

to the indispensable research of the late ethnohistorian
Dick Garneau

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From orphan to patriarch

**Men without a past
who founded dynasties of New France**



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Introduction

The past isn't dead. It's not even past — William Faulkner

About forty years ago I packed the car and took my young family of four on a camping trip all around the great Northeast. Some basic outdoor gear and a Sears tent afforded us the cheapest of back-roads escapes from the summer doldrums of central Virginia. The economical vacation in cooler climes turned into a memorable family adventure.

Historic Quebec being last on our casual travel itinerary, we followed the advice of a budget-friendly tourist brochure which recommended a neat public campsite on a big island just outside that fortress city. This island was called Ile d'Orléans. I'd never heard of it. Even the name soon faded to a vague recollection – until one day in early January of 2018.

That's when an ironic coincidence dawned on me: We had pitched our tent on the same St. Lawrence River island where my earliest known male ancestor had made his home three and a half centuries ago. Thanks to a decade of sleuthing, I had just solved the mystery of who the paternal forebears were and where they came from. Eureka!

Various cousins, even with help from a professional researcher, had long been stymied in that cul-de-sac of genealogy. It looked like trail's end because our great-grandfather, Frank Roby, né François Roberge, left behind not so much as a single photograph of himself, let alone any surviving clue to his birthplace or family in Quebec.

So our mutual ancestry quest had yielded a chronicle skewed toward the better known clan of Frank's second wife, Marcelline

Boisvert, the mother of his four sons, all raised near Trois Rivières. That research became our 2012 manuscript, *New Light on an old Family of Yamachiche: How Boisvert and Roberge became Roby*. But it still wasn't possible to reconnect the inscrutable Frank Roby to his severed French Canadian roots. His parents remained unknown.

As luck would have it, the crucial link fell into place when a cousin on the Boisvert side discovered a couple of archived Glens Falls, N.Y., newspaper items dating back more than a century. One reported on Frank's 1903 funeral, naming three surviving brothers who came in from Burlington, Vermont. The other was a brief 1891 social note on a visit paid to Frank by his long-lost older brother who had been roaming the West and Southwest for 43 years.

The given names and approximate ages of those five Roberge brothers proved a perfect match to only one of perhaps a hundred Roberge families of that era in Quebec. Bingo! It was now possible to trace our unbroken line of descent directly back to Pierre Roberge dit Lapierre of Ile d'Orléans in the 1660s.

This bridge to the past called for a revised family story. Direct paternal ancestors can now be named and even profiled within their own social setting of parishes, marital affiliations, relatives and interactions with historic contemporaries. What we've newly learned of the first Roberge family follows in the initial chapters. And since our 17th-century Canadian patriarch is said to have come from the ancient diocese of Bayeux in Normandy, an historical annex features that strategic corner of northwest France.

Perhaps the biggest surprise between these covers awaits in chapters three and four. A long-forgotten baptismal act from 1663 caused us to re-examine the oft-contested origin of great-grandmother Marcelline Boisvert's family. That surviving artifact came to our attention only after the 2012 family book was in print. But it seems to upend the complacent presumption that the first Boisvert was a

natural son of a French colonial couple who once homesteaded on the Algonquin reservation created by the Jesuits at Sillery. The Boisvert roots begin to look even redder than we had supposed.

The exploits of nomadic Boisvert frontiersmen and their blood ties to other fur-trading families in Indian country were chronicled in 2012. Chapters five through eight of this sequel now look more closely at other men and women found in the ancestral tree of our métisse great-grandmother. She was, after all, an eighth-generation descendant of Champlain companion Marin Boucher, who arrived in Quebec during the first quarter of the 17th Century. The last three chapters deal with the extended Boucher family.

While working these new wrinkles into a revised family story, a recurring thread emerged that is rarely mentioned in literature on the colonization of New France: Apart from reassuring Gallic surnames, the parents of the flesh-and-blood patriarchs who founded the 17th Century settler families are often as elusive as ghosts. The supposedly French elders of the first Roberge, for example, now qualify for the blanket euphemism “origin unknown”. And several other men without a past are also found deep in the family tree.

All old families of Quebec trace their roots back to fewer than five thousand early émigrés whose own ancestors may be as enigmatic as our own. Given the shared gene pool, our investigation might even find broader interest in the diaspora of families first formed in the St. Lawrence parishes. For instance, our Marcelline's line of descent sows doubt that her male ancestors were really as French as their surnames.

My grandfather, a mechanical engineer who had no time for such frivolities as genealogy, put it simply: *All the families where I came from were of mixed blood; the French needed native wives who knew how to get through the winters.* He and his three brothers were raised in rural Pointe du Lac and schooled in Cap de la Madeleine the last

decades of the 19th Century, before their parents decided to head south.

Academic genealogy ignores such staples of family lore. In today's Quebec, if you're not on a reservation, you must be French. It's the only Canadian province where the mixed First Nation called Métis goes unrecognized by law. A scholarly hierarchy defends the ethnic homogeneity of the colonial progenitor society. But the glorious personal freedom flaunted by egalitarian aboriginal bands held near-magnetic attraction for early French adventurers. The voyageurs whose surnames now speckle the continental interior attest to that.

Yet the birthplace of those frontiersmen has now acquired an ethnocentric European world-view, „One speaks of neither the presence of foreigners nor of slaves in the French colony,“ wrote author Pierre Montour. „And this discourse belittles the role of inter-ethnic marriage by insisting upon the numerical insignificance of this phenomenon.“ This triumph of purity even inspired a quip from a Trois-Rivières humorist: *Les Québécois sont des Métis qui s'ignorent.*

The overriding reason, opined historian Sylvie Savoie, is the fear of being tarred with the neo-Darwinian stigma of racial inferiority that supposedly set Amerindians on their path to extinction. Passionate avowals of racial purity initially mirrored the insecurity of a vanquished French Canadian minority, as Canada's inconvenient aboriginals got in the way of a steamroller of 19th Century land-grabs on the western plains.

Prevailing orthodoxy even renders nearly unfathomable the reality that must have overshadowed the daily life of an early French settler. The 17th Century great power threatening his existence was the mighty Iroquois Confederation right next-door. In this deadly duel for survival, stitching up tight alliances with the friendlier native nations was the winning ticket. This French strategy was plainly behind the mixed-race future envisaged by Quebec founder Samuel de Champlain

in his famous parley with a chieftain, whose friendship he courted. And that enlightened vision was initially endorsed by both the clergy and the crown.

The first Quebec census in 1666 pegged the French population at 3,215, two out of three being men. Our first Roberge patriarch entered the records in just this time-frame. The headcount doubled by 1672 because the crown dispatched a contingent of women called *filles du Roi* and a regiment of soldiers to fight off the Iroquois. But that was the end of serious immigration.

In both the Roberge and Boisvert lineage, older affiliated surnames suggest earlier New World liaisons from a heroic age when Frenchmen still numbered in just two digits. Some names match those of untraceable recruits mustered for Quebec exactly 400 years ago by the first viceroy of Nouvelle France. Had the scribes not lost track of their lives and offspring, perhaps fewer young men who debut in these pages would have to be called orphans without a past.

Chapter 1

Three men from Normandy

The French farming village of Saint-Germain-le-Vasson lies about ten miles south of the bustling city of Caen in Normandy. This location near the seacoast placed both the city and the village squarely in the path of the allied Normandy invasion of June 1944. Historic Caen was blasted to smithereens. Advancing armored columns tore through the mostly level fields of crops around it. Today the surrounding countryside also contains sprawling cemeteries full of fallen soldiers from many nations.

A succession of Gallic tribes, Roman legions, Frankish knights and Viking raiders had already left their mark on this contested region. The old parish of St.-Germain-le-Vasson traditionally belonged to the ancient diocese of Bayeux. The cathedral city of Bayeux, about 25 miles northwest of St.-Germain-le-Vasson, occupied a precious niche in the history of medieval Europe.

The violation of a solemn oath of fealty sworn probably under duress there at the altar of the still unfinished cathedral was the sacrilegious act that provoked Duke William of Normandy to invade and conquer Anglo-Saxon England in 1066. The oath-breaker, at least in William's eyes, was his disloyal vassal and erstwhile comrade-in-arms, Harold, the earl of Wessex, who reigned briefly as king of England until he perished in battle at Hastings. Visitors from around the world still throng Bayeux each year to view the lofty cathedral and its venerable tapestry crafted by Kentish monks to commemorate the Norman conquest (Annex A).

Tiny St.-Germain-le-Vasson, first mentioned in 1228 as Sanctus Germanus de Wachon, has nothing to match Bayeux's soaring romanesque-gothic cathedral. But its own church, with a tall belfry dating from the 14th Century, is surprisingly massive for a farming village of fewer than a thousand souls. It is also a fitting point of departure for our own New World story, although the family surname can no longer be detected on the weathered tombstones leaning at drunken angles in the churchyard. From this bucolic parish, according to an early church record of colonial Québec, came the pioneering émigré named Pierre Roberge, our direct paternal ancestor. Two other Roberge men, an older brother and a supposed half-

brother, also crossed the Atlantic to Canada at roughly that same time about 350 years ago.

The French surname, Roberge, first appeared in civil and church records of New France around 1660 upon the arrival from Normandy of an educated *marchand bourgeois* named Denis Roberge. Two younger men, both named Pierre Roberge, then entered Quebec's annals when they were confirmed as practicing Catholics in 1664 and 1665 respectively. No other men with their surname ever came to Canada during the French colonial era, the records show.

All three Roberge men appeared in Quebec census reports of 1666, 1667 and 1681 for Quebec's capital region, Comté de Montmorency. Each man married and raised a large family. The descendants of Denis Roberge, oldest of the three, can no longer be traced in North America. But those of the two Pierres number in the thousands today.

Thought to have been brothers, the two Pierres have often been confused with one another. Differentiating nicknames, La Croix and La Pierre, are usually added to tell their two collateral families apart. Both men homesteaded permanently on Ile d'Orléans, a large island in the St. Lawrence River within sight of fortress Québec. Denis Roberge, a prominent Catholic layman who served the vicar of Québec, seems to have been a patron of one or both younger men, giving rise to a belief that he was their older half-brother.

The youngest of this trio from Normandy was the man who implanted our direct paternal family line (Annex B) in the New World. This Pierre Roberge, first of the La Pierre branch, was one of twelve Catholics confirmed at the main parish of Notre Dame de Québec on 7 November 1665. The event generated the first written mention of the ancestor in colonial records. He would have been about 14 years old.

The first seven North American generations of male descendants of Pierre Roberge, born ~1651:

Pierre Roberge [m. 1679 Ste. Famille, Ile d'Orléans, Québec] Françoise Loignon

Pierre Roberge [m. 1726 Chateau Richer, Québec] Marie Le François

Prisque Roberge [m. 1761 St. Pierre, Ile d'Orléans] Agathe Goulet

Ambroise Roberge [1st m. 1793 St. Laurent, Ile d'Orléans] Louise Pouliot

Jean Roberge [m. 1826 Ste. Claire, Dorchester, Québec] Christine Bourgault

François Roberge [2nd m. 1870 St. Alphonsus, Glens Falls, New York] Marcelline Boisvert

Edouard Roberge aka Edward B. Roby [m. 1905 Troy, New York] Mary Ellen Dwyer

Described in the 1666 Talon census as an 18-year-old weaver of cloth, our man would be the bachelor who later married local teenager Françoise Loignon in Ste.-Famille parish of Ile d'Orléans on 3 July 1679 and then sired her 13 children. The marriage record¹ in the parish registry says this Pierre Roberge was the son of Jacques Roberge and Claudine Buret, or Borel, of the parish of St.-Germain-le-Vasson in the diocese of Bayeux.

Since the same parents and parish in Normandy had been given for the other Pierre Roberge at his first marriage on 22 October 1672 in the same island parish, the two men are believed to have been brothers from what is now the Caen district of Normandy's modern department of Calvados. Roberge remains a fairly common surname in that northwestern corner of France. And the former province of Normandy was the origin of at least one in five early settlers of colonial New France.

Doubt about the origin of the two Pierres

Nevertheless, a shadow of doubt lengthens over the actual origin, parentage and background of our 17th-Century patriarch. Authoritative genealogists either disagree or have grown uncomfortable with crucial facts about the two Pierres and their Norman French parents. Fichier Origine, keeper of Quebec's hallowed list of early pioneers based on cooperative research done in their European home parishes and archives, no longer lists the three Roberge men as émigrés. This means that no reliable trace of them can be found in France.

Both Pierres lack baptismal certificates. Québec's church marriage documents state that they, unlike the educated Denis Roberge, were unable to sign their names. No ship's manifest shows either one ever arriving from France alone or accompanied. And this was a passage that our ancestor, the younger of the two, would have to have made as a youth of no more than 14 years.

In the late 19th Century, a trailblazing opus of Quebec genealogist Cyprien Tanguay seems to have matched the two Pierres with the wrong wives.² The identical names of the two patriarchs invite confusion. Nor did it help that a second-generation Pierre, the son of our Lapierre patriarch, would eventually marry a young woman of the same Le François family as her aunt, the wife of Pierre, the Lacroix patriarch. Tanguay was also silent on the origin of our ancestor, noting only the common French place of origin for Denis Roberge and for the older Pierre.

A century later, University of Montréal genealogist René Jetté seems have sorted out the spouses of the brothers Pierre Roberge.³ His version makes sense because it comports with the 1681 census that lists the two Roberge couples with their ages. Jetté identified the thrice-married older brother, Pierre Roberge dit Lacroix, as a half-brother of Denis Roberge. They seemed to have had a different mother but the same father. Jacques Roberge of the diocese of Bayeux supposedly had first married Denis' mother, Andrée Le Marchand, in France around 1627.

The idea that Denis Roberge was the half-brother of the two younger men has also been abandoned by Programme de Recherche en Démographie Historique (PRDH), Québec's authoritative genealogy databank. Internet genealogy organizations Nos Origines and Wikitree take note of this change. Quebec's Nos Origines now describes Jacques Roberge, the supposed father of all three Roberge émigrés, as *d'origine inconnue* – a person of unknown origin. Apparently, as Fichier Origine found, neither Jacques nor his two supposed wives ever cast a shadow in the New World and left no trace on the other side of the Atlantic. One might even wonder, with Tanguay, whether the two Pierres really were sons of the same father and mother.

Denis Roberge is known to have married Geneviève Aubert at Chateau Richer sometime during the period 1667-1669. Parents of the Quebec-born bride were Beauport royal notary Claude Aubert and Jacqueline Lucas, whom Métis historian Dick Garneau said was English. Thomas Morell, a priest who had sailed with Denis from France in 1660, conducted that wedding. This can be gleaned from an undated parish notice of the marriage, edited by a different priest, François Fillon, and from a civil marriage contract made at an unspecified location in Québec and dated 3 June 1667.⁴

The official paper trail for Pierre Roberge dit La Croix also looks suspicious – until his third marriage in 1684. Properly signed marriage certificates for his first two unions are missing. There is only an unsigned notice from 22 October 1672 that names Denis Roberge as a witness to Pierre's first marriage with Antoinette De Bearenom in the parish of Ste.-Famille, I.O., which was still technically in the orbit of the main parish of Notre-Dame-de-Québec.

This French first wife, the daughter of Guillaume De Bearenom and Françoise Le Poupet of Normandy's diocese of Coutances, seems to be the same woman also called Bagot or Bagau and sometimes Bascon in other documents, including a civil marriage contract written by Beauport seigneurial notary Paul Vachon. Antoinette must have died childless.

Roberge's second marriage, to Marie Chabot, daughter of Mathurin Chabot and Marie Mesange, was annulled 8 January 1684, according to a civil document cited by Jetté. Therefore all of this Pierre's seven children came from his third marriage in 1684 to Marie Le François, daughter of Charles Le François and Marie Triot, or Triaut, from Chateau Richer, Quebec.

As Tanguay noted, Denis Roberge was a „confiant de François [de Montmorency] Laval, monseigneur“, the vicar of Québec. He was also involved with Laval's Séminaire de Québec, directed by Henri de Bernières. As the vicar's principal deputy, this priest became the first resident pastor of the main parish, Notre Dame de Québec. Laval, remembered as Quebec's first bishop, had sailed to Canada in 1659, accompanied by De Bernières. Denis Roberge followed them in 1660. All three men had previously been instructed in Caen at a lay seminary run by De Bernières uncle.

The common parentage and origin of the two illiterate Pierres has long been treated as academic doctrine. The sole source of this information may have been Denis Roberge, the church official from Bayeux who apparently vouched for the older Pierre at his 1672 wedding and again in 1684. He would have been a highly credible source for local parish priests who were well aware of Denis' close association with the supreme ecclesiastic authorities he served.

Denis Roberge's word on the background of the two Pierres may be perfectly factual. But it retains a whiff of geneological hearsay as long as Fichier Origine, the seasoned research team of Federation québécoise des sociétés de généalogie, cannot find any such family in French archives.

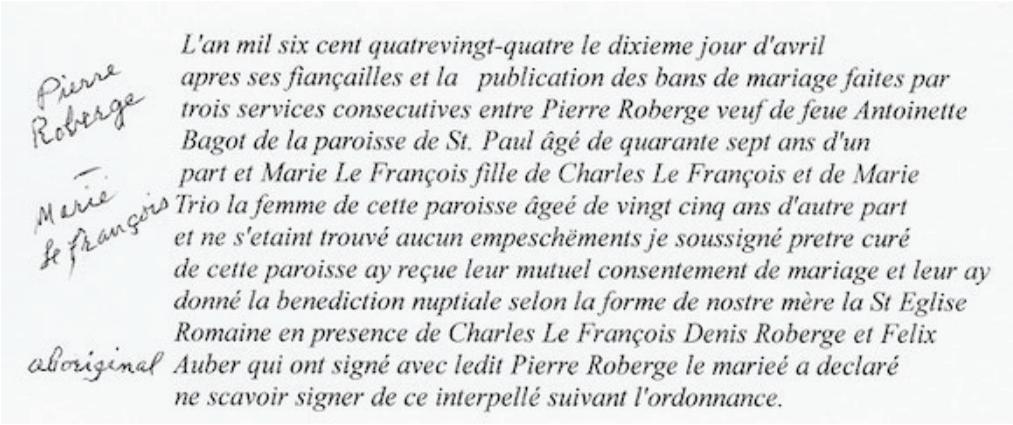
Ethnic label in the parish registry

The quandary of the identity of the Roberge brothers goes deeper. A surviving document recording the third marriage of the older Pierre implies that he was native American. Its existence was generously called to our family's attention by an historian of the Anderdon Nation, Wyandotte/Wyandot/Wendat (Huron) confederation.

This unsigned parish certificate is part of a 17th Century parish marriage registry transcribed in a parish scribe's in uniform penmanship from the original marriage acts written by different priests who actually gave the blessings to the wedding couples. It includes the 10 April 1684 marriage of Pierre Roberge and Marie Le

François at the parish of Chateau Richer. Appearing in the left-hand margin under the names of the couple, as with a few other nuptials in this parish registry, is the descriptive word „aboriginal“.

A proprietary image of the archived Canadian document, shared under strict international licensing conditions, may be viewed on major internet ancestry research sites in North America. In lieu of the protected image, the transcribed text of the scribe's true copy can be rendered roughly as follows:



Pierre Roberge
Marie Le François
aboriginal

L'an mil six cent quatrevingt-quatre le dixieme jour d'avril apres ses fiançailles et la publication des bans de mariage faites par trois services consecutives entre Pierre Roberge veuf de feu Antoinette Bagot de la paroisse de St. Paul âgé de quarante sept ans d'un part et Marie Le François fille de Charles Le François et de Marie Trio la femme de cette paroisse âgé de vingt cinq ans d'autre part et ne s'estaint trouvé aucun empeschemens je soussigné pretre curé de cette paroisse ay reçue leur mutuel consentement de mariage et leur ay donné la benediction nuptiale selon la forme de nostre mère la St Eglise Romaine en presence de Charles Le François Denis Roberge et Felix Auber qui ont signé avec ledit Pierre Roberge le marieé a déclaré ne scavoit signer de ce interpellé suivant l'ordonnance.

Identically worded but less legible was the original marriage certificate. This document⁵ from Chateau Richer translates as follows:

The year one-thousand six-hundred eighty-four, the tenth day of April, following the engagement and the publication of the banns of marriage read on three consecutive Sundays between Pierre Roberge, widower of the late Antoinette Bagot, of the parish of St. Paul, age forty-seven years, for the one party; and Marie LeFrançois, daughter of Charles LeFrançois and Marie Trio, his wife, of age twenty-five for the other party; and having found no impediments, I the undersigned priest, pastor of this parish, having received their mutual consent to the proposed marriage, have given the nuptial benediction according to the rite prescribed by our Holy Mother the Roman Church in the presence of Charles Le François, Denys Roberge and Felix Auber, who have signed; with said bridegroom Pierre Roberge having declared that he could not sign as required by the ordinance.[translation]

[signatures:] Charles Le François, Denis Roberge, Felix Auber, Guillaume Gaultier, priest

An image of the original is in the collection of Quebec's Drouin Institute of Genealogy. Written and signed by the parish pastor, Guillaume Gaultier, at Chateau Richer on 10 April 1684, it bears the signatures of Denis Roberge and the two other witnesses mentioned. Unlike the unsigned parish notice regarding this Pierre's first marriage in 1672, this one makes no mention of the bridegroom's French origin or parents. If he was aboriginal, perhaps his French surname had been conferred by Denis.

The Chateau Richer marriage registry copy plainly marked „aboriginal“ raises obvious questions: Were the Roberge brothers, who suddenly surfaced in the chronicles of New France in the mid-1660s, really just newcomers from France? If not, what were they? Since historic demography leaves hardly another likely choice in a tiny colonial enclave where Europeans were still thin on the ground, one possible answer comes to mind: The brothers were Christian natives. If so, they would most likely have been of the Huron nation. A hypothetical case for that supposition proceeds from historic circumstances:

The two Pierres were among the earliest settlers of Ile d'Orleans, first visited by Jacques Cartier in 1535. The natives called the place Minigo before Cartier renamed the island Bacchus because of its profusion of wild grapevines. The presence of Denis Roberge, who once owned an estate on Ile d'Orleans, dates to 1666, according to a current history of the island.⁶ This source says that our family patriarch was living there by 1669 and his older brother took up residence nearby the following year. A survey map of the island prepared in 1689 by a royal engineer, Sieur de Villeneuve, identifies the houses and lands of both men. Furthermore, Pierre Aloignon, or Loignon, the father-in-law of our paternal ancestor (Annex B), had previously settled on that island after serving an indenture to Noël Juchereau at Chateau Richer beginning 1647. The island's historic profile informs us that this pioneer was already living there around 1656.

Ile d'Orléans and Wendat refugees

That date merits a second look because Ile d'Orléans at that time was still divided into small farms assigned by the Jesuits to christianized Amerindians. These initial settlers were refugees – men, women and children of a nation the French called Huron. They call themselves Wendat (Wyandotte, Wyandot) and their tribal homeland lay far to the West in what is now south-central Ontario between Georgian Bay and Lake Simcoe. The Jesuit missionary fathers at Quebec city envisaged the fertile Ile d'Orléans as a new home for these surviving Christian converts who had fled eastward in their canoes to Quebec in 1650.⁷

The conversion of the Wendat people of the Great Lakes had been an early obsession with the French missionary orders because these native Americans were highly regarded as civilized aboriginals. Traditionally they lived in temporary villages of long houses and raised food crops, supplemented by seasonal hunting and fishing. Their culture and language were closely related to that of the five Iroquois nations south of Lake Ontario. The Wendat confederation north of lakes Huron and Erie quickly staked out a pivotal role as intermediaries in French trading with more remote tribes. This seemingly gainful association with the newcomers eventually proved their undoing.

Devastated by deadly European contagions, the once-powerful Wendat confederation gradually lost cohesion in the 1640s amid factional strife between traditionalists and those who embraced the religion of the French. Incessant attacks by their heathen Iroquois cousins then precipitated the collapse and dispersal of the remaining Wendat. Panic scattered them in all directions. The flight of some Wendat converts and their missionaries to Quebec in 1650 marked the end of a once promising Great Lakes tribal mission first launched by Joseph Le Caron (1586-1632) and his Franciscan Recollet priests in 1616.

The new homeland on Ile d'Orleans also proved vulnerable to Iroquois raids against the French and their native allies. A couple of displaced Wendat clans eventually chose to save themselves by leaving the island. Some accepted an invitation to join the Iroquois confederation. But chronicles also reveal that one group of settlers belonging to the clan of the Cord sought safety among the French in 1657 at Fort St. Louis, a fortified corner of Québec city.