

RESOURCES FOR FIRST NATIONS GENEALOGICAL RESEARCH AT THE BC ARCHIVES

INTRODUCTION

Sources for aboriginal¹ family history research are to be found primarily in federal government records but also in provincial government and private records, many of which are incomplete. It is often necessary to consult records from a wide range of sources. This guide will focus on those which relate to BC First Nations and are available at the BC Archives, with references to related resources found elsewhere.

GETTING STARTED

For a general introduction to First Nations research at the BC Archives see our *First Nations Research Guide*. A number of the resources identified in *British Columbia Archives Genealogical Research Resources* are also relevant to finding information about aboriginal ancestors who resided in British Columbia. Both guides are available in hard copy in the Reference Room and in PDF format on our [web site](#).

Some useful published and online resources and guides are listed below. *Researching your aboriginal ancestry* and Russell's book both deal with federal government records at the National Archives of Canada (now part of Library and Archives Canada). Some of these records are available on microfilm at the BC Archives and will be discussed later.

- "Genealogy or family history research", in *Researching the Indian land question in BC*, Vancouver: Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, 1998. An updated version is available in [PDF format](#).
- Glenbow Library and Archives. [Metis Genealogy](#).
- McCardle, Bennett Ellen, "Indian status, membership and family history", in. *Indian history and claims: a research handbook*. 2 vol. Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1983, pp. 130-149. NW 970.52 M123
- Russell, Bill. *Indian Affairs records at the National Archives of Canada: a source for genealogical research*. Toronto: Ontario Genealogical Society, 1998. NW 929.1072 R961
- [Researching your aboriginal ancestry at Library and Archives Canada](#). Ottawa: National Library of Canada and National Archives of Canada, [2004].
- [Terminology Guide](#)
- Vancouver Public Library. [Aboriginal Ancestry Guide](#).

¹ See Appendix 1 for a note on terminology.

BC COLONIAL AND PROVINCIAL RECORDS

The main sources for relevant colonial and provincial records are the government and the churches.

1. *Birth, marriage, death and related records*

Civil registration of births, marriages and deaths – referred to as vital events – did not commence in BC until September 1872,² more than a year after BC had become a province. For the colonial period and prior to the introduction of civil registration, the records of births, marriages and deaths are often to be found in church baptismal, marriage and burial records as well as in the records of the Colonial Secretary for Vancouver Island and for British Columbia. Some church records can be found at the BC Archives, although they are usually copies of the originals which are located in various church and diocese archives. More frequently, these archives are the only repositories. Coroner's records, which date back to the colonial period, often have information about deaths not found elsewhere. Information about births, marriages and deaths may also be recorded in newspapers.

Even after 1871, and into the early years of the 20th century, many births, marriages and deaths were not reported to and recorded by the government. Responsibility for reporting events fell primarily on family, clergy and other individuals and compliance varied. District Registrars – often Government Agents – to whom vital events were to be reported were generally responsible for large areas of the province. Given the size of the province, the scattered and itinerant population, the remoteness of many settlements and habitations, and the transportation and communication challenges, it is not surprising that a certain number of events were never reported at all. Consequently, post-colonial church and coroner's records remain an important source of information. For a list of early non-official records in our collections see *Colonial and Other Early Records Relating to Births, Baptisms, Marriages, Deaths and Burials*.

Registration of aboriginal births, marriages and deaths was also impacted by legislated restrictions. From 1872 to 1877 and 1899 to 1916 "Indians" were specifically excluded from provincial vital events registration. In 1916, provincial legislation was amended to include the indigenous population and Indian Agents were appointed as district registrars for their respective agencies. However, until 1943 registration was not mandatory and depended on the individual Indian Agents. Special "Indian registration" forms were used until 1956 and include such information as tribal affiliation. Collected between 1916 and 1956, and including some delayed registrations pre-dating 1916, these registrations were filed separately, and therefore appear on separate microfilm reels.³

- Searching for historical birth, marriage and death records

The birth, marriage and death registration records kept by the BC Vital Statistics Agency can be searched on the BC Archives Genealogy Search database.⁴ Digital copies of the registrations are linked to many, but not all, of the record descriptions. Otherwise there are microfilm copies available at the BC Archives (and at selected repositories elsewhere).

² *The Registration of Births, Deaths, and Marriages Act, 1872* (SBC 1872, no. 26) came into force on 1 September 1872.

³ See [Guide to Using the BC Vital Statistics "Indian" Birth, Marriage And Death Registration Microfilm](#). Hereafter *Indian Registrations Guide*.

⁴ See the [search page](#) for the dates covered in each category.

- Searching for baptisms and colonial marriages

The church baptismal information and colonial marriages reported by churches to the Colonial Secretary are not part of the Vital Statistics Agency vital events registration records but are searchable on the BC Archives Genealogy Search. There are no digital images for either. Also, both are far from complete as not all the churches are represented.

The colonial marriages descriptions provide basic information, including where to find the original record in our collection.⁵ The data provided for the baptism entries were extracted from copies of church registers loaned to the BC Vital Statistics Agency. You will have to contact the church or diocese archives to view the original registers.

- A note on names

In addition to the usual variations in spelling and transcription errors, there are a number of issues in searching aboriginal names that need to be taken into account.

- *Variations in the way that aboriginal names are recorded on registrations and indexed.* Names in aboriginal languages in early records can be very difficult to search as there are no standard spellings. They are spelled according to how the person completing the registration form at the time thought the name sounded. Usually this appears in the index in the surname field with given name shown as "unknown".
- *Use of European names for aboriginals.* Many of the early registrations contained only one European name, either just a surname or just a given name. In such cases the word "unknown" has been inserted in the index for the missing surname or given name.
- *Names of brides and grooms in aboriginal marriage registrations.* A large number of early aboriginal marriage registrations contain only one European given name for both the bride and the groom (e.g. John unknown and Mary unknown). In such cases, if the name of the father of the bride and/or the groom was shown on the registration, those names were inserted in the index as the surname of the respective bride and groom (e.g., John, son of Peter, became John Peter, and Mary, daughter of Casimir, became Mary Casimir).

If a name search is unsuccessful, some other search options are to:

- Search these records by name of community or reserve, leaving given and surname fields blank. You could search for all records from a community, or restrict the search to a year or range of years. Community and reserve names may also have variant spellings, especially over time, so try various possibilities.
- Search through the microfilm of the registrations for the relevant time period. This can fairly easily be done on the separate "Indian Registrations" reels, especially the marriages and deaths before 1935 when the records were grouped by Indian Agency.⁶

⁵ GR-3044 Pre-confederation marriage records 1859-1872 B09707.

⁶ See the *Indian Registrations Guide* for a list of the pre-1935 marriage and death reels and the [Guide to Indian Bands and Agencies in British Columbia](#) for the names of agencies and what bands they were responsible for.

2. Coroner's records ca. 1859-1970

Coroners' records consist of inquests and inquiries, mostly into violent, unnatural and suspicious deaths. Inquests are investigations in which a coroner's jury ruled on the cause of death. Inquest files often contain witness statements, transcripts, autopsy reports, and findings. Inquiries are investigations conducted by a coroner alone and usually consist of a single form. Note that not all coroners' records between 1859 and 1970 have survived or are in the legal custody of the BC Archives. If there was an inquest or inquiry into a death, this has usually been noted on the death registration. In a number of cases, however, there are inquests or inquiries into deaths for which no death registration exists. They may be the only official record of a death. For information on how to locate inquest and inquiry records see the [Research Guide to Coroners' Records](#).

3. Wills and probate (estate) records

The BC Archives has copies of probated wills from 1861-1980. Our holdings of probate records date back to 1859 and, depending on the court registry, may go up to 1992. A will expresses the wishes of the decedent; the probate file shows how these wishes were carried out and often contains detailed information about the contents of the estate and also about the heirs. In cases where a person died without a will (intestate), there may still be a probate file. For information on how to look for probate records see the [Research Guide to Probate Case Files](#).

Note that if the deceased was a status Indian, living on a reserve, then the estate was handled by the Department of Indian Affairs and the file is part of the RG10 Indian Affairs records at Library and Archives Canada. Unlike the provincial probate files, these records are generally classified as restricted. See the **FEDERAL RECORDS** section below for more information.

4. Land records

As Indians living on a reserve were prohibited from pre-empting land from 1866-1953, the pre-emption records at the BC Archives will be of little use for this category. There was no prohibition, however, against individual Indians purchasing land from non-Indians. All private land records are held at the Land Title and Survey Authority.

5. Court records

Court records may provide some information about individuals involved in civil litigation or criminal prosecutions but specific cases may be difficult to track down without a date and geographic location. See the [Guide to Court Records at the BC Archives](#) for an overview of what we have and how to access them.

6. Hunting and trapline records

There are both provincial and federal hunting and trapline records, mostly for northern and central BC. For the federal records see below. Provincial records can be found primarily in GR-1085 which includes files on Indian traplines (1925-1940), trapline registers (1928-1976) and guide's licence registers (1927-1958).⁷ The trapline reference maps and sketches were removed from GR-1085 and can be found listed and described in Map Finding Aid, CM/E117.

⁷ Some records in GR-1085 are restricted but boxes 3-7 (trapline files) and 96-100 (trapline and guides' licence registers) are open.

This finding aid is particularly useful as the names of individuals appear for trappers' correspondence and guides' files from which maps were removed.

FEDERAL RECORDS

When the Colony of British Columbia joined Confederation in 1871, its responsibility for its aboriginal population and lands was transferred to the federal government, although the federal-provincial division was not always a clear one, especially in regards to lands. Consequently most post-colonial "Indian affairs" records are federal government records and are by and large found in the record series known as RG10 comprised of the historical records created by the Department of Indian Affairs and its predecessors. It includes correspondence and other files "on all aspects of Indian administration for both headquarters and the field offices."

While RG10 is the primary source for government records relating to Canada's Aboriginals, there is related material in other federal government record groups. Of these, however, we only have copies of records of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, ca. 1883-1915 (part of RG23). See [Aboriginal peoples – guide to the records of the Government of Canada](#), and [Indian Affairs Record Group 10 \(RG10\) Inventory](#) for information about other federal government records, as well as about the RG10 records.

1. *Indian Affairs records (RG10)*

The RG10 records probably contain most of the records useful for doing research into aboriginal ancestry and family history. Use the online guides on the LAC website to find about these records and how to search for them. Note that some historical records are still in the custody of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development.

Many, but not all, of the RG10 records relating to British Columbia that have been microfilmed are available at the BC Archives. See Appendix 1 of the *First Nations Research Guide* for a list of our RG10 record holdings. If you have the original NAC (National Archives of Canada) reel number or the RG10 volume number for a file or document, consult the *RG 10 Microfilm Conversion List*. If we have the reel, it will be on the list with the BC Archives reel number.⁸

The RG10 records at the BC Archives include:

- **Trapping and traplines.** Note that individuals are often not identified. See GR-0934, volumes 6735 and 6736. See also RG10, vols. 11290-11294 (not at BCA).
- **Education records.** Individual pupil records are restricted and are not found at the BCA. The School Files series consists of files dealing with all aspects of Indian school administration throughout Canada but not all files relating to schools and education for the years 1879-1953 are found here. The BC Archives copies of the School Files can be found on reels B09808-B09836 (GR-2686, NAC reels C-8135 – C-8163) and B01856-B01859 (GR-0934, NAC reels C-8134, C-8151, C-8152, and C-8754). Unrestricted files in this series have been microfilmed and digitized and are available [online](#). There is also a [list](#) showing which schools are on which reels. For residential schools in particular see [Residential School Records Resources](#) for information and links to guides about what is and is not available at Library and Archives Canada on the subject.

⁸ Note that LAC is in the process of digitizing the RG10 records.

- **Land and property records.** Allocations of parcels of reserve land – “locations” – were sometimes made to individual band members. In 1951 location tickets were replaced by certificates of possession, of occupations or notices of entitlement. Prior to 1951 this land could be passed on to heirs. (Russell, pp. 43-44)
- **Deceased Indian estates administration.** Access to estate files, unlike provincial probate files, may be restricted under federal privacy legislation. If a file is not restricted and has been microfilmed, it may be found in GR-1550.
- **Military records.** Enlistments, pensions, casualties, veterans, etc. Although the Department of Militia and Defence (WWI) and Department of National Defence (WWII) did not keep distinct records for Aboriginal soldiers who served in both world wars, the Department of Indian Affairs did. Records include correspondence, a list of casualties, and files relating to separation allowances, assigned pay, pensions and estates of deceased aboriginal soldiers. Those which have been microfilmed and are at the BC Archives can be found in GR-1550 (vols. 6762-6765, 6782-6806) and GR-0934 (vols. 6762-6765) See also RG10, vol. 11288-11290, and vols. 11154-11155 which relate specifically to BC. These records include “general files relating to enlistments and national registration as well as dependents’ allowances, Veterans’ Land Act (VLA) grants, training, deferments, and refusals to report. There is also a series of individual agency enlistment files.”
- **Indian census records.** From 1871-1917 the Department of Indian Affairs conducted an annual “Indian census” but these were aggregate censuses for each band, not nominal returns. After 1917 the frequency was changed to every 5 years. Although detailed census records (i.e. full nominal rolls) were expected to be kept in agency offices, they “either have not survived or have yet to be transferred to NA custody”. (Russell, p. 27) Volumes 12608-12610 (RG10) “contain a collection of British Columbia agency census books [ca. 1920-1940] from the Babine, Kamloops, Kootenay, Thompson, Lytton, Nicola, and Okanagan agencies.” (Russell, p. 27, n.35). For general federal census records see below.
- **Law enforcement records,** e.g. murder, theft, Indian Act violations. Also other legal matters, e.g. divorce.

The BC Archives **does not** have copies of the following RG10 records

- Paylists: There is a 100 year holdback. As only Treaty 8 is applicable to BC, BC coverage is limited.
- Band and membership lists and membership registers. Access is restricted.
- Social records. Case files are often found at the field office level (regional and district/agency); many are in LAC custody at regional records centres (e.g. Vancouver). Records are restricted. See also RG29 (Department of Health and Welfare) records (not at BCA).

2. **Federal census records**

The first federal census which included BC was the 1881 census. The indigenous population was not systematically enumerated until the 1901 census which enumerated them by Indian Agency. There were 6 agencies, established in 1881: Cowichan, Fraser River, Kamloops, Kwawkwalth, Okanagan and West Coast. Information collected includes place of birth, racial origin, religion, names and ages of children, etc. The census records for 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 are available on microfilm at the BC Archives. They are also [online](#) and searchable on the LAC website. For Vancouver Island for these years see the [Census section](#) on the viHistory website which includes information on First Nations enumeration for 1881 and 1891. The 1921 census is currently only available through Ancestry.ca.

APPENDIX 1

Terminology

While “Aboriginal”, “First Nations”, “Indigenous” and “Indian” are often taken to more or less mean the same thing, “Indian” also has a very specific legal meaning. Someone can be considered an Indian based on the Canadian Constitution but not be an Indian according to the *Indian Act*. The difference is whether they are status or non-status. The latter is a person with Indian/Aboriginal/First Nations ancestry and cultural affiliation but is not registered as an Indian under the *Indian Act*, because they do not meet the eligibility criteria. The *Indian Act* (RSC 1985, c. I-5)⁹ defines an Indian as “a person, who pursuant to this Act, is registered as an Indian or is entitled to be registered as an Indian.” Status eligibility is determined by section 5 of the Act. For more information on applying for status see the Indian and Northern Affairs web site (www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/).

The Métis are those people of mixed European and First Nations ancestry, historically identified with the fur trade, who see themselves as “a distinct aboriginal nation based on a shared history, a common culture ..., a unique language ..., extensive kinship connections from Ontario westward, a distinct way of life, a traditional territory and a collective consciousness.”¹⁰ They are recognized in the *Constitution Act* of 1982 but not in the *Indian Act*. Section 35(2) of the *Constitution Act* states: “In this Act, “aboriginal peoples of Canada” includes the Indian, Inuit and Métis peoples of Canada.” A 2003 decision by the Supreme Court of Canada in *R. v Powley* ([2003] 2 S.C.R.) further established to whom the term Métis applied.

*The term “Métis” in s. 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 does not encompass all individuals with mixed Indian and European heritage; rather, it refers to distinctive peoples who, in addition to their mixed ancestry, developed their own customs, and recognizable group identity separate from their Indian or Inuit and European forebears. A Métis community is a group of Métis with a distinctive collective identity, living together in the same geographical area and sharing a common way of life.*¹¹

Most archival records pertaining to the Metis are to be found at the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) or the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives (HBCA). LAC has a [detailed guide](#) to Metis Scrip records. See also the [Metis National Council Historical Online Database](#). For further information about the Métis in British Columbia and how to apply for membership see www.mnbc.ca/.

⁹ See <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-5/> for most current version.

¹⁰ See, for example, <http://www.mn-s.ca/pages/about.html>.

¹¹ <http://scc-csc.lexum.com/scc-csc/scc-csc/en/2076/1/document.do>

APPENDIX 2

URLs for links used

- BC Archives - Genealogy Search
<http://search-collections.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/Genealogy/BasicSearch>
- BC Archives - Guide to Court Records
<http://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/Court-Records-guide.pdf>
- BC Archives - Indian Registrations Guide
http://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/Indian_registrations_guide.pdf.
- BC Archives - Reference Guides
<http://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/archives-collections/guides/>
- BC Archives - Research Guide to Coroners Records
<http://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/coronersguide200705.pdf>
- BC Archives - Research Guide to Probate Case Files
http://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/assets/probate_guide200906.pdf
- Glenbow - Metis Genealogy
www.glenbow.org/collections/archives/genealogy/
- LAC - Aboriginal Peoples – Guide to the Records of the Government of Canada
<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/the-public/005-1143-e.html>
- LAC - Census pages
<http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/Pages/census.aspx>
- LAC - Guide to Indian Bands and Agencies in BC
www.ubcic.bc.ca/files/PDF/IndianBands.pdf
- LAC - Guide to Metis Scrip Records
www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/metis-scrip/index-e.html.
- LAC - Researching Your Aboriginal Ancestry at LAC
www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/022/f2/022-607.002-e.pdf
- LAC - Residential School Records Resources
www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/resources-researchers/Pages/residential-schools-resource-sheets.aspx#a
- LAC - School Files series digitized microfilm
<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/microform-digitization/006003-110.02-e.php?&q2=2&interval=50&sk=0&PHPSESSID=g5v2mpkudf6nsuuk2r4g14p307>
- LAC - School Files Series list of schools
www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/006003/f2/006003-e.pdf
- LAC - Terminology Guide
www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/aboriginal-heritage/Documents/Terminology%20Guide%20%20Aboriginal%20Heritage.pdf
- Metis National Council Historical Online Database
<http://sunsite.ualberta.ca/Projects/MNC/>
- UBCIC - “Genealogy or family history research”
<http://www.ubcic.bc.ca/Resources/rilq.htm#axzz3Sz4aVDsF>
- Vancouver Island Census
<http://vihistory.ca/content/census/census.php>
- Vancouver Public Library - Aboriginal Ancestry Guide
<http://guides.vpl.ca/genealogy/aboriginal>