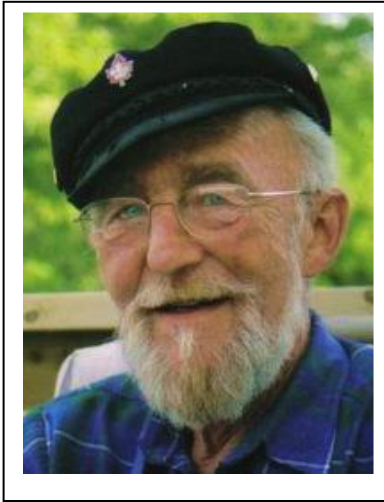


### What's It Worth?



I am sure most of us have encountered amounts of money that our ancestors either earned or spent on something and wondered what that really meant in today's currency. Now don't get your hopes up, I don't have an easy answer for you. I was recently faced with such a problem and did a bit of research.

Most conversion formulas are based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) but others are based on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the Gross Domestic Product per capita (GDP/C), and the unskilled wage scales (UW).

There are at least three different organizations that maintain web-based conversion utilities and I tried them all. I arbitrarily chose \$100.00 in 1820 as my base and tried to convert it to current values. The answers were in American dollars but that is easy to convert to Canadian dollars if it is important.

The first one, <[eh.net/hmit/compare](http://eh.net/hmit/compare)>, covers the period 1790–2004 and gives you a choice of using any of the four bases of comparison. The results of the conversion were: (CPI)\$1602.30; GDP/C) \$2733.29; (GDP) \$22,570.15; (UW) \$22,570.15.

A second one, <[www.westegg.com/inflation](http://www.westegg.com/inflation)>, covers 1800-2005 and uses only the CPI. Their conversion gave me \$1204.24. The third, <[www.minneapolis.org/research/data/us/calc](http://www.minneapolis.org/research/data/us/calc)>, also used the CPI and came up with \$2426.00. Clearly this is not an exact science, in fact it is little better than "your guess is as good as mine".

There are also other factors that have to be taken into account. The relative values of things change over time. A cow was more valuable to our ancestors than it is today. Some professions, like medicine, have become a lot more valuable today because of the increased costs of training. Technological advances have played a major role in changing product values. In 1939 most urban families would not have a car whereas today many of them have several. Social and cultural changes have had a significant impact on our value system.

In short, I don't believe that we can come up with a realistic estimate of what an ancestor's dollar is worth today. However, all is not lost. I think it makes better sense to compare income and expense figures of the same time period.

In 1857, a recent immigrant to Ottawa (Richard Lester) made \$0.80 per day digging a trench and \$1.00/day as a night watchman. His rent was \$3.00 per month. This gives us something to help us understand the economics of his life.

Most of our ancestors were farmers and did not have wages but in 1851, a farmer in Lakefield Ontario wrote home that he had earned £1/10/0 for plowing a field. The cost of his plow was £2/1/6. He bought 24 acres for £30 a few years later. By looking at all his data together, we can get a better picture.

Marcel Trudel, a pre-eminent French Canadian historian tried to do this in 1956 for New France. He estimated a day's labour at 2 Livres. I am sure that he is way off in his estimate. The 1653 Census shows that Surgeons were earning 100-150 Livres per year. The higher trades like cabinetmaking earned about 100Livres and the others ranged from 60 to 100 Livres per year. At 2 Livres per day, the labourer would be earning in the vicinity of 600Livres a year. I don't think so.

Hard data on early wages is scarce for most places. In Great Britain the average daily wage for labour in 1800, the era when many of our ancestors emigrated, was 23 old pence (d). It must be noted that it took 240 of these to make one pound sterling. By 1875, it had doubled. It is not the best guide in the world but it can help to understand the costs and income of our ancestors in Canada.

So lets take another look at contemporary correspondence, diaries and record books and, not only from our own family, but from others at the same time and place that are available in archives, to develop a fuller picture of our ancestors' lives.