

# Researching Aboriginal Ancestors in Ontario

Janice Nickerson shows you where to find resources for Aboriginal research

SO YOU'RE LOOKING for an Aboriginal ancestor in Ontario. Some people will tell you that finding Aboriginal ancestors is impossible. Others say it's no different from finding non-Aboriginals. Neither is completely correct, but both have rationales behind them.

I'll tackle the issue in three stages. First, I'll give you the bad news — the special challenges of researching Aboriginal ancestors. Next, I'll discuss the sources that apply to all residents of Ontario, with emphasis on the strengths and weaknesses of these records for Aboriginal research. Finally, I'll describe some unique records that pertain especially to Aboriginal people.

## SPECIAL CHALLENGES

While the process of genealogical research is similar for all people, regardless of their ancestors' ethnic heritage, people researching Aboriginal ancestors may find themselves facing unique challenges. It is important to be aware of these potential problems, so that you can approach the records with a critical eye and, when necessary, seek the guidance and expertise of people with the requisite historical, cultural, linguistic and geographic knowledge.

### 1. Lack of Official Records in Early Time Periods

If your Aboriginal ancestors lived in Ontario, and did not join a treaty, you may find your research more difficult than non-Aboriginal Canadians. This is because, historically, your ancestors have fallen through the cracks of official government record keeping. They generally did not participate fully in the institutions of white society, so

they are not consistently recorded in land, court or civil registration records. As unregistered Aboriginals, they aren't documented in the records of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

### 2. Lack of Aboriginal Categories in Older Records

When people of mixed heritage were recorded in early records, they frequently were not identified as such, so it may be difficult to verify their ethnic heritage.



*Studio portrait taken in July 1882 of the surviving Six Nations warriors who fought with the British in the War of 1812. (Library and Archives Canada, C-085127.)*

### 3. Suppression of Aboriginal Identity Within Families

People of mixed heritage often find that their relatives cannot or will not tell them much about their Aboriginal ancestors, because of the stigma attached to their heritage. The active suppression of Aboriginal identity, can, over time, result in lack of important information that most other Canadians take for granted.

### 4. Language Issues

Differences in language between the registrar (enumerator, minister, etc.) and the person being recorded can result in many errors, from the misspellings of names, to

the complete inability to communicate information. This problem exists for many Canadians because Canada was settled by immigrants who spoke many different languages. However, the problem is even worse for Aboriginal people because the difference between European languages and Aboriginal languages is much greater than that between European languages. So errors in recording names and other information will be greater and it will be more difficult to interpret written Aboriginal names.

### 5. Cultural Issues

Many cultural differences between Aboriginal people and those who created the documentary records about them may create problems for you. For example, kinship patterns and terminology may be alien to non-Aboriginal record creators, so they might not record these relationships accurately.

One example of this is the confusion created when European record keepers tried to record the names of

Aboriginal people who traditionally passed family names and group membership through women rather than men. For example, among the Six Nations, many people ended up being recorded with multiple family names because European record keepers would sometimes record them under the family name of their fathers, instead of under the names of their mothers.

### 6. Naming Traditions

The identification of individual Aboriginal people in early records can be difficult when traditional naming practices involved the use of more than one name for a

person, either at the same time, or over the course of their lives. This was made worse by the adoption of European names, so that one person might be referred to in the records by several names.

Also, early record keepers, especially Christian missionaries, sometimes gave Christian names to Aboriginal people and only recorded those names in their records. Other record creators, such as fur traders, often referred to individual Aboriginal people by nicknames. Matching these nicknamed individuals to actual members of your own ancestral family may well be impossible.

## 7. Reliance on Secondary Information

Information in records pertaining to Aboriginal people was usually provided by those who did not have firsthand knowledge of the facts or events. We rarely find diaries, letters, deeds or other documents that were created by Aboriginal people in the 19th or earlier centuries. Most records are the reports of non-Aboriginals created after the fact, based on information from a variety of sources. This type of evidence is much less reliable than firsthand testimony.

## 8. Bias in Record Keeping

Because the vast majority of records were created by non-Aboriginals, often with a particular goal in mind, the problem of bias can distort the accuracy of the records.

For example, where the goal of an Indian census might be to determine the number of individuals entitled to payments, it would be to the benefit of the government to err on the side of recording fewer, rather than more, people. This might result in some individuals not appearing on the lists.

Another effect of cultural bias is lack of identification of individual Aboriginal people, referring instead only to vaguely described groups. This results in records that are virtually useless from a genealogical point of view. A less extreme situation results when census enumerators record only the name of the head of the house-

hold and list the remaining household members as "wife", "boy" or "girl".

## 9. Ancestors' Mistrust of Record Keepers

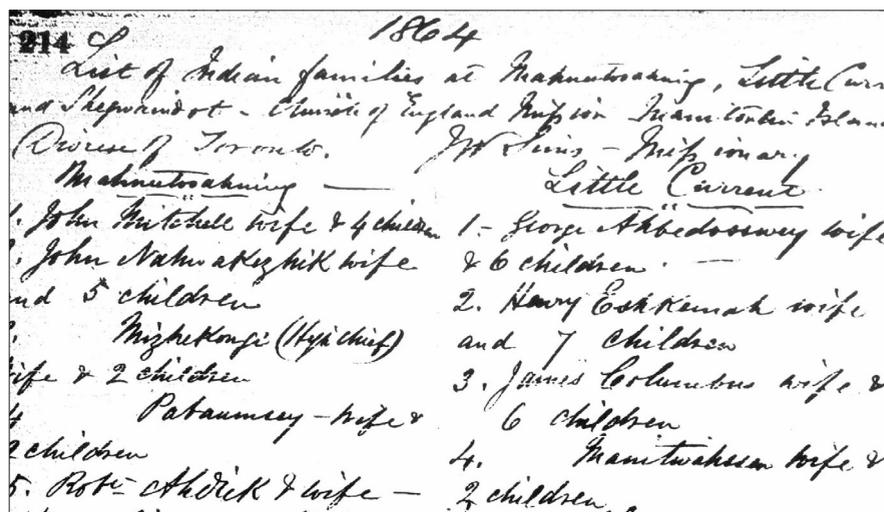
For a variety of reasons, many Aboriginal groups and individuals have historically distrusted government officials and other persons in authority, and thus, chosen either not to comply with record-keeping or to be less than fully cooperative.

## BASIC SOURCES

### 1. Oral History

Virtually all family history research begins with oral sources — that is, the information we get from our parents, grandparents and other relatives. This source is extremely valuable, as the memories of living people include much information that has never been written down. However, as with any information source, oral history is not a perfect source of credible, reliable information.

The credibility of oral history



Indian Families at Manitoulin, 1864.

(Waters Sims fonds, Journal (RG24 J51 /R4176-0-0-E. Library and Archives Canada, Jabez)

## 10. Geographic Remoteness and Diffusion

In the case of historical Aboriginal communities that relied on hunting, trapping and trading for a large part of their livelihood, both the people and the records about them are likely to be more geographically scattered than for those who belonged to settled agricultural communities.

Further, members of remote communities often had less access to clergy, government officials and other record keepers, so their vital events were recorded less frequently. Also, families might use different churches for different events, depending on which clergy were available at the relevant time. This makes the search for records much longer, requiring greater persistence and imagination.

information should be assessed using the same criteria as for written sources, by asking questions about how the person came to know the information, how many degrees removed from the eyewitness they are, how much time has passed between the event and when the source learned about it, in what context the source learned the story, whether any of the parties involved had reason to distort the information, etc.

Keep in mind that, in addition to living people, anthropologists, historians and other researchers have collected oral history interviews for many years, and you may find recorded interviews in archives, museums and special collections.

### 2. Civil Registration

In Ontario, registration of births,

marriages and deaths began midway through 1869. However, enforcement wasn't thorough for the early years, so many births, marriages and deaths went unrecorded. Some areas were better than others. For example, people who lived in more remote areas who had to travel further to reach government offices didn't comply as often.

Members of some religious groups were more compliant than others. For example, Roman Catholics tended to register less frequently, perhaps due to the misconception that they were exempt.

In addition, because the governance of treaty or registered Aboriginal people has been considered a federal responsibility since 1876, there has been much confusion over the responsibility for civil registration of Aboriginal people. In some cases, local Indian Agents didn't realize that the births, marriages and deaths of all people, regardless of status, were supposed to be registered with the province, and thus, many Aboriginal people are not recorded in the civil records.

### 3. Censuses

Full every-name censuses were taken in Canada every 10 years starting in 1851-52 (when Ontario was called Canada West). The most recent census available is the 1911.

Most Canadian census records recorded the "color" and ethnic "origin" of each individual. However, this piece of information is particularly problematic. If a person was recorded as Aboriginal, the precise nation was rarely identified. Furthermore, Métis was not a recognized category, so the "color" of individuals was recorded as "red", "white" or "black", and their "origin" as "Indian" or whichever European category might apply. Only in 1901 was specific instruction given as to how people of "mixed" ancestry ought to be recorded — only "pure" whites were supposed to be recorded as such. Anyone of mixed ancestry was supposed to be recorded as "red", "black" or "yellow" (Chinese/Japanese).

Under ethnic origin, Aboriginal people were supposed to be recorded by their "tribe", such as "Cree" or "Chippewa" and people of mixed ancestry were to be recorded as "Cree e.b." for "Cree English breed", "Chippewa f.b." for "Chippewa French breed".

The accuracy of census records depends a great deal on the census taker. Some were more diligent and competent than others. In

Generally speaking, Roman Catholic records provide more detailed information and are more complete and well-preserved than the records of other denominations. In the case of baptisms, Roman Catholic records generally provide both the birth date and the baptism date of the child, and they provide the names of both parents (including the maiden name of the mother). In the case of marriages,

*The following persons Indians have been baptized at Manitowanning since the 26<sup>th</sup> day of May last.*

<i>Indian Names</i>	<i>Christian Names</i>	<i>Age</i>
<i>Waw-e-ke-zhick</i>	<i>William</i>	<i>aged 20</i>
<i>-----</i>	<i>James</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>-----</i>	<i>Henry</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>-----</i>	<i>John</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>-----</i>	<i>Anne</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>-----</i>	<i>Arthur</i>	<i>aged 50</i>

**Baptisms at Manitowanning, 1839.**

Samuel Peters Jarvis Indian Papers (S125) Baldwin Room, Toronto Public Library.

cases of reserves, usually the census taker was the Indian Agent, who ought to have had some familiarity with the names of the people and their relationships. It should be noted, however, that Aboriginal communities were frequently under-enumerated, due to both lack of thoroughness on the part of enumerators and lack of cooperation on the part of Aboriginal people.

All of the surviving census records from 1851 to 1911 have now been digitized and indexed by Ancestry.ca, so are available online to those with subscriptions. By the end of 2009, they should also be available free through the Canadian Genealogy Centre, [www.genealogy.gc.ca](http://www.genealogy.gc.ca).

### 4. Church Records

The amount and type of information provided by church records varies enormously by religious denomination and time period.

Roman Catholic records generally provide the full names of the parents of both the bride and the groom, and if any of the four parents were deceased at the time of the wedding, this is noted as well.

Records of Protestant denominations vary, but most baptism records do not provide more than the mother's first name, and most marriage records provide only the names of the bride and groom and the witnesses. And some denominations, such as Baptists, do not practice infant baptism, so there may be no birth-related records in the church registers.

Earlier records of all denominations tend to provide less information than more recent records. When neither the birth date nor the age of the child is recorded, a baptism record cannot be assumed to provide evidence of the date of birth, however, it is still evidence of the relationship between parent(s) and child.

Some church records also include lists of church members, which can prove residence, and in the case of Aboriginal people, they can provide key information about clan and band membership. Sometimes both Christian and Aboriginal names are given.

Many early schools were established and run by churches, so records of these schools can also be found in church archives. School records might, for example, include the name of the child, his or her birth date and parents' names.

Special mention should also be made of the writings of early missionaries, especially the Jesuits. These writings, including journals and correspondence, often provide much information about the Aboriginal people with whom the missionaries interacted, sometimes naming specific individuals and giving details of ceremonies, conversions, etc.

One of the greatest strengths of church records is the fact that these are often the earliest written records of individual Aboriginal people. This is because missionaries frequently visited people in communities that did not have any contact with civil authorities. The main limitation is that frequently only Christian names are recorded, even when the people in question generally were known by their Aboriginal names.

Most protestant church records have not been microfilmed or digitized. They must be searched at the archives of the relevant religious denomination. Many Roman Catholic registers are available through Ancestry.ca or on microfilm through the Family History Library of the LDS Church.

## 5. DNA Testing

DNA testing for genealogists has become popular recently, with tests becoming more accurate. DNA testing can help a man learn about his exclusively male-line ancestry or anyone to learn about their exclusively female-line ancestry. However, it is nearly useless for learning about your ancestors to whom you are linked through a mixed line of males and

females.

Male-line (Y chromosome) tests can tell you the probability that two men (you have to compare two people) have a common ancestor in the exclusively male line, and approximately how many generations ago your most recent common ancestor lived. The most stringent tests can tell you that within a 95 percent probability whether two men share a common male-line ancestor within the last six generations.

The female-line tests (mitochondrial DNA) generally can tell you with a 50 percent probability whether two people have a common ancestor in the exclusively female line within the last

markers from your Aboriginal ancestors.

## UNIQUE SOURCES

Now, let's consider a few sources that pertain especially to Aboriginal people.

### 1. Pay Lists, Band Membership Lists, the Indian Register and Indian Censuses

The records of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and its predecessor units of government (until recently, classified together as Record Group 10 at Library and Archives Canada) are a valuable resource for people researching Aboriginal people from the mid-18th century to the

Le P. du Banquet donne Marie Sara	
1) Mary-Jane (1 <sup>e</sup> )	25/3/1887; 29/5/1887.
2) Josephine, Ch. 17/7/1900	19/4/1889; 14/6/1889
3) Daniel	juin 1891, 3/7/1891, 29/10/1891
4) Martha, brulée,	1892
6) Marie-Isabelle	13/1/1898; 6/2/1898
3) Louise	4 janv. 1896; 7/2/1896
7) Mary-Jane (2 <sup>e</sup> )	5/9/1900; 12/9/1900
8) Ellen (Hélène)	9/9/1902; 28/9/1902

"Indian" genealogy collected by Jesuit Missionaries regarding the Sainte Croix Mission on Manitoulin Island and other bands on Lake Huron and Lake Superior. Genealogies Collection (F277), Archives of Ontario.

28 generations.

Neither type of test can tell you specifically who your ancestor was.

There is another type of DNA test, the autosomal test, that uses parts of a person's DNA that are inherited from both parents. This test can show approximately what percentage of a person's genetic make-up is Aboriginal. While interesting, it won't show from which branch of the family the Aboriginal heritage came. Also, lack of Aboriginal markers in your genetic make-up does not prove that you have no Aboriginal ancestry. It only proves that you didn't inherit any of the relevant

present. However, the vast majority of the records are more recent, with most being created since 1900.

You will need lots of patience to conduct research in these records, since they are not filed or indexed by name, but rather by band, agency (field office) or district, and relevant records can be scattered throughout many sub-departments and agencies. Because of the amount of information and lack of indexing, it is almost always necessary to identify the relevant band first, before beginning research in these records.

Two types of pay lists provide valuable information: treaty

annuity pay lists and interest distribution pay lists. Treaty annuity pay lists begin in 1850 and include only those bands that participated in treaties. Interest distribution pay lists begin in 1856 and include only members of bands that had funds held in trust by the Department of Indian Affairs (these include most bands in Ontario). The early lists give only the names of the heads of families (or their representatives) with the number of men, women, boys and girls noted for each family.

Starting about 1893, the treaty annuity lists and interest distribution lists began including the names of all band members. Some lists also include birth dates and relationships between family members. To locate treaty annuity pay lists, you must know the number of the treaty to which the band adhered. Interest distribution lists are listed by band name or agency.

Band membership lists may also be available depending on the time period and location.

Enfranchisement lists, which record the names and former band affiliation of Status Indians who lost their status (either by marrying a white or non-status man for women, or in order to purchase reserve lands or gain the right to vote in federal elections) from 1920 to 1945 are open to the public. Individual case files for enfranchised individuals can be searched for by name in the online Government of Canada inventory.

Starting in 1951, a list of all registered Status Indians has been kept. The Indian Register includes the person's name, vital events, familial relationships, religion and band membership.

Special censuses of Aboriginal communities were also taken by Indian Agents, starting in 1871. In most cases, the detailed enumerations that listed every household, or even every individual, were not preserved and only the aggregate census reports were retained.

However, some did survive and can be found in the INAC records.

There were also very early "censuses", which were actually lists of Aboriginal people

receiving "presents", in Upper Canada (now Ontario). These lists mostly cover the 1830s to 1860s.

Remember, these records generally deal only with Status Indians or members of recognized bands.

Most pre-1910 LAC RG 10 records are available on microfilm and can be borrowed through the inter-institutional loan system. Records more recent than 1910 are restricted due to privacy laws and thus require special application and proof of next-of-kin status.

## **2. Government Correspondence and Administration Records**

The correspondence and administrative records of governments in Canada (colonial, federal and provincial) include vast amounts of information about Aboriginal people. Topics include the development and administration of reserves, social service provisions, individual requests for assistance and legal disputes of various kinds. All of these records have the potential to identify particular individuals and their relationships with others, and thus be genealogically valuable.

The main drawback of these records is their size and lack of index. This means a great deal of time and effort is required to use these records.

## **3. Publications and Research Notes of Historians and Anthropologists**

In the late 19th and 20th centuries, many historians and anthropologists studied the history and cultures of Aboriginal groups. Their published studies, and especially their research notes, can be of great value to researchers looking for information about their Aboriginal ancestors.

Published studies can be found in anthropological and historical journals; unpublished research notes can often be found in the archives of universities and museums. Obviously the former are easier to access, but the latter often provide the greatest benefit.

One excellent example is the Lyman Draper Collection. Draper was a historian who visited the Six

Nations people in Brantford and the Bay of Quinte and gathered many documents and notes in preparation for a book about Mohawk Chief Joseph Brant (a.k.a. Thayendinaga) and his family (which was never published). These records are found in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Microfilmed copies are available at Library and Archives Canada.

## **4. Private Papers**

Private papers of people who had dealings with Aboriginal people can also be helpful for researchers. These records vary widely from the private papers of government officials, which may include official or quasi-official records, to the personal diaries and letters of travelers. Their potential is enormous, but so is the effort required to locate and examine them.

The papers of Rev. John Strachan are an excellent example. During his long career, Rev. Strachan was very involved with Aboriginal people, both as a government representative and as a leader in the church. His papers include many references to Aboriginal people, including education records for Indian missions in Manitowaning on Manitoulin Island and Sault Ste. Marie, organized in the 1830s and 1840s. These papers are found at the Archives of Ontario.

## **CONCLUSION**

I hope I've convinced you that Aboriginal research in Ontario, while challenging, is not impossible. If you are diligent in your research, and critical in your perspective, you may be surprised at what you can learn.

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*Janice Nickerson is a regular contributor to Family Chronicle magazine.*