

## Family Names in French Louisiana

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**T**HE PARTS OF SOUTHERN LOUISIANA which were settled by the French in the eighteenth century offer an interesting area for the study of evolution in family names. The earliest settlers were French, including many direct from France plus others from the French West Indies and from Canada. Then came small but important groups of Spanish and Germans to add their family names to the Louisiana list. In the nineteenth century came large numbers of Americans, with their English, Scotch and Irish names, and finally, in the twentieth century, smaller numbers of Italians, Syrians and Lebanese added their names to the melting pot. New Orleans, of course, has representative groups of almost all nationalities, but even outside this metropolis the variety of family names is considerable.

Two distinct trends seem to be noticeable in Louisiana family name history. First, there was the tendency to make non-French names conform to the French in spelling or pronunciation, and second, in the last century or so, there has been an attempt to anglicize the French name. It should be pointed out, however, that particularly in the southern part of the state, the French name forms have survived remarkably well as compared with other foreign name forms in the United States. Such names as LeBlanc, Broussard, Begneaud, Benoit, Guidry, and even longer ones such as Delahoussaye, Demontreville and Domengeaux have preserved their forms unchanged after two centuries in America.

Some of the most interesting changes in the forms of family names took place among the German settlers. The so-called "German Coast" on the Mississippi was settled by German Catholics, who were gradually assimilated into the French Catholic population so thoroughly that they became French speaking and in many

cases lost all knowledge of their German ancestry. In some cases their names were simply translated into French, and Zweig became LaBranche, or Weiss became LeBlanc. Usually, though, the change was in spelling, to conform to French pronunciation. Weber became Webre, or, as some would have it, first Ouebre and then Oubre. However, Oubre is a good French name in itself and there is no particular proof that Weber ever took this form. Among other German names, Bernhardt became Bernard; Zeigler became Seigler or Sigler; Altmann became Aultman; and Hofbauer changed to Hoffpauir. Konig, for example, seems to have changed in several directions. Some became Roys, others Kings, according to whether French or English predominated at the time the change was made, but still others became first Koennings and then Cunnings. Apparently some of the Germans were called simply "allemands", for that term exists today as a family name in several forms including Allemand, Allemond, Alleman and Aleman. One Albert Schecksneider or Scheckschneider, who came to Louisiana in 1721, has left several thousand descendants who spell their names in a remarkable variety of ways. There are Shexnayders, Schexnaiders, Schexnaldres, and Seicschnaydres, to mention only a few of those beginning with "s", as well as Cheznaidres and Chezneiders in the "c"s.

The Spanish element managed to preserve its family names relatively intact, probably because Spanish was phonetically close to French. Thus such names as Galvez, Hernandez, Lopez, Ortego, and Romero are spelled the same as they were in the eighteenth century. The few changes made in Spanish name forms have been relatively minor, as in Galves for Galvez, or Goutierrez for Gutierrez. Only occasionally are such variants found as Artego for Ortego, or LaPez for Lopez. The Americans sometimes adopted French forms for their names, however, and some of these have survived. There is, for instance, Jeansonne for Johnson, and Petitjohn for Littlejohn. The Yongues may have been originally either American Youngs or German Junges. The French name Melancon or Melanson is supposed to have derived from Mellonson, although another theory has it coming from the German Melanchton.

In the nineteenth century there was considerable leeway in the spelling of French family names, and sometimes different branches

of the same family adopted varying forms. In a case of difficult spelling such as Arceneault, the form was changed to Arceneau or Arcenau, and also to Arseneau and Arseneaux. For Arcement there was also Arsement and Arcemand. For Savoy there was Savoie and Savoie; for Breaux, both Braux and Braud; and for Comeaux, Comau and Comaux. Thibodeaux had even more variants, including Thibodaut, Thibodaux and Thibodau, and probably also the closely related Quibodaux and Kibodaux. Theriot also appeared as Theriau and Theriaut, while Bigneaud varied with Vignaud, Vigneaux, Vignaux and Vignau. Comau was substituted for Comeaux; Guilbaud and Guilbeau for Guilbeaux; Dugat for Dugas; and even Latiolay for Latiolais. There were Decou and Decoux; Gauthreaux, Gautreau, and Gautreaux; Jolienette, Jolinette, and Jolinet; Doucet and Doucette; Chevillier and Chevalier; Fuselier and Fusilier; and Goeffroy and Jeffrey. Final "s", "x", and "d" or "t" were interchanged liberally, and "au" and "eau" were often exchanged. By the twentieth century, in most cases, one form of the family name was usually in common use, while the others had disappeared or were seen only infrequently. Exceptions, of course, can be fairly easily found where many different forms of a name are still in use. One example is the Schexneiders, mentioned above, and another is Kiercereau, of which there are supposed to be at least nineteen variants, including Kiersereau, Kersereau, Kesserau, and Quiercero.

In the last few generations, and especially on the fringe of the French speaking region, there has been a pronounced tendency to anglicise French names. In New Orleans, Shreveport, Baton Rouge and in east Texas, simplified forms of French names are fairly frequently found. Only seldom has there been a case of translation, although there are known cases of Roy becoming King, and LeBlanc, White. Usually it is a matter of fairly simple spelling change, as from De Clouet to DeClewett, or plain Clewett; from Geaux to Joe, or from Franques to Franks. In many cases the final "eau" or "eaux" has become an "o", as in Rousso, Arno, Primo, Bello, and Como. Some of these may be Italian names, of course, but where they appear in formerly French-speaking families there can be little doubt as to their origin. In some cases, the "au" at the beginning of a name has been exchanged for "o", as

in Obear for Aubert; Oden or Odin for Audin; and Ozen or Ozenne for Auzine. One of the oddest changes in this connection is O'Quin for Aucoin. Another French to Irish form appears in Delauney for De Laune. Bourque has been changed into Bourke and even Burke. Barrilleaux has become simply Barrio, and Le-Moine, Lemmon. In the same way, Simon has become Simmons; Denais, Dennis; Vincent, Vinson; Pasquier, Paskey; and Foret, Foray. It is easy to see how Solier gave way to Sollay; Soileau to Swallow; and Andres to Andrus or Andrews; but it is more difficult to see how Sonnier became Swinney, although this is supposed to have happened. Lebow for Lebeau, and Lewis for Louis are fairly obvious, but how about Moncla for Montclair? Or Opet for Aupied? Similarly, one might recognize Des Hotels in Disotel, but one would have to pronounce Abare several times before realizing that it was the familiar Hebert, and the same is true where Ayo masquerades for Aillot. Cornay seems once to have been Corneille, but on the other hand, Leday was once Ledet. There seems to be little or no consistency in the methods by which names have been changed, and it should be repeated that the great majority of Louisiana French names still retain their original form, or a variant form that is still recognizable as French.

Although there is some evidence that the anglicizing trend is still underway, there is also a strong movement, particularly among the Acadians, to preserve their French name forms. The Acadian Bicentennial Celebration, being observed in 1955, has noted this trend away from French customs and names, and its leaders are urging that it be reversed. With compulsory birth registration and social security numbers, it is conceivable that the era of name changing is over, and the colorful period of Louisiana family name history has probably come to an end, or is fast approaching it.