

Lives of Quiet Desperation

The Ancestry of a Louisiana Frenchman

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Privately Published by the Author
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1880 United States Federal Census for Alcide Rickard

Louisiana > St Landry > 1st Ward > 039

Street	House No.	Dwell No.	Family No.	Name	Race	Sex	Age	Birth Month	Relationship	Single	Married	Widow/D	Married C	Occupation	Mo	Ur
				Adèle	W	F	19		wife	1				Colon in farm		
	2301			Rickard Alcide	W	M	31		ha farm		1			Farming		
				Edmonia	W	F	23		wife		1			Supp house		
				Iniquiere	W	M	5		son							
				Louis	W	M	2		son							
				Olta	W	F	1 1/2		step daughter							

Household of Joseph Alcide Richard and Edmonia Savoie, 1880 U.S. Census

LOUISIANA'S FRENCH AMALGAM

Louisiana's French heritage has been the subject of much prose and poetry. Since Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic (and hugely successful) poem *Evangeline* romanticized the Acadian Odyssey, numerous novels, works of historical fiction, histories, documentaries and motion pictures of the 20th Century tended to melt all French cultures into a generic "Cajun" culture. Louisiana is arguably the most ethnically diverse of the fifty states. In addition to rich African and Caribbean cultures, pockets of Asian, German, Irish, Czech, Anglo-Saxon, Indian, Spanish and Italian communities can be easily identified. The general tendency of writers is to add French to the above list of influences, equate French with Cajun, and presume it to be dominant. As Glenn Conrad writes in *Attakapas Gazette*: "No matter the interpretation placed on the content and status of the South Louisiana lifestyle, there seems to be an iron-clad rule that the piece must end by quoting a South Louisiana 'Cajun' saying, *laissez les bons temps rouler*." Louisiana's historical French heritage is multi-faceted; to homogenize it is to ignore a unique intra-ethnic diversity.

The Center for Louisiana Studies of the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now the University of Louisiana-Lafayette) is engaged in ongoing research on identifying the cultural contributions of *several* groups of French-speakers who settled Louisiana in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Hopefully, their noble work will do much to analyze the various cultures of the Louisiana French.

In another article in the *Attakapas Gazette* entitled "How Acadian is Acadiana?" (Winter, 1986), Conrad identified four distinct groups of French-speakers to arrive and settle in Louisiana between 1700-1900. The first group were soldiers, administrators, entrepreneurs, and adventurers who settled between the founding of the colony in 1699 and the surrender of it to Spain in 1766. Louis Lavergne from Quebec, who married Elizabeth Tomelin in New Orleans in 1725, and her father, Pierre Tomelin, would be good examples of this category. Historically, *Sieur de Bienville*, the founder of the city of New Orleans and the "Father of Louisiana" would be a member of this class of Frenchmen. Many of these Frenchmen were

not interested in farming or settling as much as engaging in business, commerce or getting wealthy through investment and speculation. Many, like Pierre Tomelin, came to Louisiana directly from France. Others, like Louis Lavergne made their way to New Orleans from Canada via the Mississippi River. In South Louisiana such family names as Delahoussaye, Fontenot, Boutte, Soileau, Patin, Bonin, Lavergne and many others pre-date the arrival of the Acadians and as such are not Cajuns themselves. These families and their descendants who remained in Louisiana after cession to Spain were generally referred to as Creoles. Today, the term Creole has additional and varied meanings. Successive generations of Creoles were given over to a lifestyle generated by a plantation or mercantile economy.

The second group of French immigrants to Louisiana were exiled Acadians from what was "Acadie" and is today called Nova Scotia. For approximately five generations, French peoples lived and worked in the frigid climate of the Canadian maritime provinces. The Acadians were forcibly ejected from their homes shortly before, during, and shortly after the Seven Years War (1756-1763) between France and Great Britain. This forced migration has been called "*Le Grand Dérangement*." The term "Cajun" originated circa the Civil War and was used as a pejorative term until it was gleefully adopted by the Acadians themselves. Genevieve Massignon's *Le Parles français d'Acadie* is a helpful source in identifying Acadian surnames, as is the 1714 census of Acadie. Acadian names found in this genealogy include: Aucoin, Brasseaux, David, Guidry, Pitre, Benoit, Breaux, Doucet, Hebert, Poirier, Bergeron, Broussard, Dugas, Lalande, Prejean, Bernard, Chaisson, Duhon, Landry, Richard, Blanchard, Comeaux, Dupuis, Leblanc, Savoie, Boudreaux, Cormier, Foret, Leger, Simon, Bourgeois, Daigre, Fournier, Lejeune, Sonnier, Bourque, Daigle, Girouard, Martin, Thibodeaux, and Trahan.² Cajuns tended to be more rustic, engaging in farming, fishing, and cattle raising—skills they brought with them from Acadie.

The third group of Franco settlers to enter Louisiana were refugees from slave insurrections on the West Indian island of Hispanola. From 1793 and on into the 1830s, thousands of refugees poured into New Orleans from Santo Domingo and spread across Louisiana. This group of French speakers were so similar in culture to the original French settlers, or Creoles, that they were quickly assimilated into that element of French-American society. In South Louisiana some of the family names of this group would include Domengeaux, Pecot, Sigur, and Sorel.

The final wave of French immigrants to Louisiana came over in waves during the nineteenth century after various upheavals in France. The Napoleonic Wars of the early 1800s and the era of the Franco-Prussian War saw the movement of thousands of French families from Europe to America, and Louisiana in particular. Some family names from this group are Bloch, Faul, Petitin, Monie, Coussan, and Croucet. These nineteenth century immigrants eventually settled into a lifestyle of small business operations in tiny urban centers of South Louisiana.

As Glenn Conrad suggests, recent popular literature has done more than any of many other factors to blur the distinctive cultural characteristics of Louisiana's French-speaking groups and their descendants. Most of my family and friends in Louisiana are completely unaware of the French groups described

² *Le Grand Dérangement* brought about the relocation of the Acadians in such far-off places as French Louisiana, Santo Domingo, and France. Once there, Cajuns bitterly resisted attempts by other Frenchmen to take advantage of their plight, exploit their labor, and make them a peasant class. Social friction between Acadians and New Orleans Creoles resulted in westward migration and a new kind of insularity for the Cajuns and their culture during the 18th and 19th centuries. But paradoxically, for generations during the 20th Century, some Cajuns cooperated in the near suppression of their own culture by *not* encouraging and even punishing their children when they spoke French in public or in school. My parents, for example, spoke French to each other when they *didn't* want my brothers and me to know what they were saying. To this day I speak very little French.

above. The media blitz that followed the "Cajun Craze" of the 1980s was compounded by the French Louisianians themselves and several would-be historians. Very often, articles, monographs, and books about "famous Cajuns" contain references to persons who are not Cajun at all. Many Laverignes do not know that they are not Cajun but are of Creole descent. It does not matter because, like most Louisianians of my generation, they do not know the difference anyway and twenty-first century Louisianians are much like me, an amalgam of all of Louisiana's French, plus much, much more.

About the Author



Gary M. Lavergne is a retired Director of Admissions Research and Policy Analysis for The University of Texas at Austin. He has authored four books and is the winner of the Writers' League of Texas Award for Best Book of Non-fiction, the Carr P. Collins Award for Best Work of Non-fiction by the Texas Institute of Letters, and the Coral Horton Tullis Memorial Prize for Best Book on Texas History by the Texas State Historical Association. He has also written for the New York Times, CNN, and numerous magazines and scholarly journals. He is an elected member of the Texas Institute of Letters and has appeared on DATELINE NBC, the Today Show, Good Morning America, the History Channel, Biography, American Justice, The Discovery Channel and many other network and cable news shows.