

CANADIAN ARCHIVES SERVICE

During the centuries when Canada was a French or British colony, major decisions on its affairs were made in Paris and London, not Quebec or Ottawa. For this reason, many records preserved in France and Great Britain are, for all practical purposes, part of the archives of Canada. Access to their contents is essential if we are to understand the motives and personalities that determined policy in colonial days. Efforts have, therefore, been made for many years to secure copies of them, in order that the texts might be readily available for the use of Canadian scholars.

Such copies are specially important to historians and other interested in the history of New France. When Montreal surrendered to the British in 1760, the terms of the capitulation authorized the Governor and Intendant of New France (the two senior officials of the colony) to take with them to France the central records of the French administration. Unfortunately almost all these records have since disappeared. We know that most of them were landed safely at La Rochelle, and that a few years later they were removed to Rochefort; but there the trail ends. They may have been destroyed in a fire that occurred in 1786, or they may have been burned by revolutionaries. There is a remote possibility that they may still survive, concealed in some unsuspected hiding-place. But this seems unlikely, and we must turn to the archives in Paris, where the colonial files of the King and his Ministers are preserved, to trace the history of New France in any detail.

It is interesting to find that the first person sent to France by the Government of Canada to examine these files and secure copies of some of them was none other than Louis Joseph Papineau, who visited Paris in the 1840's. The transcripts he secured were bound in ten volumes. Four of these are still in the possession of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec. As the Public Archives did not exist in those days, the other six were placed in the Library of Parliament, and were destroyed with the library when the Parliament Buildings in Montreal were burned in 1849. Just a century ago, Georges Barthlémi Faribault was sent to France to copy documents there. The printed catalogue published by the Library of Parliament in 1858 lists the transcripts he brought home. Unfortunately, the transcripts themselves have vanished. The oldest copies now in the possession of the Public Archives are contained in a stout volume of 587 pages compiled by the Jesuit, Father Martin, in 1857.

Started in 1872

The Public Archives came into existence in 1872, and the following year the Abbé Verreau went to Paris to make a survey of material of interest to Canada in the great collections there. This was the first of several such surveys undertaken by the department. The last and best known was carried out by J. Edmond Roy, who compiled a formidable 1100-page guide published by the Archives in 1911. Meanwhile the copying of documents, as distinct from the preliminary task of examining them and listing items found to relate to Canada, had begun on a considerable scale. Sometimes as many as a score of copyists were employed, and many hundreds of volumes of transcripts have been secured for the Manuscript Division in Ottawa. The size of the staff has varied with circumstances, but the work of copying documents has now continued steadily for many years, except in wartime.

In London, copying began in 1882, and here again hundreds of volumes of transcripts were prepared and sent to Ottawa. Although the majority of these represented material in the Public Record Office, copying was not confined to official documents. Private papers frequently throw as much light, or even more, on events; and the Public Archives has hunted out many valuable items, and copied many thousands of pages, from such great collections as the Department of Manuscripts of the British