1847 are ALBERT, JOANNISSE, CHAUVIN, POTVIN, CYR and LABRECHE. The St. LOUIS dam is shown in red. Jean Bapiste St. Louis recruited some of his neighbours from Lowertown to build the dam.

Nicholas TREMBLAY was a Francophone canal worker who married into the Irish STACKPOLE family in 1833. This is an example of early intermarriage between the Irish Catholics and the early Francophones in Bytown.

However, the working conditions between Irish and French Canadien labourers were not always this peaceful. John McTaggart, who was the Clerk of Works on the Rideau Canal project in Bytown, had an interesting comment on labour relations on the Canal: He was happy with the quality of work done by the French Canadiens and Irish Catholics but said with a caveat in 1828, “Give me plenty of French Canadien labourers and Irishmen, but let them work apart, and wonders may be wrought!”.

Here is a very good book which details the early Francophone pioneers in Bytown: Bytown et ses pionniers canadiens-français, 1826-1855, by Georgette Lamoureux, written in 1978.
4. **Disbanded soldiers from the 99th / 100th Regiment of Foot, 1818**

In 1818, several hundred disbanded soldiers were given land grants, mostly near the village of Richmond in Goulbourn Township, now part of the City of Ottawa. The main book in our Library for this area of research is “For King and Canada: The Story of the 100th Regiment of Foot During the War of 1812”, by A. Barry Roberts, published by the Goulbourn Township Historical Society and Museum in 2004, ISBN 1-55036-683-1.

According to military regulations, soldiers were allocated land according to their rank at the time of leaving the military. At the time, Catholics (in most cases) were allowed only 100 acres, as privates, for their land grants. The book by A. Barry Roberts lists all of the military settlers in Goulbourn Township and, as a bonus, states the County of Origin in Ireland for each settler. It contains a good index. The
majority of these settlers were Protestant but there are many descendants of these ex-soldiers, both Protestant and Catholic in the Ottawa area today.

5. The Talbot Settlers in 1818

“Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach”, by Dr. Bruce Elliott of Carleton University, gives historical background for an early emigration from County Tipperary, Ireland.

Hundreds of early local families are named and the index is very detailed. For our area, the first Irish settlers were the Talbot Settlers who came to the Hazeldean area of Kanata via the ship Camperdown in the year 1818.

6. The 1823 Peter Robinson Settlers

In 1823, a government scheme to quell economic depression and to alleviate sectarian troubles in County Cork, Ireland, was put into action. This plan, implemented by the Honourable Peter Robinson, brought almost 500, mostly Irish Catholics, to the Ottawa area. They were given land grants and settled roughly in the Kanata – Almonte – Huntley Township region in the west of what later became the City of
This migration to our area is documented in a book called “Peter Robinson's Settlers, 1823 and 1825”, by Carol Bennett, 1987, ISBN 0-919137-16-4.

This book is available on the shelves of our OBOGS Library. It contains a detailed list of family members who came here in 1823, parents, spouses and children and provides the name of the village in County Cork from which they emigrated. They all lived near the Blackwater River in the north of County Cork. Some of these pioneer families also came from County Limerick and County Tipperary.

7. The 1828-1829 Militia Lists for Bytown

These records have been transcribed and are available in the book “Men of Upper Canada, Nominal Militia Rolls 1828-29”, by Bruce Elliott, Dan Walker and Fawne Stratford-Devai, 1995, ISBN 0777901889. All men between the ages of 18 and 39 were required by law to join their local militia group. This book lists the names and ages of all militia members in Carleton County (the First Carleton Militia).
Many workers on the Rideau Canal are listed here, broken down into the following local geographical areas: Richmond Village, Goulbourn Township, Nepean Township, March Township and those residing along the canal line between Bytown and Hog’s Back. In total, there are 734 names of men listed. This list pretty much serves as a census of heads of households for those who were in Bytown in 1828. One of our subjects for this presentation will be a canal labourer named Michael STACKPOLE who appears on the 1828 militia roll, along with his son John. In 1828, Michael is 47 years old and John is 19 years old.

8. The McCabe List, 1829.

The Rideau Canal was constructed between the years 1826 and 1832. Thousands of emigrants from all of the counties in Ireland were attracted by the possibility of work as construction labourers here. Fortunately, the names of 673 of them are recorded in an OGS publication at our library. The book is called “The McCabe List: Early Irish in the Ottawa Valley”, by Dr. Bruce Elliott, 1991 and is published by our own Ontario Genealogical Society.
The entry on the McCabe list for the STACKPOLE family shows that Michael was unable to sign his name and had a family of two males and five females. The McCabe List was signed in February of 1829.

9. Land Grants in the early Bytown era

In the OBOGS library is a CD containing the names of 87,000 land grant petitions in Upper Canada. This CD contains the database, in .pdf format, which enables us to search for our ancestors. Ask at the reference desk in the library for the CD. Once you find your surname on the CD, you will be able to use the CD to find your ancestor’s petition number and then access the Library and Archives Canada website to locate the original, digitized copy of the land records. The following link will take you to the search engine for the LAC Upper Canada land petitions and grants:


Here is the screen at LAC which allows searching the land grant records:

**Search: Land Petitions for Upper Canada, 1763-1865**

Enter one or more search terms. (e.g. Whiteaves, White*)
Here is the link to the first land grant given to John Cunningham in Gloucester Township in 1832:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Surname</th>
<th>Given Name(s)</th>
<th>Place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cunningham</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Gloucester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1832</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>C. Leases 1831-1836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RG 1 L3</td>
<td>C-1741</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

John Cunningham is on the McCabe List and appears in the records of Notre Dame Cathedral starting in 1830. His early land purchases proved very profitable for him as he was able to build an inn / stopping place on his property when the Bytown and Prescott Railway was completed in 1854 through Gloucester Township.

10. Nepean Township residents at Hog’s Back and Hartwell’s Locks in 1847

There is a lot of information in Bruce Elliott’s book The City Beyond, A History of Nepean Township. This book covers all of Nepean Township from its earliest days, including the Rideau Canal.

The following map, from page 23 of the book, shows a map of French Canadian and Irish settlers at Dow’s Lake and Hog’s Back in 1847, the year of the potato famine in Ireland.

Donald Kennedy (his wife was Catherine Ferguson) is the only Scot here on Ordnance Land in 1847. There is a photograph of his modern brick home on the east side of the canal beside Hartwell’s Locks where Carleton University is today in Harry and Olive Walker’s book Carleton Saga, page 117. Mr. Kennedy later became a surveyor.
11. **Using the 1879 Carleton County Digital Atlas**

Among the holdings in our Library are hard copies of the Belden County Atlases for many counties of Ontario. Using these atlases, we can locate our ancestors in the relevant township where they settled and can pinpoint the location of their property – lot number, concession number and amount of acreage for their land.

We are not allowed to photograph material in the library but once again, we can use the public computer there to retrieve a digital image showing the property location in 1879. McGill University has
digitized these large maps and we can access them on our computers. The URL for these maps is http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/Countyatlas/search.htm. We can search for individual surnames or can view individual township maps. Many of the canal workers were not itinerant labourers but instead became permanent settlers on farmland in the various townships adjacent to the Rideau Canal and carved farms out of the wilderness. The built-in Windows Snipping Tool allows the capture of all or a portion of the map showing the location of your ancestor’s property. This image can then be pasted into a Word document or saved onto your thumb drive.

The map below has been extracted from the digital version of the Belden Atlas of 1879. It shows some of the folks who were renting land on ordnance property in 1847 have moved on to privately owned farms adjacent to Dow’s Great Swamp. Some of the surnames are STACKPOLE, NEVINS, MULLIGAN and KENNEDY. Gabriel TAILLON is the francophone neighbour of the STACKPOLE family. His son Jean was a godparent to some of the STACKPOLE second generation children.

12. **Using ancestryinstitution at the OBOGS Library**

There is free access to ancestry.com in our library. This is normally a paid subscription service for individual users but the version we have is provided free of charge for OBOGS computer users in the library. The URL is ancestryinstitution.com. Before accessing this URL, you need to be signed on to the Wi-Fi Network at the Library. This URL leads to original digital documents such as census data for Canada and the United States, Ontario birth marriage and death records (civil registration records). Also available are many church records available for Ottawa area churches. For example, the Drouin Records at http://www.ancestryinstitution.com begin 1829 for Notre Dame Cathedral on Sussex Drive. These records contain information on most of the Irish Catholic and Francophone Rideau Canal workers. Also available are most of the records for the early Protestant churches, except for Anglican records which require contacting the Anglican Diocese Archives on Sparks Street downtown. E-mail them at archives@ottawa.anglican.ca.

13. **The Stacks at the OBOGS Library**

This is a shot of some of our family histories at our Library. Hundreds of local family historians have submitted hard copies (and some electronic copies) of their own family research to our library to serve as a permanent repository for current researchers and for use by future generations. We can search for individual family histories by entering the surname into the search engine for the library catalogue on our web site.
As you can see, there is a great variety of the types of family history publications that we have on our shelves. As you can see, some are hard covered published histories but many more are small duatang or cerlox publications that can vary from 2 or 3 pages to 100 pages. These all provide excellent research potential for you.

As well, we have over 500 cemetery transcripts available.
They cover not only cemeteries in our own area, but across the province and many from other Canadian provinces and some from the USA too.

14. Land Speculators:
As soon as workers realized that the canal construction was coming to an end in 1832, there was a concentrated effort made by them to acquire farmland along the Rideau River. This led to the proliferation of a number of early land speculators. The major speculator was Charles Rowan who owned a tavern at 34 York Street in the Byward Market. His tavern attracted many of the Irish Catholic workers and he bought and sold many farm properties at his inn and arranged private land transactions between individual farmers-to-be.

The tavern, owned later by his son John Rowan, is shown in the next picture. The source for this photograph is Ottawa: An Illustrated History, by Professor John H. Taylor, ISBN ISBN 0-88862-981-8, page 87.

Below, from the Belden Atlas in 1879, are shown two lots, marked in red, one of thirty acres and one of 50 acres on the Bowesville Road where the Ottawa International Airport is located today.

15. **Real Life Example: The Michael STACKPOLE and Patrick CHRISTOPHER families**

On the **1828 militia list**, Men of Upper Canada, Militia Nominal Rolls, 1828-29, by Bruce Elliott for the Ontario Genealogical Society, 1995, we have a John STACKPOLE, aged 19 and also a Michael STACKPOLE, no age given. Michael is likely the father of John STACKPOLE.

Michael STACKPOLE signed the **1829 McCabe List** Petition. He signed the petition with an “X” therefore Michael is unable to read or write. His exact location of origin is Glanworth, in the north of County Cork, Ireland and already here in Canada are 7 of his family members, 2 males and 5 females. Michael has two brothers, William and John back in County Cork and they can be recommended by Lieutenant Roberts of Shanballymore, County Cork.

*In Notre Dame Records* which begin in 1829, there are additional children baptized beginning in 1831:

10 Apr 1831
Baptism of William, aged 1 week, Father: Michael STACKPOLE; mother: Margaret Haws
Witnesses: John Ryan and Honorah STACKPOLE
Priest: Angus McDonell

A minor daughter marries in 1843:
16 May 1843
After the publication of one bann, marriage of Patrick O’NEIL, resident in this mission and adult son of Gerald / Garret O’Neil and Mary Burns of County Carlow, Ireland to Bridget STACKPOLE, resident in this mission and minor daughter of Michael STACKPOLE and Mary HAW of County Cork
Witnesses: James Black, Mary Hogan & others

The STACKPOLE family is still living on Ordnance Land at Hogsback after the canal construction is finished:

6 Oct 1833
Marriage of Thomas Davy and Elizabeth Cusick of Hogsback
Witnesses: Michael STACKPOLE & Catherine Barry

The priests from Notre Dame travelled to the major works on the Rideau Canal to perform marriages and baptisms. There were large settlements of workers at Dow’s Lake, Hartwell’s, Hog’s Back, Black Rapids and Long Island.

17 Mar 1837
Conditional baptism of Patrick, born the 11th of the marriage of Michael STACKPOLE and Mary HAW
Godparents: Jean Taillon and Mrs. Conroy

Michael STACKPOLE dies in 1842:

16 Mar 1842
Burial in the R.C. Cemetery (Sandy Hill, now MacDonald Gardens Park) of Michael STACKPOLE who died the 14th, aged 61 yrs. (born 1781). We now have an age for Michael STACKPOLE and can conclude that he is the likely father of John STACKPOLE who is on the 1828 Militia List.

Here is the original death record for Michael STACKPOLE from the church registers of Notre Dame Cathedral (available in the Drouin Records at the OBOGS Library).

Transcription: March 16th, 1842, burial in the R.C. Cemetery (Sandy Hill) Michael Stackpole who departed this life the 14th inst. aged 61 years.

His son, Patrick, aged 11 years dies in 1848:
6 Feb 1848
Funeral service for Patrick STACKPOLE who died yesterday, aged 11 yrs., son of the late Michael STACKPOLE and Mary HAW.
Witnesses: Edward Moore and Nicholas Tremblay

16. Wills and Estate files for the County of Carleton

At the time of his death in 1842, Michael STACKPOLE had prepared a will and it appears in the Court of Probate Registers and Estate Files for Carleton County. The index for these wills can be searched on microfilm by name of the deceased in the library of the Ottawa Branch of the OGS.
Once you have the number of the will, you are able to locate the actual documents and save them to your thumb drive. Here is part of the index, showing Michael STACKPOLE’s will as being filed in 1842. His name is outlined in yellow on the list below:

Here is the two-page estate file of Michael Stackpole in 1842, (scanned from Microfilm to a USB stick at the City of Ottawa Archives):

Probate File

Will
N.B. It appears that young Patrick Stackpole (next record) was to be the eventual intended heir to his father, Michael Stackpole.

17 Mar 1837
 Conditional baptism of Patrick, born the 11th of the marriage of Michael Stackpole and Mary Haw
 Godparents: Jean Taillon & Mrs. Conroy
 Source: <a href="notredam.htm">Notre Dame</a> Records in the Drouin Records at ancestry.ca

16 Mar 1842
 Burial in the R.C. Cemetery (<a href="http://www.bytown.net/sandyhillcem.htm">Sandy Hill</a>) of Michael Stackpole who died the 14th, aged 61 yrs.
 Source: Notre Dame Records in the Drouin Records at ancestry.ca

Young Patrick dies after his father has died and is not available to inherit from his two elder brothers:

6 Feb 1848
 Funeral service for Patrick Stackpole who died yesterday, aged 11 yrs., son of the late Michael Stackpole and Mary Haw
 Witnesses: Edward Doore (Dore or Moore) & Nicholas Tremblay
 Source: Notre Dame Records in the Drouin Records at ancestry.ca

In 1848, a new church called St. Mary’s was built on Bank Street in the village of South Gloucester, to accommodate the growing families of descendants of the Irish and French Canadian canal workers. This church is now called “Our Lady of the Visitation” and many of these records can be followed from the Notre Dame records to the settlers in the South Gloucester neighbourhood. All of these records are available by searching the Drouin records via ancestryinstitution.com in our OBOGS library.

Starting in 1842, census records become available for research for the area west of the Canal (Nepean Township). The 1842 census for Nepean contains the names only of male heads of households plus the number of women and children broken down by age group and sex. The STACKPOLE family and several others who are shown on the 1847 Hog’s Back map moving to their new farm just west of Dow’s Lake. By 1879, sons of Michael STACKPOLE and Margaret HAWS have moved to the Stage Coach Road, in Osgoode Township, south of Mitch Owens Drive.

In the 1879 Belden County Atlas, three STACKPOLE farms and two neighbouring CHRISTOPHER farms are shown on the following map. This map was extracted digitally by using the Public Computer in the OBOGS library. Or you can do it from home.
In 1910, a grandson of Michael STACKPOLE is the best man at the marriage of George BURNS and Theresa CHRISTOPHER, my grandparents. The BURNS, CHRISTOPHER, and STACKPOLE families had been friends and neighbours from the time of the construction of the Rideau Canal up to the twentieth century. Most of the families shown on the 1879 map were canal workers who became respected farmers in what is now the City of Ottawa. Some of their original farms are now suburban subdivisions.

The photograph on the left shows George BURNS and Theresa CHRISTOPHER my grandparents, in 1908. The photograph on the right shows Ambrose STACKPOLE and Ella McNeely in 1926. These two couples are grandsons and granddaughters of original workers on the Rideau Canal.
Here is a photo of the tug boat *Agnes* and a barge passing the present site of Carleton University during the time period when the two couples above lived.