

# **CAJUNS, CREOLES, PIRATES AND PLANTERS**

*Your New Louisiana Ancestors Format*

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By Damon Veach

**RECORDING THE PAST:** Genealogical research is one of the most rewarding hobbies, but it is also one that requires a lot of determination to reach sometimes elusive goals of discovery. There is more to genealogy than meets the eye of the ordinary person. It is something that requires a lot of research, which means long hours of going through old records, scanning numerous books, and even using online resources. It isn't something that is handed out on a silver platter. It's a job, but it is one that is very rewarding when the end results are measured and placed among precious memories of lives gone and now found again.

There are many facilities in the U.S. and other countries where materials can be researched. Many have been discussed in this column format. It is, in my opinion, best to go to these sources in person if at all possible. Paying someone to do research has never been my cup of tea, and I would only recommend something like this as a last resort when all other avenues of discovery have been exhausted. Learning about one's family history is an insight into the heritage of this country, and when done personally, it becomes even more meaningful.

The National Archives offers many avenues into the lives of our ancestors. Because the records have come from every branch of the federal government, almost all Americans can learn about themselves, their ancestors, and the communities where each lived. Knowing how these ancestors interacted with the government is a key to a successful search of one's past history.

Some of the more important means of learning about ancestors can be found in census records, military service records, immigration records, naturalization records, passport applications, land records, bankruptcy records, and court records. These aren't the only ones, but checking out all of these can keep anyone busy for a long time. And time is the important factor here. It is for this reason that many people seek help from others, but this can be very expensive and not nearly as rewarding if done individually.

In addition to the National Archives, every state has their own archival facilities, and most of the larger cities have major genealogical collections in their libraries. Many cities are also the homes for private collections, so there is a wealth of data that can be researched. The main thing to do is to start out with a plan and concentrate to keep that plan on track, expanding as you go further into the research.

Let me offer a personal approach that I used when I first decided to delve into my family history. I've touched on this before, but it was one of the most valuable

lessons I received at an early age in my life and worth mentioning again. My 10<sup>th</sup> grade civics teacher in high school gave us the assignment of interviewing our grandparents and recording our family history. I never thought about doing anything like this, and I doubt if any other 14-year-old boy or girl really think about their heritage at this point in time. I think the priority is school work, school activities, part-time jobs for extra money, and, of course, dating – not family research.

I didn't think that much about the assignment except that I had to complete it in order to get a decent grade. Both grandfathers had passed away, so I approached my two grandmothers for my family history. My maternal grandmother seemed more open to discussing the family history, and I acquired quite a bit of information from her. My paternal grandmother gave me lots of information too, but I think the family scattered around the country when she was young and the needed information just wasn't readily available. I do recall her stories of the Oklahoma Land Rush and a brother going up the Oregon Trail. This was different from my other grandmother's story. There was her version of coming by boat and eating only cornbread and then learning about one ancestor who dressed like an Indian, thus telling me that my Indian heritage was something that might be of great interest to research.

The one thing that I completely overlooked at this time was the local church cemetery. I had a wealth of material right there within a mile of my home, but it never entered my mind to copy down names and dates or even ask my parents to guide me through all my relatives buried here and in another cemetery nearby. It is amazing what I learned in later years right there and then in other cemeteries within a few miles from there.

Land grants brought many relatives to their respective locations. This was a common occurrence as people moved westward. There was always that quest for a better life, and they braved the hardships in order to obtain this dream. Stories of hardships abound, and one set of circumstances always led to another. It's that way with research. Once you open the door, there are others waiting for you.

It's nice to be able to go to the different locations to do research, but when this isn't possible, you take alternate routes. When I finally decided to do my own family history, I had no idea how to proceed. I made my way to the genealogy section of the Fort Worth Public Library, started checking card indexes for any references that might help, and started using the census rolls. At the time, I knew I had done the civics assignment in high school, but I forgot that I left that family history form in the old family trunk along with other family pictures and documents.

Without recalling this, I decided to do something that many researchers probably never think about doing. I started by writing a letter to the mayor of the little town where my father was born in Kansas. I knew that my great-grandfather's home had been torn down when they built the John Redmond Reservoir, so I wrote an

**inquiry and told the mayor about an old family picture with relatives standing in front of the home. Above the front door was a large stone with the date and construction worker's name on it. I wanted to know if he could direct me to any descendants who might still be living in the area.**

**I got an immediate response, and it was one that I certainly hadn't expected. He gave me the names of relatives and the biggest surprise of all. In his back yard was the old stone from the family homestead. They decided to save it in case anyone asked for it. It was time to head out to Kansas and to retrieve this stone which now rests in my garden. I see it every day, and I marvel at how I located it and the luck that I had with that one letter I wrote at the beginning of my family history research.**

**One letter led to another until I must have touched just about every living relative I knew. All of these letters are in 33 notebooks, but I have them cataloged by family names. My main surname is in three volumes. My mother's maiden name occupies another large volume, and so on. Each surname, sometimes more than one, is in these notebooks.**

**I then became really inspired to pursue this more. I recalled that civics assignment and realized that I needed to do more interviewing. I had only one grandmother left at this time, so I took out my paper and pen and started asking her questions. She thought it was unusual, but from these discussions I came up with priceless information about my immediate relatives. The descriptions she gave of all the relatives are there on those pieces of paper, and I got her to discuss the Indian lineage more too. I noted all the cemeteries where relatives were buried, and I made notes on people who lived nearby. I learned about the hardships of life in turn-of-the-century Louisiana, especially DeSoto Parish and the adjoining counties in Texas.**

**I mention Texas here because the old homestead was located on the Louisiana and Texas line, and the nearest church and store were across the state line. Today, you can drive down the old country road, and Texas is on one side and Louisiana is on the other.**

**As we grow older, we also realize that sometimes we carry the knowledge of family history in our heads that never gets put down on paper. What one thinks may not be important could possibly be a piece of vital information. That's why I save so many notes. They mean something to me, but there is also so much that seems to be out there and needing to be discovered or re-discovered. This is why I often take relatives on journeys into the past, showing them different places where relatives lived, or even guiding them through cemeteries where our family members are buried.**

**I have also saved all the old family pictures, those from official photographers and even all the old snapshots taken by relatives at family reunions. Thank goodness I got relatives to help me label them. Otherwise they would be of no value except to**

say they are family members. There are just so many things that make recalling memories so nice. One discovery seems to lead to another, whether it is in a book, in old courthouse records, or checking out headstones in an old cemetery.

It was really a blessing to have had that assignment in high school. Now when I return to this area of Louisiana, I can look at the surroundings and know that I have done something to save a little of the past. I realize there is still a lot in my head, but maybe I can put some of it down on paper. I guess that is why people say a mind is a beautiful thing to waste. If you can do anything to preserve your heritage, I encourage you to do it now. It's never too late to start, and you may possibly be the only one to record this material for future generations.

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**FREE SERVICE:** Correspondence to this column should be directed to Damon Veach, Cajuns, Creoles, Pirates and Planters, 709 Bungalow Lane, Baton Rouge, LA 70802-5337. The e-mail address is [ancestorslaveach@cox.net](mailto:ancestorslaveach@cox.net). Queries and book reviews are printed as space permits, and you are encouraged to take advantage of this free service. Claitor's Publishing can serve as a distributor for self-published genealogy titles. Go to their homepage for details on how you can obtain this excellent service.