

A Family Beadle



Questions often arise when digging through ancestral records. I recently spent a little time researching the occupation my aunt's third great-grandfather listed on his 1891 Canadian census report. Anaclet Petit described himself as being a bebeau.

Not knowing the term, I turned to the Internet and discovered this from the website "The French Canadian Genealogist."

"The *bedeau*, or beadle, was the priest's jack-of-all-trades; he was essential to the proper administration of the church. He was mainly tasked with the maintenance of the church and preparation for religious services. During mass, he would distribute the blessed bread to the attendees and collect donations. The beadle also tried to maintain peace and quiet during services, chasing away beggars and dogs from the church doors, earning him the nickname of "chasse-chiens," or dog hunter. He was responsible for drawing "Passover water" for baptisms and "Pentecost water" for Sunday mass. He would lead the way during any religious processions, removing any obstacles. The beadle rang the church bells, either for

religious announcements or civic ones, such as weather warnings.

The beadle was also tasked with keeping the church clean, and in winter, ensuring that the roads leading to the church were clear. Some beadles also doubled as gravediggers, a lucrative side job.

Similar to their French counterparts, beadles wore long robes that were either blue or red, or sometimes with both colours. The left sleeve sometimes featured a silver plate or an embroidered figure representing the patron of his church. In France, beadles traditionally held a wand in their right hand. It was used as a stick, to drive out the aforementioned beggars and dogs from the church. Over time, the object evolved into an adorned symbol of authority.”

Perhaps the most well-known beadle to the uninitiated would be Charles Dickens' character Mr. Bumble from *Oliver Twist*.

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