CHAPTER ONE

OLD FRENCH RECORDS

The purpose of this chapter is to briefly explain the background of old French records and give you guidelines on extracting vital information.

The oldest register in France is from the parish of Givry near Chalon-sur-Saône. It is divided into two sections covering marriages and deaths from 1334 to 1357. Slowly the use of registers became accepted. By the early 15th century, many bishops and priests were keeping registers. These contained only the names of rich or famous people at first, but gradually commoners were also entered. During the latter part of the 15th century, bishops ordered burial registers to be kept. By 1539, 35 out of the 90 departments of France were keeping some sort of register.

The ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts in 1539, standardized the keeping of civil and criminal registers. This ordinance obligated the priest to keep death registers noting the time, day, month, and year of death and the location of burial by parish and village. The names of the deceased and surviving relatives were also recorded, as well as the names of godparents and occupations of parents. Baptismal records were not kept until later. Rules for keeping the registers were given with the stipulation that if the rules were not kept, the registers would be taken under royal custody.

Priests keeping the records had to provide witnesses and have the entry notarized, either by themselves or by an appointed notary. Each year the registers were subject to inspection.

Unfortunately, few of the parishes complied with these laws. The keeping of registers was erratic throughout the rest of the 15th and early 16th centuries.

The 24th session of the Council of Trent canonized the rules governing registers. It became law that all priests in charge of parishes keep baptismal, marriage, and burial records. Thus, shortly after 1563, more parishes began keeping these three registers, many of which were written entirely in Latin.

The Ordinance of Blois in 1579 called for an announcement of banns over three successive feast days and gave persons the opportunity to testify for or against a marriage. The approval of parents or guardians was necessary; otherwise one could be tried for kidnapping. This ordinance made priests or vicars responsible for recording baptisms, marriages, and burials. They were allowed to charge fees for creating each entry, with the fees being held as bond against errors found by the yearly inspection.

In order to establish a unified code for all registers, Louis XIV proclaimed a new ordinance known as Le Code Louis. It unified the rules and procedures for all registers. Articles 4-14 of title 20 were the most important. They set the time and place of registry inspection, besides combining all the other requirements of previous laws into one document. However, it called for the combining of all three registers (baptism, marriage and burial) into one book, with the entries set in chronological order.

Blank pages were to be crossed out, and the entries of a particular year confined to one volume. Rates or fees were set for each type of entry, and penalties for forgeries and loss of registers were given. The most important requirement of Le Code Louis was the signature of parents (or guardians) and godparents. Because of the penalties for losing registers, most parishes began producing a duplicate register.

Even with this unified approach, parish registers continued to reflect regional peculiarities according to the way a priest interpreted the law. By 1691 a standardized book was available with the titles and page numbers preprinted. In June of 1705, a new
registry office was created in each parish (which was to become the civil registry), and many parishes ceased making duplicate registers. An administrative style or "legal talk" also appeared. Most registers soon adopted it, with Latin phrases appearing in the entries. The Royal Declaration of 1736 required all parishes to deposit with the royal registry a copy of their registers each year. In 1746, baptisms, marriages, and burials were again separated into distinct volumes.

Following the French Revolution in 1792, the assembly of legislators met and pronounced the formation of the First French Republic. The Royal Registry was disbanded, and duplicate registers were mandated. One was to be retained by the municipality or commune, and the other to be sent to the departmental archives. Civil servants replaced priests, and all religious registers were collected by the new civil authorities. Religious registers of both Catholic and Protestant churches continued to be kept but only for their own use.

Ten-year indexes were also instituted along with the new Republican calendar. On 31 December 1805 the Republican calendar ended, but the ten-year indexes survived, providing the idea for a national census. Also surviving the Napoleonic era was the continuance of duplicate registers. These duplicate civil registers, as well as many other religious and legal registers, have continued in use until the present day.

As an extractor, you will be working with microfilm copies of these registers. You will come to know the development and individual characteristics of the records. You will become proficient in reading the text and format. You will develop a deep feeling for the records and a great appreciation for the people who created them.

The first time you encounter an old French record, you will be struck by the fact that old handwritten records are not the same as modern printed books and newspapers. You will see difficult handwriting styles, unfamiliar or even archaic words, ink blots, torn and worm-eaten pages, unfamiliar abbreviations, and other obstacles you must overcome. While some of these things may cause you concern, you will be able to overcome them quickly and be able to read and extract the vital information from these records.

The specific regulations governing registers created a very defined format, which is a tremendous aid in extracting. Naturally there were local and regional influences which affected the registers; however, there are also general similarities found in all records.

The following parish and civil entry examples have these general similarities boxed to introduce you to the format of the entries.

Study the boxed areas of the entries—there are several significant points which need to be emphasized.
PARISH BAPTISMAL REGISTER

Le Samedi 1er Novembre 1735


Le Samedi 1er Novembre 1735

Look at the entries and note that—

1. The vital information is in approximately the same place in each entry.

2. The wording in the entries is nearly the same. When new or different words appear in an entry, this may indicate a significant change in the vital information.

3. The signatures of the involved parties change from entry to entry, but the officiating agent’s does not.

4. The information in the boxed-in areas appears in a specific order. For dates there are two common orders of entry: day, month, and year; or year, day, and month. The French placed dominance on the male gender; therefore, the father’s name, if given, precedes the mother’s name, and the godfather’s precedes the godmother’s. If the mother’s name appears first in a christening entry, this may indicate an illegitimate or a common-law child.

5. There are two types of phrases in an entry: the vital information phrases such as dates, names, and relationships; and the directional phrases, which contain key words directing the extractor to the vital phrases, such as baptisé (baptised), mariage (marriage), aujourd’hui (today), and et de (and of).

6. You are required to extract only a small part of the entry. Because of the similarities between entries, you need only a small vocabulary to extract. You do not need to be proficient in French. There are also similarities between French and English, which further ease the task of learning the necessary vocabulary.

7. Due to the close affiliation between France and the United States, the handwriting styles were similar and may even be in use today. Only in pre-Revolutionary parish registers would you encounter a different handwriting style.

From the two sample parish entries, this is the vital information to be extracted:

1. Christening date: 11 SEP 1684
2. Principal’s name: FRANCOIS/
3. Principal’s sex: Male
4. Father’s name: PIERRE/DUVAL
5. Mother’s name: FRANCOIS/BERENGER

1. Christening date: 17 SEP 1684
2. Principal’s name: LOUIS/
3. Principal’s sex: Male
4. Father’s name: LOUIS/VITEL
5. Mother’s name: MARIE/TALON

From the two sample civil entries, this is the vital information to be extracted:

1. Birth date: 14 PLUV 11
2. Principal’s name: THERESSE JULIE/HOUBEAULT
3. Principal’s sex: Female
4. Father’s name: JOSEPH/HOUBEAULT
5. Mother’s name: ELIZABETH/PICOT

1. Birth date: 17 GERM 11
2. Principal’s name: ANNE/HOUBEAULT
3. Principal’s sex: Female
4. Father’s name: FRANCOIS/HOUBEAULT
5. Mother’s name: ELIZABETH/NAGENT