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NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRENCH PASSPORT LAWS AND DOCUMENTS

HOWARD C. BYBEE AND ANNICK HOUZÉ

Finding an ancestor's birthplace or residence within his or her native country may cause anxiety among family historians and genealogists because passenger lists record country of origin while usually ignoring the village, town, or region where emigrants were born or resided prior to emigrating. This information determines where a researcher must look for records to verify birth, christening, marriage, or other events, and to locate ancestors and contemporary relatives. In addition, the country recorded on the passenger lists or arrival records, in the destination country, is often the emigrant's country of embarkation, not the birth country.

Emigrants often spent time living in an alien European country before departing for their final destinations. To find the record-keeping locality, the family historian needs to consult records created and archived within the country and region of origin that give the birthplace and residence of the emigrant. Passport applications and passports record this information with other personal information about the emigrant, such as physical description, occupation, traveling companions, and character, solvency, or military status.¹

In order to locate these records, a general knowledge of passport law helps the historian to find where the records will be archived so the researcher may search on-site, locate microfilm and online documents, or request copies.

The following brief paper summarizes French passport law governing emigration and travel within the country. In nineteenth-century France, these laws required government agencies to control the issuance of passports, beginning with an application, and eventually passport issuance, depending upon whether the emigrant or traveler wished to move within or across the borders. Traveling within the borders required an internal passport, and crossing borders required a passport for foreign lands. Each was issued by a different entity and resulted in records being archived in various locations, as well as creating differing record types. Nineteenth-century passports were issued in two parts, the passport given to the applicant and the stub, or *souche*, retained by the issuing authority.² The application files also contain correspondence written by the applicant requesting issuance of the passport.

Travelers did not consistently observe the laws, and the laws were in suspension from time to time which means that the archived documents are incomplete.³ Wars, fires,

¹ Jean Vidalenc, "Une source d'histoire économique et sociale, les passeports, problème d'utilisation, limites et lacunes," *Bulletin de la Section d'Histoire moderne et contemporaine* vol. 8, Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques (Paris, 1971): 187–202.

² Camille Maire, *En route pour l'Amérique, l'odyssée des émigrants en France au XIXe siècle* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1993).

³ Nicole Fouché, *Emigration alsacienne aux Etats-Unis, 1815–1870* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1999).

floods, and other catastrophic events have also resulted in a loss of documentation. These records have not been widely extracted or microfilmed, but where they exist they are valuable historical clues to emigrant origins.

As early as the reign of Louis XI (1461–1483) passports were issued to prominent persons and royalty to ensure safe transit to European destinations.⁴ In the nineteenth century the issuance of passports was broadened to include all citizens, and documents were created and kept by government agencies.⁵

CHRONOLOGICAL SUMMARY

The following passport law summary is taken from *Dictionnaire de l'Administration française* by Maurice Block (Paris, 1856), pages 80, 81, under the heading *passport*. The translation summarizes the content of each entry. The letter “L” means Law, “D” decree and other abbreviations should be self-evident.

1789—Before this date passports were issued only for citizens from certain aristocratic or economic social classes.

3–4 September 1791—Abolition of passport law.

28 March 1792—Decree reestablished and passport usage generalized.

8 and 19 September 1792—Decree suppresses passports again.

6 February 1793 and 10 Vendémiaire year IV, (2 Oct. 1795)—Forms the basis of today’s legislation on this subject.

L. 5 May 1855—No one may leave his home canton without a passport issued by the *Préfet* (*départements* over 40,000 inhabitants) or the *Maire*; if for abroad, the *Préfet* must issue the passport, and for Paris the *Préfet de police* alone may issue them.

D. 28 March 1792 and c. 20 August 1816—The president of Legislative Chambers may issue passports to the Chamber members.

D. 23 and 27 August 1792—Passports for Ambassadors and foreign ministers and their family members and attendants are granted by the Minister of foreign affairs.

L. 17 Ventôse, an IV art. 1er, and C. P., art. 155—Two witnesses required unless the issuing authority knows the applicant personally.

L. 28 March 1792—Military personnel receive *feuilles de route* instead of

⁴ Maurice Hartoy, *Histoire des passeports français depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: H. Champion, 1937).

⁵ *Ibid.*

passports.

D. 26 March 1852, art. 12—*Diplômes* issued to members of *sociétés de secours mutuels approuvées*, replace passports for workers.

L. 17 November 1797, art. 1er—Passports indicate surname, name, age, profession, birthplace, residence, physical description of the applicant and destination, where he must show his passport to the mayor and obtain a residence permit.

D. 18 Sept. 1807—Visa is applied for additional destinations.

Instr. Min, 6 August 1827—Passports are issued to individuals, but one passport can include husband, wife, children under fifteen, and two brothers or sisters if one is a minor under supervision of the other.

D. 11 July 1810, art. 4—Passports are good for one year from day of delivery.

Decis. 11 July 1810, art 9—Price fixed at two francs for interior of France and ten francs for abroad.

D. 18 September 1807, art 5—Visas are free.

Avis du C. 22 December 1811—Free passports may be issued to indigents unable to pay the fee.

L. 13 June 1790—Free passports with travel aid can be issued to beggars or indigents, who are citizens who wish to return home, as well as to foreigners without means who must leave French territory.

Circ. Min, 25 October 1833—The *Préfet* issues free passports with travel aid.

D. 29 July 1792—All agents of the public authority may demand that travelers present their passport.

L. 10 Vendémiaire. An IV, tit. III, art. 6 and 7—All individuals traveling without a passport are arrested and detained. Travelers not verifying a domicile after twenty days are declared vagrants and prosecuted as such.

L. 19 October 1797, art. 7—All foreign travelers to France must leave their passport with the city, which will send it to the interior ministry. A provisional security card is issued awaiting the ministry's decision. His passport will be retained and he will be ordered to leave France if his presence threatens the public safety and tranquility.

HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

Napoleon instituted many of the above passport laws for internal travel and for travel abroad. Many of these travelers were merchants or migrants who regularly moved from province to province, or to England or other nearby countries for commerce; rarely for resettlement.⁶

Historically, emigrants who left France permanently left because of religious persecution, economic opportunity, adventurism, colonization, imprisonment, or other forces that propelled them from their homeland.

Because France offered a stable homeland during much of its history, with fertile lands and a stable population, the country did not experience emigration in vast numbers during the nineteenth century⁷ as did Ireland, Italy, Spain, and other countries where social upheaval, economic conditions, geography, or population pressure compelled inhabitants to seek a better life far from ancestral homes.

However, French emigration has been a continuous, if uneven, phenomenon for centuries. Because France has had an orderly, bureaucratic government and because the population has been stable, with slow increase, laws governing emigration have resulted in documents, preserved in archives, recording the passport application and granting process. Surviving documents preserve vital information about the applicants', birth place, place of residence, occupations, names of accompanying persons, and dates, all of which are vital to historical researchers. Statistical studies are available that quantify emigration patterns to reveal historical forces and trends affecting the social structure of the country.⁸

We include a bibliography at the end of this article, which will be a growing inventory of meaningful historical analysis on French emigration.

Though concerned primarily with nineteenth-century emigration, we list some antecedents to the nineteenth-century laws governing the issuance of passports to travelers.

During peak emigration periods, an undetermined number of emigrants departed clandestinely because of bureaucratic delays, government efforts to discourage emigration, the cost of passports, and to avoid military duty or creditors, though the latter two seem to be of minor importance.⁹ However, those applying for internal passports to cities near ports where ships departed for foreign destinations were suspected of neglecting to apply for and obtain the necessary passports to depart abroad, and choosing instead to bribe their way aboard because they never intended to return to their native land.¹⁰

In some cases emigrants were recruited by agents of licensed travel companies to

⁶ Matthieu de Oliveira, "Marchands au long cours. Négoce et territoire: les passeports nordistes au XIXe siècle (1791–1869)." *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 48 (2/3) (Avril/Septembre 2001): 103–122.

⁷ Béatrice Verquin, "Du 'Modèle migratoire colonial' à la circulation mondiale des élites professionnelles: Le cas des Français à l'Étranger," *Intergeo-Bulletin*, 2/2001.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Camille Maire, *En route pour l'Amérique, l'odyssée des émigrants en France au XIXe siècle* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1993).

¹⁰ Nicole Fouché, *Emigration alsacienne aux Etats-Unis, 1815–1870* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1999).

colonize foreign lands, such as North Africa, Canada, and Atlantic or Caribbean islands. The government actively recruited emigrants to settle Algeria and Morocco along the coast of North Africa.¹¹

All of these factors contributed to the accumulation of documents in many different archives throughout France. Municipal archives, such as Cherbourg and Dunkirk (Dunkerque), hold registers and *souches* from passports issued to or applied for by emigrants. Departmental archives have gathered originals or copies from local municipalities. Diplomatic archives also preserve records of those who departed for government or military service abroad. In some instances records have been destroyed in one location, but copies exist in another. Where records have been destroyed in one archive researchers may find copies in another.

From the Huguenots of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries to the settlers in Algeria, documents not often consulted for their data on individuals exist, to the advantage of historical and genealogical researchers. Because of their fragmented nature and small numbers in comparison to other records, they have been overlooked to a large measure. For these reasons, there are currently few databases of extracted information or digitized images of these records to be found among the rapidly growing resources found on the Internet. This paper encourages increased awareness and accelerated extraction of these historical documents.

During an exploratory visit to a few archives, largely along the western coast of France, repositories in La Rochelle, Charente Maritime; Nantes, Loire Atlantique; Quimper, Finistere; and Bordeaux, Gironde all contained records useful for emigration research. The departmental archives catalog these records in the series L, eighteenth century; and series M, nineteenth century. These series contain passport stubs and application correspondence, as well as copies of laws and decrees governing passport issuance. In addition, in the municipal archives in Cherbourg, a small collection of passport stubs was cataloged in series H. The Dunkirk (Dunkerque) Archives holds a collection of bound internal passport *souches*. There are certainly many more French archives where these documents are kept, awaiting the historical researcher's attention.

Researchers studying emigration patterns, and local historians or genealogists, will find a rich source of information if they will look at the records originating at the emigrant's starting point. Publishing these documents or their contents completes the emigration story by connecting the starting point to the destination, and the families settling in foreign lands to the homeland, telling a compelling story of cultural as well as familial migration.

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¹¹ *L'Emigration française, étude de cas: Algérie, Canada, Etats-Unis*. (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1985).

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