

On the Origin of Hagionyms in North American French Surnames

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Most surnames of French origin in North America were borne by migrants from various parts of France, so it is hardly surprising that the two sets should share many commonalities. One of these involves the existence of hagionymic family names, for example, *Saint-Pierre*, *Saint-Jean*, *Sainte-Marie*, and the like. A significant difference between them, however, is that the ones in present-day France invariably stem from surnames that were taken directly from hagiotoponyms, of which there were a great many, whereas the majority of those in North America originate from nicknames — the so-called *dit* names — of various types. Prominent among these were the numerous *noms de guerre* that discharged soldiers passed on to their descendants.

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Introduction

The term *hagionym*, from Greek *hagios* “sacred, holy” and *onyma* “name,” is used in onomastics to designate placenames (toponyms) and surnames (anthroponyms) that are derived from the names of saints. Normally, hagionymic surnames are topographical in nature, that is to say, based on an individual’s place of origin. Though rare in English,¹ such surnames are widespread in European countries with a long-standing Catholic tradition. Thus, as explained by Faure et al., “[n]o sólo en España, sino en otros países de gran tradición católica como Portugal, Italia or Francia, son muy frecuentes los apellidos procedentes de nombres de santos o santas. En la mayor parte de los casos, estos apellidos proceden de nombres de poblaciones” (2005: 677–678).²

That is particularly true in France where, as noted by Morlet, “les noms de famille commençant par saint représentent presque tous des n[oms] de localités” (1997: 874).³ One might expect that the same would hold true for *saint* names in North American French (NAF) since the vast majority of them come from France, but this is not the case. The reason, as I will try to show in this study, is that most of them come from bynames — the so-called *dit* names, as we will see — that have more than one source.

Hagionyms in NAF

Jetté and Lécuyer's (1988) index of French-Canadian family names borne by married men up until 1825 comprises two sections, one which lists the actual surnames (*patronymes*) and the other the main orthographical variants (*variantes orthographiques*) and nicknames (*surnoms*). What is interesting to note is that there are over thirteen times more hagionyms in the second section than in the first. This is a clear indication that most *saint* names in Québec and Acadia were not originally surnames, as they were in France, but aliases.

However, this does not mean that the 425-odd names listed by Jetté and Lécuyer in the latter category correspond to a similar number today. First of all, as is the case with all the surnames that the original migrants bore upon their arrival to North America, many of them have disappeared through simple attrition. In other words, many men either never married, had childless unions, or had all-female offspring. This could have happened within the first generation or the lineage could have simply petered out later on for the same reasons. Moreover, the byname could have simply been eliminated at some point in favor of the surname.

Secondly, another reason why there are far fewer *different* surnames of secondary origin, including hagionyms, in NAF than there are actual entries in Jetté and Lécuyer's list is that a great many of them were borne by more than one individual and, in some cases, by a great many more. For example, the nickname *Lafleur* is associated with 71 migrants bearing distinct surnames, though only 6 of them actually have modern-day descendants (to which can be added some who had a forebear named Pierre Lafleur). As far as hagionyms are concerned, one can cite as examples 30 individuals with the nickname *Saint-Louis*, 37 with *Saint-Pierre*, and 58 with *Saint-Jean* according to Jetté and Lécuyer.⁴

The *dit* names

As was noted at the outset, hagionyms in France originated as surnames proper that were derived from placenames. The fact that this was generally not the case in North America does not mean that this type did not exist at all, though they are few in number today. Still extant, and given in their modern French or americanized abbreviated forms, are *Ste-Croix* brought over by Jacques-Guillaume SAINT-CROIX from Jersey in the Channel Islands, *St-Pierre* by Pierre (de) SAINT-PIERRE dit Dessaint from Rouen in Seine-Maritime (though some migrants having this as a nickname also left descendants), *St-Yves* by Jacques SAINT-YVES also from Rouen, *St. Julien* by Louis-Constant SAINT-JULIEN d'Erneville dit Cadet from Bordeaux in Gironde, and *St. Romain* by Antoine SAINT-ROMAIN from Sauzet in Lot.

Barring a few exceptions, all of the other NAF *saint* names come from nicknames, which are officially known as *dit* names.⁵ The word *dit* literally means "said," but in this context it is best rendered by "alias" or "aka." To give a typical example, my own ancestor was Philippe Destroismaisons dit PICARD for the obvious reason that he hailed from Montreuil in what was then the province of Picardie but which is now part of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region. As happened in many other cases, either the surname or the nickname was discarded at some point, so that today all of his descendants either go simply by *Picard* or *Destroismaisons*.

Types of hagianyms

Nicknames like *Picard* that were based on an individual's place of origin were very common, and this obviously included hagiotoponyms since there were so many of them in France. This first type of hagianym, then, is habitational in nature, and among the extant NAF *dit* names that come from clearly identifiable placenames, we have *St. Esprit* which was brought over by François Plantier dit SAINT-ESPRIT who was from Pont-Saint-Esprit in Gard, *St-Gelais* which originated with Simon Pradet dit Laforge and SAINT-GELAIS who is listed as being from Niort in Deux-Sèvres but who must have had some connection with Saint-Gelais which is just a few miles from there, *St-Jules* which is an alteration of *Saint-Jude* that came over with Jacques Aveline dit SAINT-JUDE and which was a parish so named in his hometown of Troyes in Marne, *St-Marseille* which is an alteration of the nickname borne by Étienne Giroux dit SAINT-MARCEL which in turn was in all likelihood a misapprehension of his hometown Saint-Martial-sur-Isop in Haute-Vienne, and *St. Ours* which is from Jacques-Amable Payan dit SAINT-OURS who was the place so named in Québec.

One telltale sign that a *dit* name is based on a location is when it is preposed by *de* "from," though that location may not correspond exactly to an individual's actual hometown. For instance, Louis-Charles Conscient dit de SAINT-AUBIN who is the ancestor of the present-day bearers of *St-Aubin* was from Bolbec in Seine-Maritime, *St-Michel* comes from François Circé dit/sieur de SAINT-MICHEL who was from Paris in Île-de-France, and *St-François* which originated with François-Michel Messier, sieur de SAINT-FRANÇOIS, who was born in Québec, the son of Michel from Saint-Denis-le-Thiboult in Seine-Maritime. One possibility is that these placenames could have referred to something other than townships, as was the case with *St-Roch* which, according to Jacob (2006: 166), was the parish in Paris where Jacques Lagarde dit SAINT-ROCH was from.

The second type of hagianymic byname consists of an individual's given or family name to which *Saint* is prefixed. One may suspect that this sanctification, so to speak, had an ironic aspect to it, the recipient probably being anything but saintly. At any rate, among the surnames with such an origin that are still around today, we find *St-Antoine* from Antoine Vacher dit SAINT-ANTOINE, *St-Charles* from Charles Plat dit SAINT-CHARLES, *St-Denis* from Jacques Denis dit SAINT-DENIS, *St-Marie* from Louis Marie dit SAINTE-MARIE, *St-Germain* from Germain Gauthier dit SAINT-GERMAIN, *St-Jacques* from Jacques-Joseph Cheval dit Chevalier and SAINT-JACQUES, *St-Jean* from Jean Anctil dit SAINT-JEAN and Jean-Baptiste Laperche dit SAINT-JEAN, *St-Julien* from Joseph-Antoine Julien dit SAINT-JULIEN, *St-Laurent* from Pierre Laurent dit SAINT-LAURENT, *St-Martin* from Jean Martin dit SAINT-MARTIN, *St-Pierre* from Pierre Legros dit SAINT-PIERRE and Pierre Petit dit SAINT-PIERRE, *St-Thomas* from Thomas Letendre dit SAINT-THOMAS, and *St-Vincent* from Vincent Chamereau dit SAINT-VINCENT.

The third type of *Saint* name, and the most common by far, was brought over by French soldiers from various regiments who chose to settle in New France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries rather than go back home when their military stint was over. The result of this mass colonization is that "the *noms de guerre* of the French soldiers who came to New France make up the majority of all nicknames that

we find in the Province of Québec” (Lépine, 2004: 24). And why were there so many? The simple reason was that instead of a serial number, every French soldier was assigned a *nom de guerre* which was tacked onto his family name.⁶

Now one might expect that when those soldiers who were mustered out of the army and decided to remain in New France mostly as farmers would have discarded their *nom de guerre* since, just like a military serial number, it would have served no purpose in civilian life. However, such was not the case for the reasons that Lépine adduces:

In 1669, Louis XIV creates the official structure of the militia. There are no longer any regular troops in the country but a large proportion of the population has served in the army. The martial spirit is still present. All the male inhabitants of the country from 16 to 60 years old are divided into companies under the orders of captains, lieutenants, and ensigns. The officers of the *Régiment de Carignan* become *seigneurs*. The former soldiers become militiamen. The new *seigneurs* continue to call the tenant farmers by their *noms de guerre*. The soldier-*censitaires* hand down their nicknames to their wives and children. (2004: 21)

It is one thing to know that most NAF hagionymic surnames come from erstwhile *noms de guerre*, and quite another to determine their individual origin or significance. Unfortunately, little if anything is known about why Soldier X chose or was assigned Nickname Y except in the case where his hagionymic nickname was derived from his given or family name. Thus, among the cases that were cited above as being of that type, SAINT-ANTOINE, SAINT-CHARLES, SAINT-DENIS, SAINTE-MARIE, SAINT-GERMAIN, SAINT-MARTIN, SAINT-PIERRE, and SAINT-THOMAS were *noms de guerre*.

Following is a list of the other extant military *dit* hagionyms whose origins remain undetermined along with information on their first North American bearers:⁷

St-Amand

Louis André dit SAINT-AMAND from Taillebourg in Charente-Maritime

St-Amour

Pierre Payet dit SAINT-AMOUR from Sainte-Florence in Gironde

St-André

Pierre Botquin dit SAINT-ANDRÉ from Saumur in Maine-et-Loire

St-Arnaud

Paul Bertrand dit SAINT-ARNAUD from Verneuil-sur-Avre in Eure

Paul Bertrand dit Saint-Arnaud (Jean et Marie Nées) de Verneuil-sur-Avre Paul Bertrand dit Saint-Arnaud (Jean et Marie Nées) de Verneuil-sur-Avre Paul Bertrand dit Saint-Arnaud (Jean et Marie Nées) de Verneuil-sur-Avre Paul Bertrand dit Saint-Arnaud (Jean et Marie Nées) de Verneuil-sur-Avre

— *Paul Bertrand dit Saint-Arnaud (Jean and Marie Nées) from Verneuil-sur-Avre in Eure (Haute-Normandie) m. Gabrielle Baribeau (François and Perrine Moreau) in Batiscan, QC in 1697.*

St-Georges

Jacques (de) Laporte dit SAINT-GEORGES from Nocé in Orne

St-Germain

Jean Gazaille dit SAINT-GERMAIN from Sarrazac in Dordogne

St-Hilaire

Guillaume Guérin dit SAINT-HILAIRE from Saint-Symphorien-des-Monts in Manche

St-Maurice

Jean Desforges dit SAINT-MAURICE from Saint-Georges-Blancaneix in Dordogne

- Pierre Legros dit **Saint-Pierre** (Jean-Claude and Jeanne Coulardeau) from Roulans in Doubs (Franche-Comté) m. Marie-Françoise Foisy (François and Marie-Élisabeth Végeard) in Verchères, QC in 1761
- Pierre Petit dit **Saint-Pierre** (Jean and Marie Blot) from Évreux in Eure (Haute-Normandie) m. Judith Miville (Pierre and Marie-Anne Roy) in Québec in 1758
- Pierre Legros dit **Saint-Pierre** (Jean-Claude et Jeanne Coulardeau) de Roulans dans le Doubs (Franche-Comté) m. Marie-Françoise Foisy (François et Marie-Élisabeth Végeard) à Verchères en 1761
- Pierre Petit dit **Saint-Pierre** (Jean et Marie Blot) d'Évreux dans l'Eure (Haute-Normandie) m. Judith Miville (Pierre et Marie-Anne Roy) au Québec en 1758
- Pierre Legros dit **Saint-Pierre** (Jean-Claude and Jeanne Coulardeau) from Roulans in Doubs (Franche-Comté) m. Marie-Françoise Foisy (François and Marie-Élisabeth Végeard) in Verchères, QC in 1761
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Offshoots

As can be seen in Picard (2010), for example, a great many surnames underwent various modifications after their arrival in New France. For example, *Dépault* was altered to *Dépeault*, *Dépôt*, *Despault*, and *Despots*, *Devaux* branched out to *Devault*, *Deveau*, *Deveault*, and *Deveaux*, and *Ouellet* developed into *Ouelet*, *Ouelette*, *Ouellete*, *Ouellette*, and *Ouellon*. This was generally not the case with hagianyms, however, at least not in French Canada. The only exceptions are *St-Amant* from *St-Amand*, *St-Arnault* and *St-Arneault* from *St-Arnaud*, *Cyrenne* from *St-Cyr*, *Georges* from *St-Georges*, and *St-Marseille* from *St-Marcel* (which did not survive).

The story is entirely different when it comes to the hagianyms that were borne by the waves of French-Canadian immigrants who moved to English-speaking parts of North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. All were modified in one way or another, ranging from simple orthographical substitutions like *St-* to *St.* to wholesale phonological alterations like *St-Aubin* to *Centerbar* (see Picard, 2012; 2013 for details). Following is a list of these anglicized hagianyms:

St-Amand, St-Amant > Saintamand, Saintamant, Santimaw, St. Amand, St. Amant
St-Amour > Saintamour, Santamore, Santimore, St. Amour
St-André > Saintandre, St. Andre
St-Antoine > Anthony
Saint-Aubin > Centerbar, Saintaubin, St. Aubin
St-Charles > Saintcharles, St. Charles
St-Clair > Saintclair, St. Clair
St-Côme > Saintcome, Sancomb, St. Come
St-Cyr > Saintcyr, Sears, St. Cyr
St-Denis > Dennis, Saintdenis, Saint-dennis, Santhany, Santhony, St. Denis, St. Dennis, St. Denny
St-Croix > Saintcroix, St. Croix
St-Marie > Saintmarie, Saintmary, St. Marie, St. Mary
St-Esprit > Sanspree, Santspree, St. Esprit
St-François > Saintfrancis, St. Francis
St-Gelais > Saintgelais, Singelais, St. Gelais
St-Georges > Saintgeorge, Saint-georges, St. George, St. Georges
Saint-Germain > Germaine, Saintgermain, Saintgermaine, St. Germain, St. Germaine
St-Hilaire > Sainthilaire, St. Hilaire
St-Jacques > Saintjacques, Saintjames, Saintjock, St. Jacques, St. James, St. Jock
St-Jean > Saintjean, Saintjohn, St. Jean, St. John
St-Laurent > Saintlaurent, Saintlawrence, St. Laurent, St. Lawrence
St-Louis > Saintlouis, St. Louis
St-Martin > Saintmartin, St. Martin
St-Michel > Mitchell, Saintmichel, St. Michel
St-Ours > Saintours, St. Ores, St. Ours
St-Pierre > Saintpeter, Saintpeters, Saintpierre, Sampier, Sempier, St. Peter, St. Peters, St. Pierre
St-Roch > St. Rock
St-Romain > Saintromain, St. Romain, St. Roman
St-Sauveur > Saintsauveur, St. Sauveur
St-Thomas > Saintthomas, St. Thomas
St-Vincent > Saintvincent, St. Vincent
St-Yves > Saintyves, St. Yves

Conclusion

If the only French hagnonyms in North America had come from surnames as they did in France, they would be very few in number since these were only borne by relatively few immigrants. The reason they are so widespread, as I have tried to show, is that so many settlers had nicknames, a goodly number of which were hagnonymic. Most of these settlers were former soldiers,⁸ and since *dit* names were obligatory in the military and continued to be used when these former soldiers continued to serve in militias, many of them came to replace the original surnames in subsequent generations. Today, these erstwhile *noms de guerre*, which comprised a significant number of hagnonyms, as well as the many variants they have given rise to can be found all over North America as a result of successive migrations out of Québec and Acadia.

Notes

- ¹ For example, Reaney and Wilson (2005) cite only four such names, all of which are from placenames, viz., *St Barbe* (> *Simbarb*) from Sainte-Barbe-en-Poitou in Haute-Vienne (now Saint-Barbant), *St John* (> *Sinjin*) from Saint-Jean-le-Thomas in Manche, *St Nicholas* (> *Sennicles*) from St Nicholas-at-Wade in Kent, and *St Quintin* from Saint-Quentin-des-Isles in Eure.
- ² Translation: “not only in Spain but in other countries with a long Catholic tradition like Portugal, Italy or France, surnames that come from the names of male or female saints are very frequent. In the majority of cases, these surnames come from placenames.”
- ³ Translation: “most family names that begin with saint represent placenames.”
- ⁴ Though proportionately the same, the numbers given by Jacob (2006: 316) are much higher since they are based on data from the PRDH website which lists all the orthographical variants on record.
- ⁵ The exceptions include *St-Clair* which is a francization of English *Sinclair*, *St-Ange* and *St-Fleur* which are from Haiti and thus of unknown French provenance (if any), and *St-Onge* which is an alteration of *Saintonge*.
- ⁶ The other categories of *noms de guerre* identified by Lépine (2004) include (1) place of origin, e.g., Jean Deslandes dit CHAMPIGNY (a town near Paris), (2) military activity, e.g., Jean-Baptiste Leriche dit LA-SONDE, a surgeon (from *la sonde* “the probe”), (3) surname alteration, e.g., Jacques Rivière dit LARIVIÈRE, (4) vegetation, e.g., Hubert Ranger dit LAVIOLETTE (from *la violette* “the violet”), and (5) personal characteristic, e.g., Étienne Audibert dit LAJEUNESSE (from *la jeunesse* “(the) youth”).
- ⁷ Non-military *dit* hagionyms whose origins remain unaccounted for are *St-Amand* first borne by Michel Lebre dit SAINT-AMAND from Dinan in Côtes-d’Armor, *St. Come* by Pierre Gagné dit SAINT-CÔME, grandson of Pierre from Igé in Orne, *St-Cyr* by Pierre Deshayes dit SAINT-CYR from an unknown location in France, *St-Germain* in part by Charles Lemaire dit SAINT-GERMAIN from Thurles in Ireland, *St-Louis* by Jean-Baptiste Gadiou dit SAINT-LOUIS, son of Gilles from La Flotte in Charente-Maritime, *St-Ours* in part by Louis Béchet dit SAINT-OURS, a descendant of Yves from an unknown location in France, and *St-Sauveur* by Pierre-Henri Dominé dit SAINT-SAUVEUR from Vitry-le-François in Marne.
- ⁸ As estimated by Lépine, “70% of all our French ancestors were soldiers when they arrived in the country” (2004: 24).

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