

Louisiana Family History Research: Four Centuries of History and Genealogy

Class 1: 17th Century Colonization and Conflict

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To be blunt, there is really no way to synopsise the history of Louisiana. Between the French, Spanish and English, Europeans have been in what became the state of Louisiana since the 16th century. Coming from the north, French and French-Canadian expeditions (that had done much to establish what they referred to as *Pays de Illinois* (Illinois Country)), with their established religious and commercial enterprises, the lands under the claim of France were vast within what would eventually become the United States. Named for France's King Louis XIV, by French explorer Robert Cavelier de La Salle in 1682, the first permanent settlement within the Louisiana region was founded in 1699 and named Fort Maurepas by Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville.

Discovery

One of the things we all learned in school was the names of many explorers and what they were known for. Of course, much of what we learned were the *highlights* of the careers of individuals who were in many ways not very nice men. Of course, when it came to the Spanish, their very name *conquistador* indicated that one of their goals in exploration was to conquer.

Alonso Alvarez de Pineda

Pineda was head of a Spanish expedition in 1519. He sailed along the Gulf of Mexico coastline from Florida to Cabo Rojo, Mexico. The purpose of his expedition was simply to explore the coast between the Florida peninsula (discovered by Juan Ponce De León), and that of the southern Gulf (discovered by Diego Velázquez). Ultimately, he was trying to solve the riddle of how to find a strait to the Pacific Ocean. The goal was always to get to Asia.

Pineda's map, which is located in the *Archivo de Indias* in Sevilla, Spain, was perhaps not to scale and had some area to the left of Cuba—to this day know what knows what the shading in that area means.

Hernando de Soto

With the map that Pineda had created, there was a better understanding of the southern area of what would eventually become the United States of America. By the time of the expedition of Hernando de Soto, many of the various islands to the east of Florida had been identified and were becoming inhabited by Europeans, specifically the Spanish. This meant that as future expeditions set off they knew they had places they could stop, such as Santo Domingo. Additionally, de Soto had an important role in Francisco



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Pizarro's overthrow of the Incas in 1532. Pizarro's murder of the Incan emperor Atahualpa, despite his having paid a ransom for his release, was the second major expedition to send gold and silver back to Spain. The first having been in 1521, when Hernando Cortés had overthrown the Aztec Empire in a rather brutal manner.

As a result, de Soto was no stranger to what it meant to be an explorer and *conquistador*. By 1536 he was well known as someone who was successful in the conquest of Native American groups in Central and South America, and he had been involved in the sale of Indian slaves.

In 1536 when he returned to Spain, he petitioned King Charles V for a governorship in Central Florida. This didn't work out for de Soto though the King did offer him a chance to explore what was at the time known as *La Florida* which at the time was a much larger region than the state of Florida is today. In addition, the King made de Soto the governor of Cuba. It would take de Soto a couple of years to gather not only his supplies but also a paid army for the expedition. He set out on May of 1539 with 600 men, horses, pigs, and equipment. He was to explore the region and along the way establish settlements and forts.

It was while on this expedition that he and his men eventually would cross the Mississippi River into present day Arkansas on 28 June 1541.¹ Of course, by this time he had traveled much, interacted with many of the Native people—in many cases resulting in battles—and had found no gold or any wealth to send back to Spain. Eventually he died 31 May 1542 of a fever, though many speculate his spirit had been broken.

Rene-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle

It would be more than a century before another attempt would be made involving the Mississippi River. And this time it was the result of Rene-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de la Salle from *Nouvelle France*.

In 1677 he had received a fur trade monopoly in *Pays des Illinois* (Illinois Country) with Louis de Buade, Comte de Frantenac et de Palluau. However, the monopoly was not as profitable as he had hoped, and he began to look further south within the lands of what would become the United States that were west of the Appalachian Mountains and were under the control of the government in Québec.

He traveled to France in 1677 and presented an opportunity to King Louis XIV. King Louis approved of his idea, and he received a patent to explore, build forts and find a way to Mexico. In 1678 while in France he met Henri de Tonti, who was very familiar with the *Pays des Illinois* and agreed to become La Salle's lieutenant in his new expedition.

¹ Dates given in Gregorian calendar.

It would take a few attempts to discover how to get to the Gulf of Mexico. It was his third attempt to descend the Mississippi in 1682 that proved successful. His party consisted of 23 Frenchmen, 18 Indian men, 10 Indian women, and 3 Indian children. He would finally enter the Mississippi River on February 3, 1682. And on March 3, 1682, when he discovered the river entering the Gulf of Mexico, he claimed all the lands in the King's name. At an official gathering, which included some of the Native people, a column with the arms of France was erected that said below *Louis, le Grand, Roy de France et de Navarre, règne le 9^e Avril, 1682*. With the planting of the column, La Salle made a statement that included naming the land as *Louisiane* (for his King) and he went into great detail about the lands, rivers and various native tribes within the boundaries. He called the Mississippi the *River Colbert* after an advisor to Louis XIV.

When Joseph-Antoine le Fèbvre de La Barre was appointed by Louis XIV as the Governor General of *Nouvelle France* (Canada) in 1682, replacing Louis De Buade de Frontenac, he dispossessed La Salle of his lands including Fort St. Louis (known today as Starved Rock).

Unhappy, La Salle traveled to France to get justice. He met with Louis XIV and laid out his issues about Fort St. Louis and shared his plans for establishing a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi as well as his plans to conquer the province of New Biscay in Mexico. Louis authorized the settlement and ordered La Barre to surrender everything that had belonged to La Salle.

Sadly, as La Salle was returning from France, things didn't go quite as planned. He left La Rochelle 24 July 1684 with four vessels containing soldiers, mechanics, laborers, volunteers, several families and a number of girls. They stopped at Santo Domingo briefly. Unfortunately, La Salle missed the entrance to the Mississippi and instead landed at Matagorda Bay (in present day Texas). Some of those who were with him murdered him there 18 March 1687.

Nine Years' War

Part of the Anglo-French Wars that took place over seven centuries (1109-1815), the Nine Years' War was an attempt by Louis XIV to extend France's frontiers in Europe. He led an army across the Rhine to seize territories.

By 1696 both sides were financially suffering, though they struggled to come to terms on peace. Eventually in 1697, the Peace of Ryswick, the result of a series of treaties signed between 20 September to 30 October 1697 in the Dutch city of Rijswijk, the war came to an end.

Throughout the war no thought was given to *Louisiane*.

Colonization

The purpose of colonizing Louisiana was to create an outpost against the English. A settlement in Louisiana would serve as a "buffer zone" between the English colonies to the east and the Spanish colonies

of Mexico. Likewise, France was indeed hoping that it could provide raw materials. However, it was never expected to be heavily populated and in the view of those in Versailles, it certainly wasn't expected to become an economically successful colony. With that said, there were a number of individuals who were interested in this new territory. Top of the list was the hope by Louis XIV that there would be vast riches such as those Spain had acquired in the 1500s from the Aztecs and the Incas.

Louisiana's Reputation

Unfortunately, Louisiana was doomed on many accounts. Two publications by Father Louis Hennepin published in 1683 and 1697, a Recollect Missionary who had traveled with La Salle, did not do Louisiana proud. While Hennepin was willing to acknowledge the fertile wilderness, he also described it as populated by many wild and dangerous beasts. Additionally, he didn't have much good to say about the Native people, whom he referred to as savages—describing them as cruel and stating they would waylay, murder, and torture Europeans.

Eventually Louisiana became synonymous with the phrase “bad country.” It was known that it lacked any riches, and word of mouth from some naval officers and soldiers who returned to Paris after their time in Louisiana was that it was a “desert of misery and despair.” Such comments didn't entice people to want to make the arduous crossing of the Atlantic only to find new struggles where they would be settling.

What is Louisiana?

At this point, it is important to perhaps identify just how much land fell under the term “Louisiana.” First, it was sometimes referred to as Lower Louisiana and consisted of the southern section of the French colonial Territory of Louisiana (which extended north to the Great Lakes). Lower Louisiana included the present-day states:

- Louisiana
- Arkansas (portion)
- Mississippi (portion)
- Alabama (portion)

As a result, many of the towns that were under Lower Louisiana as it began to be settled would eventually end up in different states of the present-day United States, including Biloxi (Miss.) and Mobile (Ala.).

Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville

Born in Montreal, 16 July 1661, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville achieved what La Salle was unable to, the actual founding of a settlement in Louisiana. One of twelve brothers, he would go on to become a French soldier and an explorer, who did ultimately get down to Lower Louisiana. Many of his brothers would serve as soldiers as well, and one, Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne Bienville will travel with Iberville when he achieves La Salle's goal.



He would distinguish himself in Hudson Bay during King William's War. He became a *filibustier* (freebooter – similar to a privateer but can legally attack ships even when not at war) in 1686 and managed to capture two English ships on the Nelson River. It was in 1694, during King William's War that he eventually captured Fort York—which he renamed Fort Bourbon. The French would hold the fort until 1713.

Under Louis-Phélypeaux, Comte de Maurepas, Count de Pontchartrain (minister for naval affairs and colonies) gave Iberville the task of finding the mouth of the Mississippi River and to build a fort to block the river from other nations using it. Under this charter, he left Brest, France on 24 September 1698 with four ships: two frigates and two smaller vessels. Onboard in addition to his brother Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne Bienville, he carried one company of marines along with 200 settlers (which did include a few women and children). After successfully finding the mouth of the river, he would go on to build Fort Maurepas on 8 April 1699. This was the first settlement in Louisiana.

While Iberville returned to France in 1699, he left Sieur Sauvole as commander of the fort and his brother, often referred to as Bienville, as the lieutenant. In December of 1699 a census was taken for Fort Maurepas which showed:

- 5 officers (including the two mentioned above)
- 5 petty officers
- 4 sailors
- 19 Canadians
- 13 freebooters
- 10 laborers
- 6 cabin boys
- 20 soldiers

They were the only individuals identified. It is unknown if some had families with them.

By 1700, the census showed the following for the same categories:

- 8 staff officers
- 5 petty officers
- 9 sailors
- 61 Canadians
- 10 freebooters
- 6 laborers
- 6 cabin boys
- 20 soldiers from 4 detachments



It is safe to say that at this point Louisiana had more Canadians than it did emigrants from France.

War of Spanish Succession

Though Iberville was hoping to grow his community, Louis XIV was once again involved in a war, this time the War of Spanish Succession. When Charles II of Spain died childless it caused a bit of a problem. France and most of Spain were hoping to see Philip of Anjou take the throne. However, the Grand Alliance (which consisted of primarily of Austria, the Dutch Republic, Great Britain) wanted to see the Archduke Charles of Austria on the throne. The war went from 1701 to 1714 and cost France dearly when it came to finances. As a result, the fledgling colony of *Louisiane* was left to fend for itself.

At this point, France considered the attempts to settle Louisiana a failure. There were no riches and wealth to extract. It continued to have issues in regard to settlement. There was a thought to create a plantation system similar to that of South Carolina. And in an effort to raise some capital, there were thoughts about selling North American Native people to the Caribbean in exchange for slaves.

Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville

Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville was born in Montréal, *Nouvelle France* in 1680. He was brother to Iberville and upon Iberville's death in 1706 he proclaimed himself governor of Louisiana. During the years that the War of Spanish Succession was raging in Europe, Bienville was doing what he could for the colony of Louisiana. He was the one that thought about selling the Native Americans to the Caribbean in exchange for slaves—his idea was to sell two North American Indians to the French West Indies in exchange for one slave. This and his overall treatment of the Native peoples caused issues with the various tribes.

The best information as to how sorely the settlers in Louisiana were suffering comes from Jean-Baptiste-Martin d'Artaquiette d'Iron. He was named *Commissaire Ordonateur pour la Louisiane* in 1707 and arrived in Mobile in 1708. He was expected to remain there for five years. The main purpose of his arrival was to investigate Bienville who was accused of malfeasance, including “his authoritarianism towards his compatriots and his cruelty towards Indian prisoners.” Nothing came of this investigation, but it did give Artaquiette an unvarnished view of life in the colony.

In 1712 he sent a letter back to France addressed to Pontchartrain, the naval minister, in which he described the terrible situation. He described soldiers who were deserting and settlers who were basically naked and subsisting on “crushed and boiled Indian cord with a piece of meat...”

Antoine Crozat

Because France was essentially broke after the War of Spanish Succession, letters patent were granted to Antoine Crozat, a successful businessman, in 1712. He was the first proprietor of the colony. His patent

was registered in August 1712 and within the document it included a provision for the annual emigration of 20 settlers from France. Crozat didn't do this, and the clause wasn't enforced.

Crozat's goal had originally been to make a quick and sizable profit, and he hoped to establish commerce between Mobile and Vera Cruz. He was never able to establish this. Likewise, he had hoped to search for precious metals, and again this did not materialize.

Instead, Crozat found himself paying for everything, in essence covering the tab for the crown and for his good deeds. He was also trying to make a profit, something that Versailles needed him to cut back on because it was basically more than those who were already in the colony could afford.

And because it was expensive to ship people to the colony, Crozat hadn't done much in the way of helping the colony to increase in size. And eventually this became a serious issue.

Forced Emigration

By the 1710s, it was becoming impossible to encourage anyone in Paris and the Atlantic seaboard of France to consider immigrating to Louisiana.

Crozat came up with a proposal that would take certain individuals who had broken the laws in France and send them to Louisiana rather than having them languish in prison or spend the rest of their life as a galley slave aboard a ship. In order to get his proposal accepted he brought up many of the same items that Iberville had to get authorization for his settlement, the biggest being how important it was for Louisiana to hold back the English from moving across the country from their eastern colonies as well as having a way to continue to hassle the Spanish. He did bring up the fact that both Great Britain and Holland had similar schemes, and their colonies were doing quite well.

Within the proposal, a very specific criminal was suggested—the *faux sauniers* (salt smugglers). Though considered some of the most dangerous, their smuggled salt was costing the French crown millions of *livres* per year by undercutting the crown's monopoly price. Many of the *faux sauniers* came from the provinces of Anjou, Touraine, and Maine and as a result the men were of sturdy stock and usually came from a farming background.

The scheme was to send 100 of them per year, in three staggered shipments, to Louisiana. While they would be barred from France for life, after spending their first three years as an *engage* (similar to an indentured servant) they would then be given lands, tools, etc. and become yeoman.

The proposal was accepted 8 February 1716. However as soon as it was accepted, the wheels began to fall off. It took a year just to select the *faux sauniers*. They were then sent to prisons in La Rochelle where they spent months in overcrowded prisons waiting for a ship to carry them to Louisiana.

In 1717, Crozat had a major disagreement with the Council over a matter of government subsidies. Remember that he had been footing the bill up to this point and the Council had already requested he adjust his price policy, which he had agreed to. It was a surprise then that when the Chambre de Justice imposed a charge of 6,600,000 *livres* on him he was most unhappy. This solidified his decision to resign as a proprietor.

John Law and the *Companie d'Occident*

Law was the director of the *Companie d'Occident* and they picked up the pieces of Louisiana after Crozat's abandonment. Law was very much aware of the reputation that Louisiana had and so he mounted a major propaganda campaign with anonymous pieces appearing in the *Le Nouveau Mèrcure* that described Louisiana as a paradise. Once again anyone who lived in Paris or along the Atlantic coast of France was well aware that Louisiana was anything but a paradise—so the only takers Law received came from areas of France that hadn't heard the horror of Louisiana. He also managed to get some Germans to immigrate.

As a result, Law encouraged Crozat's ideas of forced emigration. He suggested that while the *faux sauniers* still serve an *engagement* for the first three years, that they be treated like regular day laborers and that they be allowed to travel with their families, if they had one, to Louisiana.

It was also in 1717 that Law encouraged the addition of army deserters to the list of forced émigrés. Once this was found to be acceptable, France found the forced emigration program to be a way to rid themselves of all manner of undesirables.

New Orleans Founded in 1718

Bienville, discussed above, brother of Iberville, founded the town of New Orleans in early 1718, which is what he is best known for. It would be slow going for this new town just as it had been for much of Louisiana. However, when Father Pierre François Xavier Charlevoix arrived in New Orleans in 1722 he did mention in a letter that he could see promise in the town.

By the time the 1721 census for New Orleans was taken on 24 November 1721, there were a considerable number of individuals enumerated in the city:

- 290 Frenchman
- 140 Frenchwoman
- 96 French children
- 156 Domestic servants
- 533 “Negro slaves”
- 51 Indian slaves

It had taken centuries to see Louisiana start to become something. Much of its problems had been the result of France's lack of care for their oft-forgotten colony, especially under the reign of Louis XIV.

Native Peoples

Of course, as France was trying to settle Europeans in the area, it cannot be forgotten that the land itself had long been inhabited by many tribes of Native people. Unfortunately, it really isn't until the Europeans arrive that anything is learned about the many varied tribes since the Native Americans passed down their knowledge orally.

There were many different tribes, whose names were often spelled in many different ways, but a large number of them seemed to be linguistically connected. John R. Swanton, previously mentioned, was a well-known anthropologist who, after receiving his doctorate from Harvard, began working at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., specifically in the Bureau of American Ethnology. He held that job for 40 years until his retirement and he became an authority on the Native American tribes of the United States, specifically those of the Lower Mississippi (what was previously Lower Louisiana).

His valuable publications offer great detail as to the various tribes, how they were related to one another (if they were) and often discussed their way of life from physical and moral characteristics, dress, tattooing, marriage and religion to origins of the tribes and history since first white contact.

Sadly, many of the tribes no longer exist, or are greatly diminished from their historic numbers. And as was mentioned in regard to Bienville, the Europeans did not always treat the original settlers of the Lower Louisiana nicely.

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