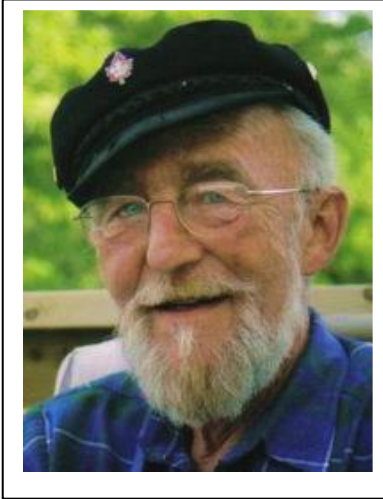


The Family Historian

Patrick Wohler

Column 209



Presbyterian records

The Archives of the Presbyterian Church in Canada is the 'mother lode' of documentation for those researching Presbyterian ancestors. The exception to this is if the congregation of your ancestor opted for Church Union in 1925. In that case their records would be at the United Church of Canada Archives.

A general knowledge of church organization can help in understanding and finding the documents you want. The basic unit is the 'congregation' with its minister and elected group of elders. This is the level at which baptisms and marriages took place and were recorded.

The 'presbytery' is made up of the minister and a ruling elder from each of the constituent congregations. This is the level at which decisions are made about who will be ordained, approval of calls of ministers to congregations and important decisions about church property. If an ancestor was a minister then this level of record may be very important to you.

The presbyteries are grouped into 'synods' of which there are eight in Canada. All members of the constituent presbyteries attend. This level usually looks after church camps and provides spiritual and educational renewal for its members.

The court of final appeal is the 'General Assembly' which meets once a year and deals with church-wide issues.

The collection and preservation of documents by the church began in 1879 and the archives itself was founded in 1973. A modern climate-controlled facility for them was completed in 1998.

The collection includes over 85 cubic metres of textual documents, thousands of photos, over a million documents on microfilm and lots more. They have a comfortable reading/research room with two microfilm reader/printers and a photocopier.

It is a busy archives with over 3,000 researchers being helped each year. If you are one of the 85% who cannot get to their premises, there is a research fee of about \$25/hr. If you intend to visit them it is a good idea to make an appointment.

The records are organized under General Assembly, Synods, Presbyteries, Congregations and Individual ministers etc. Research is facilitated by online finding aids which frequently lead you to archival descriptions of the separate fonds. The descriptions are actually on the Archeion database (Archives Assoc. of Ontario) but the transfers back and forth are seamless.

The records of the various congregations are organized by their location and include the baptisms, marriages and a brief history of the congregation. Rarely will death or burial records be found because these were considered to be more of a private family nature. They also have a very useful guide to genealogical research at their archives which is well worth reading.

The website for the Archives of the Presbyterian Church in Canada is located at www.presbyterianarchives.ca and the menu in the left margin will help you to navigate wherever you want to go. It is very user-friendly and highly informative.

You can also contact the archivist, Ms Kim Arnold, at 416-441-1111 ext 310 or by e-mail at karnold@presbyterian.ca. Their mailing address is 50 Wynford Drive, Toronto ON M3C 1J7.