

CAJUNS, CREOLES, PIRATES AND PLANTERS

Your New Louisiana Ancestors Format

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By Damon Veach

BACK TO BASICS: Requests on how to get started doing genealogical research continue to be received, and I try to help these individuals in the best way I can. It just all goes back to the fact that you have to start with the basics. For me, the beginning had to be with the known family data, and for many of the younger generations, this is an unknown factor. Just beginning to write down known parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins is like a foreign language. It is something that hasn't dawned on them before they decided to research their family ties. Many even give up before they actually get that involved in the process.

This may all sound strange, but it is, for the most part, true. I have to inform anyone asking about getting started to just write down what is known. After this is done, the journey into the past begins, but it takes time and a desire to keep going even when no records can be uncovered readily. Failure is never an option. Impressing on beginning researchers the importance of doing proper documentation from the very beginning is the first step in making them aware of the responsibility they have undertaken. It is a journey into discovery not only of ancestors but the history of where they lived, how they lived, and how they came to be in a particular location.

People now are likely to move around more than they did in the past, so looking up records may involve a number of different areas in the beginning. However, once you reach a certain point in time, these movements will become more stabilized. When this happens, it is definitely time to search out some of the reasons for settling in an area and perhaps the reason for the migration. This is the beauty of research.

History at one time was one of the most important subjects taught in American school systems, and, in my opinion, this is what I really mean by getting back to the basics. For Louisiana researchers with local ties going back several generations, it is good to know how our region was settled. Knowing that Caddo, Tunica, Choctaw, Chitimacha, and other tribes were here long before settlers came from Europe will cause you to realize that this land was not always your land. You need to know about the Spanish explorers and the French connection and the migrations from points in the Atlantic states. There are rivers that played an important part in this migration, and ship records from ports up the Atlantic seaboard and along the Gulf of Mexico come into the picture.

Also in Louisiana, we have that constant Spanish and French influence prior to the movement of other people of European descent into the area. While studying this movement, it will become apparent that the northern part of the state became a

little different from the southern part. In a way, it remains that way today, almost like two cultures existing in harmony.

Land grants from war service played an important part in some of the northern regions whereas the southern part saw the settlement of the Acadians and early Spanish land grants being awarded. These land grants were often due to service in the Civil War. In many cases, entire families traveled together to these areas. This was true not only for Louisiana settlements but also for those people coming across the central and northern parts of our country. Wagon trains taking settlers westward looking for land and better opportunities was important, and riverboats carried others inland. It was a period of time that saw our ancestors suffer many hardships, but they saw hope in a new land and struggled to make every move one that would improve their lives and their desire to give their children something that they had not known themselves.

Louisiana researchers, like those in other states, have a number of ways to learn about their ancestors. After recording the known data, it is time to see what else can be learned, and vital records are important here. It is really up to the individual on which way to continue, but birth and death records, marriage records, court records, wills, deeds, even divorce records, census records, and land records await the serious researcher.

My first serious study of early records was with census reports but only after I checked with the local library to see what had already been done in regards to research on my family lines. I was fortunate to live in a large city with a very good genealogical section to begin my journey. Knowing what has been done already is important and will keep you from duplicating work that has already been done by others. At the time, I was living in Fort Worth, Texas, but any large library will have material filed by state, so I took advantage of the Louisiana section that was on file here.

Since the beginnings of my early research, my own journey led me back to the original point of settlement for my immediate family – to the parish where I was born and to the place where I spent my younger years. Emphasis on history again came into play as I had several teachers who inspired me to do more than just read from a book. It was a self discovery of who I was and how family was very important to my very being. I suppose I would have to say that teachers were those you looked up to for guidance, and I had the very best in all fields of study – from history to English to parliamentary law and public speaking. However, it was that one teacher in the tenth grade who gave us that unusual assignment of interviewing my grandparents and recording their names and the names of their parents and where they were from that carried me on the journey of a lifetime.

At the time, I really didn't realize the importance of this assignment, and it was years later after deciding to do my ancestry that I recalled placing that family record form in the old family trunk. There in front of me was the information that I

had not been able to discover in the local library, and it was data that my other family members knew nothing about. They had not been interested in recording this kind of data, but that assignment meant the clarification of a number of points for me. It also told me where to go to continue my research. My class assignment proved to be one of the most important lessons I received from my civics course.

I also realized at this time how important the local cemetery near the old home place was in relationship to my personal files. All those years of growing up and attending church only a mile from my home revealed clues that I had no idea would mean so much to me in later years. There was that marker designating one of my ancestors as a Civil War veteran that opened up my research into other areas. It also explained why my mother's family had moved into the area in the beginning. The church itself was the answer to the movement of my father's side of the family. It was a land grant for one and the call to serve as pastor of the church on the other side. There it was, not on that assignment sheet but in and around a church where I grew up and attended for so many years. I'm still amazed at how much can be learned from areas like this.

Of course, not everyone falls into a category of having so much family history located in one place, but there will be a point somewhere in the past where things come together in this way. Even today, I can travel back to places where my ancestors lived and discover new things, simple things not to be found in libraries or in courthouses. I often take younger members of the family to these places of interest, and I recall things from my past that I had totally forgotten. They weren't important way back at that point in time but suddenly the knowledge opens up, and I'm there again recalling minute points of interest.

If you have the good fortune of having someone to lead the way, by all means take advantage of the situation. Not only can they lead the way into the past, but they may have documents that you had no idea were still in existence or even Bibles with inscriptions from the past. There are all sorts of ways to discover one's past. It is all dependent upon a desire to obtain these and the time to do so properly. Documentation is the key issue. Seeking out all avenues of research is important, but that desire to do things right has to be there from the very beginning.

As the journey continues, there is always that challenge to continue. That is as it should be. Once the journey begins, you most probably will never see an end, but it is an experience that you will never forget. Enjoy it while you can.

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COLUMN INFORMATION: "Cajuns, Creoles, Pirates and Planters" is a service column designed to promote genealogical/historical subjects and offer readers free query listings on family lineage problems. There is no limit to the number of words in each inquiry, but there should be a Louisiana connection by heritage or residence of researcher working on lines in other areas. Books and society publications are

reviewed only if a sample copy is submitted with each review request. Dated notices should be sent in for consideration several weeks prior to the scheduled event. Otherwise, mail is filed by date of postmark and used as space permits.

All materials submitted by genealogical societies and many privately printed books and magazines are donated to the DeSoto Parish Historical Society for inclusion in the Veach-Foshee Memorial Library Collection in Mansfield, Louisiana. All genealogical/historical materials – Bible records, old wills, letters, ledger records, etc. – are accepted and considered for publication with full credit being given to the researcher submitting the material. If the data is too extensive for use in this format, it will be passed on to a preservation group for publication in their quarterlies or periodicals. The important thing to remember is to do everything possible to get these records into print or preserved in some fashion. Some of this material may be the only copy in existence and is valuable for both current research efforts and especially for use by future generations of researchers. Please help to preserve our heritage. It is priceless and cannot be replaced.

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