

STATE GUIDE

LOUISIANA

by ANDREW KOCH

THE FRENCH QUARTER. Jazz and blues. Mardi Gras. Cajun cuisine. From scenic bayous to historic French Creole architecture, Louisiana has drawn tourists from around the world with its unique flavors, sights and sounds.

Indeed, Louisiana has always been a crossroads of cultures and peoples—a place where French, Acadian, Caribbean, American Indian, African, Spanish, English and Creole collide at the mouth of the mighty Mississippi River.

Louisianans are resilient, too, enduring dozens of hurricanes and major floods throughout their history. And if your ancestors are among this vibrant, persistent people, turn to the records and resources in this guide.

MULTICULTURAL HISTORY

Spanish and French explorers first arrived in the area in the mid-16th century, with France claiming the region in 1682. At the time, the area was inhabited by several American Indian groups, notably the Chitimacha and the Caddo.

Early settlers from American colonies, France, Spain and the West Indies came in dribs and drabs, putting down roots in the trading port of New Orleans, in particular. Enslaved individuals came along with their enslavers, and the first ship carrying African slaves directly to Louisiana arrived in 1719.

More people groups came to the area after Spain won the Louisiana territory from the French in the Seven Years' War in 1763. Around the same time, Great Britain cast out thousands of French-speaking residents from their homes in Acadia.

Le Grand Dérangement (“The Great Expulsion”) saw many displaced Acadians migrate to the Francophone territory of Louisiana. Their descendants became known as “Cajun” (a word derived from “Acadian”).

The Haitian Revolution, which ended in 1804, also drove waves of refugees to the Louisiana area. These emigrants—many of them free people of color—brought with them their West African and Caribbean culture. The pre-statehood population in the region collectively became known as the Louisiana Creole.

The Haitian Revolution also indirectly led to Louisiana being added to the Union. France, smarting from the recent independence of its valuable Saint-Dominigue colony, was looking to divest the North American land it had recently reacquired from Spain. So when the Jefferson administration approached Napoleon Bonaparte about purchasing New Orleans, the French

leader was willing to sell the city *and* much more: 530 million acres extending all the way north to Canada. The southernmost portion, the “Orleans Territory,” became the state of Louisiana in 1812.

Thanks to the arrival of steamboats and railroads, Louisiana prospered as a center of trade, particularly of cotton and sugar. Much of the state’s economy was also built on the back of slavery and the slave trade, with New Orleans growing into one of the largest slave markets in the United States. In fact, on the eve of the Civil War, 47 percent of the state’s population was enslaved. Louisiana also had one of the country’s largest populations of free people of color.

FAST FACTS

- ★ **Statehood:** 1812
- ★ **First federal census:** 1810
- ★ **Statewide birth and death records begin:** 1911
- ★ **Statewide marriage records begin:** none (kept at parish level)
- ★ **Public-land state**
- ★ **Parishes:** 64
- ★ **Contact for vital records:**
Vital Records Registry, Box 60630,
New Orleans, LA 70160,
(504) 593-5100, <ldh.la.gov/index.cfm/subhome/21>

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timeline

1528

Spaniard Panfilo de Narváez leads the first Europeans to the region when he locates the mouth of the Mississippi

1682

Frenchman René-Robert Cavalier de La Salle claims Louisiana for France, naming it after King Louis XIV

1763

Modern Louisiana trades hands from France to Spain after the Seven Years' War

1803

Thomas Jefferson purchases Louisiana (and what would become the middle third of the United States)

1811

In the United States' largest slave revolt, hundreds of enslaved men living on Louisiana's German Coast rise up

1815

Andrew Jackson defeats the British at New Orleans—two weeks after the War of 1812 officially ended

Because of the state's racially diverse population (and New Orleans' economic reliance on trade), Louisianans were initially split on the issue of succession. But they ultimately voted to leave the Union, and New Orleans became an early target for Union soldiers, falling in 1862.

VITAL INFORMATION

Louisiana required birth and death registration beginning in 1911, though some parishes have earlier records. (Note: "Parishes" are the Louisianan equivalent of other states' counties.)

The Louisiana State Archives has an online searchable index of the vital records under its care: statewide birth and death records older than 100 and 50 years, respectively <www.sos.la.gov/HistoricalResources/ResearchHistoricalRecords/Pages/OnlinePublicVitalRecordsIndex.aspx>. You can order certified copies of these records from the state archives.

More-recent documents are restricted to those mentioned in the records or their direct descendants. The Department of Health's Vital Records Registry, which holds these records, has information on obtaining them <ldh.la.gov/index.cfm/page/2663>.

Marriages were recorded by parish clerks of court, and can be found by contacting them individually <www.laclerksofcourt.org/clerksof-court>. (Beginning in 1957, state law required copies of parish records be sent to the state government, but no online index of these duplicates exists as of writing.)

Orleans Parish began keeping vital records sooner—as early as 1790 for birth records and 1804 for death records. The state archives' online index captures these. The state archives—not the Orleans clerk of court—hold Orleans Parish marriage records, and you can search an index of them on the archives' site. Orleans marriage records are also subject to the 50-year privacy restriction.

AUTRES REGISTRES

Here are some other key record groups to study:

★ **Census:** Louisiana first appeared in the federal census in 1810 as Orleans Territory, and each of the major records websites (including FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org> and Ancestry.com <www.ancestry.com> has free collections of federal censuses. But Louisiana was also captured in colonial censuses that date back to the French and Spanish eras; see <wiki.rootsweb.com/wiki/index.php/Colonial_Records_of_Louisiana> to learn where to find them.

Other enumerations include 1850 and 1860 slave schedules that accompanied the federal censuses in those years, plus



1837

The first Mardi Gras parade is held in New Orleans

1863

In a key strategic move, Union forces capture Port Hudson, the last Confederate holdout on the Mississippi

1884

New Orleans hosts a world's fair, called the World Cotton Centennial

1896

The Supreme Court rules against New Orleans resident Homer Plessy in *Plessy v. Ferguson*

1927

The Mississippi River floods, leaving hundreds of thousands homeless

2005

Hurricane Katrina causes widespread flooding, killing nearly 1,000 people in Louisiana

TOOLKIT

Websites

Acadian-Cajun Genealogy & History <www.acadian-cajun.com>

Cyndi's List: Louisiana <www.cyndislist.com/us/la>

FamilySearch Research Wiki: Louisiana
<www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Louisiana,_United_States_Genealogy>

LAGenWeb <www.lagenweb.org>

Louisiana Clerk of Courts Association: List of Clerks
<www.laclerksofcourt.org/clerks-of-court>

Louisiana Digital Library
<www.louisianadigitallibrary.org>

Louisiana Historical Society <www.louisianahistoricalociety.org>

Publications

Historical Atlas of Louisiana by Charles Robert Goins and John Michael Caldwell (University of Oklahoma Press)

History of Louisiana, four volumes by Charles Gayarré (Pelican Publishing)

Old Families of Louisiana by Stanley Arthur (Arcadia Publishing)

Archives & Organizations

Louisiana State Archives 3851 Essen Lane, Baton Rouge, LA 70809, (225) 922-1208 <www.sos.la.gov/HistoricalResources/LearnAboutTheArchives/Pages/default.aspx>

National Archives at Fort Worth, Texas 1400 John Burgess Drive, Fort Worth, TX 76140, (817) 551-2034, <www.archives.gov/fort-worth>

New Orleans Public Library Louisiana Division/City Archives & Special Collections, Third Floor, 219 Loyola Ave, New Orleans, LA 70112, (504) 596-2610, <archives.nolalibrary.org/~nopl/spec/speclist.htm>

The State Library of Louisiana 701 North 4th Street, Baton Rouge, LA 70802, (225) 342-4913, <www.state.lib.la.us/library-collections/genealogy>

1830s and 1850s censuses of just Orleans Parish. In addition, New Orleans, specifically, had two special censuses in 1791 and 1804, and the City Archives & Special Collections has translated them and made them available on microfilm.

★ **Military:** Louisiana played an important role in the War of 1812, supplying more than 9,000 men to the effort and serving as a battleground for its last conflict, the Battle of New Orleans. Access Genealogy has a list of War of 1812 records organized by state <www.access-genealogy.com/america/war-of-1812-military-records.htm>, including an Ancestry.com collection of Louisiana War of 1812 service records <www.ancestry.com/search/collections/3339>.

More than 56,000 Louisianans served in the Confederate armed forces. (Notable among them was P.G.T. Beauregard, commander at Charleston who ordered the first shots of the war fired at Fort Sumter.) You can find their service records among the free Soldiers and Sailors Database <www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>.

In 1898, Louisiana granted pension records to its Confederate veterans and their widows. You can search an index of pension applications and order copies of them on the state archives website, or view digital images at FamilySearch <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1838535>.

★ **Immigration:** New Orleans has been a major port of immigration since the city was founded in 1718. The National Archives <www.archives.gov> holds original passenger lists, and FamilySearch has an online collection of them dating from 1820 (when the federal government mandated their creation) through 1945 <www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1916009>.

★ **Land:** When the United States took control of Louisiana, landowners in the area had to file a proof of ownership with the government. Those applications have been collected into *Bound Records of the General Land Office Relating to Private Land Claims in Louisiana, 1767-1892*, and can be found on microfilm at the National Archives and the Family History Library. Any unclaimed land was sold off to individuals.

Parish clerks of court recorded subsequent land transfers between individuals (called “conveyances”), some of which were filed in notarial books. If your ancestor purchased land from the government, consult the Bureau of Land Management’s General Land Office <gloreCORDS.blm.gov>. ●

Emily Anne Croom (1943–2018) was a genealogy expert and writer whose advice helped decades of genealogists. Her Louisiana State Research Guide was instrumental in writing this new version.