

CAJUNS, CREOLES, PIRATES AND PLANTERS

Your New Louisiana Ancestors Format

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The internet has made genealogical research much easier, and much of this can be done on your own without paying individuals or groups for information. However, I still think of the days when I first started and all the hours I spent in libraries, cemeteries, and courthouses. I still feel it is so important to visit places where my ancestors lived, but I have yet to go to France where both my main family lines – Veach and Foshee - originated. Starting with personal interviews with relatives, long hours in research files, and discovering through census records, card files, and microfilm will always be an important phase for me in the compilation of my family history.

However, with all the information now available online, it would be foolish not to take advantage of all the ways to bring your lineage home to you by way of your computer. Taking any data you have from personal experience, you can embark first on a study of your surname.

A family name (known as a surname or last name) is one that has been passed down from one generation to the next. In many countries and cultures, a woman adopts her husband's family name when they are married. Therefore when doing research, each marriage means another surname to research, and in many cases, researching a maternal line can add much-needed information to the male or major surname. If you have reached a point where it seems impossible to obtain more information, concentrate on those maiden names, and you may be surprised at what you find. This is sometimes really important in helping to solve a dead-end problem.

In Europe, surnames started in the 12th century, but it took several centuries before the majority of Europeans had one. The primary purpose was to distinguish one person or family from another. A large portion of the male population had a given name, such as John, William, Richard, etc. It became common after a while to begin referring to different Williams as William, the son of Andrew, which in turn soon became Anderson. If William was a cook, this led to the surname Cook. Even locations contributed to surnames, such as Brook or Brooks. Hair-coloring was also responsible for such names as Brown.

Eventually, surnames were derived from given names, such as Williams, Williamson, Johnson, and others. Most of the time, it was the male name that took the surname, but occasionally it was the mother's name, thus the difference in patronymic and matronymic names. Occupations also contributed to surnames, such as Smith, Wright, and Clark, or locations, such as Hill, Woods, and Ford. Even nicknames became surnames – Long, Young, and White, for examples. Colors became surnames too, such as Silver, Gold, Black, etc.

There are so many ways to go about finding specific data on surnames and individuals. Once again, you have to have starting points, and talking with the older members of the family is such an important thing to do. It needs to be written down or it will be lost in time. In earlier times, Bibles were important ways to record family names, dates, births, deaths, and even adoptions although this was not as common. In more recent times, researchers can turn to the Death Master File (DMF) from the Social Security Administration (SSA). This currently contains millions of records and is updated weekly.

The file is created from internal SSA records of deceased persons possessing social security numbers and whose deaths were reported to the SSA. Often this was done in connection with filing for death benefits by a family member, an attorney, a mortuary, etc. Each update of the DMF includes corrections to old data as well as additional names. (NOTE: If someone is missing from the list, it may be that the benefit was never requested, an error was made on the form requesting the benefit, or an error was made when entering the information into the SSDI.)

This file includes the following information on each decedent, if the data is available to the SSA:

- Last name
- First name
- Social Security Number
- State issued
- Birth date
- Death date
- Last residence
- Lump sum payment

The absence of a particular person in the SSDI is not proof this person is alive. Additionally, there is a possibility that incorrect records of death have been entered on the DMF. The Social Security Administration does not guarantee the accuracy of the file.

When you know the information, be as specific as possible to avoid a large number of hits. (Large can be somewhere over a couple hundred or so.) If you are unable to find someone you are looking for, here are some things to try:

- Change dates around (e.g. instead of searching for 5 Oct 1954 [10/5/54], search for 10 May 1954 [5/10/54])
- Change years around (e.g. 1984 becomes 1948)
- Use all other possible spellings of the name (and perhaps some that aren't so likely)

- Switch last name and first name around
- Try searching for a middle name as a first name
- Even if you know a piece of information, try omitting it (e.g. if you know first and last name and death date, try leaving off the first name).

Of course, you can always depend on census records to help you out in your research. This is the beauty of doing research online. Census records are among one of the most often utilized tools for genealogical research. Many censuses are recorded or transcribed and can be found online. Locating free census records online can present a challenge. With a bit of patience, you will find thousands of census links to free census transcriptions, census indexes, and census images in categorized directories. In many cases in my own research, I didn't have to go to microfilm, I could find individuals who had copied census records and published the data in book form. I even did that for a parish in Louisiana years ago and included it in my column series.

The census records are a roadmap to future research. With the location of the birthplaces of you ancestors, your search widens to other states and other countries. It doesn't necessarily simplify your research, but it does point you in the right direction. Here again, having so many of these records online means this research time becomes a lot easier to accomplish positive results.

Ways of finding information on your surname seems almost endless at times. With each new clue, another door opens into your past. You just have to find those doors and proceed from there. Just utilize all the tools before you. Don't depend on the internet alone. I found great joy in going to the courthouse in DeSoto Parish where my families lived and finding those original signed documents. Land records can reveal so much that you may have missed along the way, and it would be a monumental task to copy all these for internet perusal.

Many of these records, however, are available, but many are still hidden away waiting for you to find them and copy them to add to your family files. As you go back in time, you can learn so much about your heritage. Although I've never been to those foreign lands where ancestors lived, I do know where the records are. I've been there through books and letters and shared research items with distant relatives.

Don't overlook any source where your family information may be hidden away. It may even be right before you just waiting to be enjoyed and cherished by you and those who come after you. This is the joy I have found in doing things my way. You just have to learn what is best for you.

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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. 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.