

Finding Your French Ancestors With Resources Both Online And Offline

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Presentation summary

- I. Key things to know about French genealogy
- II. A concrete example to get you started
- III. Going further

I. Key things to know about French genealogy

A. **France's archives are decentralized.** In 1790, at the Revolution, the *départements* (counties) and *communes* (municipalities) were created; there have been a few adjustments since. Today, there are 95 *départements* and 36,000 *communes*. Note that these are the only administrative levels which are important for genealogy. It's useful to know from an historical perspective about the duchies and provinces of the Ancien Régime, but not essential. And the modern regions, replaced a few years ago by the so-called super-regions, are irrelevant to genealogy.

B. French vital records: timeline of key dates

- 1. **1539:** King François I publishes the decree of Villers-Cotterêt. Baptism registers are to be written in French, not Latin, with copies sent to the state.
- 2. **1579:** Ordonnance de Blois: King Henri III adds marriage and burial records as records to be kept and transmitted to the state.
- 3. **1793:** Civil vital records and *tables décennales* (ten-year indexes)

were begun. Note however that parish records continued in parallel - your ancestor may be cited in both! In 1804, the formats of civil records were further standardized in Napoléon's Code Civil. Vital records registration was imposed on the territories conquered by Napoléon and administrations outside France continued the system after the emperor's defeat and exile.

4. **1836:** Beginning of five-year censuses. Note that some *départements* started only decades later. Censuses were usually interrupted or postponed in wartime (1916, 1941 / 1872). Since 1946, they have been less frequent (1954, 1962, 1968, 1975, 1982, 1990, 1999) and since 2004, there is a system of annual partial censuses which are designed to cover the whole population every five years.
5. **1867:** *Registres matricules* (military muster roll registers) were begun. Every 20-year-old male was required to register for military service in his municipality of residence.

- C. **Principal sources: *'Etat-civil*.** Births, marriages, and deaths were recorded in registers. In larger municipalities, the three main types of records were in separate registers; otherwise they were recorded chronologically in the same register. Some registers also contain marriage banns, paternal recognitions of children born out of wedlock, even divorces. Note that the maiden name of women is always mentioned. **Marginal notes** are a key aspect of the registers: whenever a marriage or death was recorded in France, it was the registrar's duty to inform the municipality of birth, who entered the event in the margin of the birth register. In other words, a birth register entry may be able to point you directly to the marriage and death records!
- D. **Principal sources: Censuses.** Every five years starting in 1836. Not begun in all *départements* at once, with some skipped during wartime. Many are still unindexed, but if you know the municipality you can leaf through the pages. Of course, this is a small task for a village, and a lot more work for a city!
- E. **Principal sources: *Registres matricules*.** Although military muster rolls were widespread decades earlier, what changed was that every male upon reaching age 20 was required to enlist at his municipality of residence. These documents rich in genealogical information (birth date and place, profession, physical description, parents' names) were updated during the life of the soldier, with not only his unit and campaigns, but information about medical issues, criminal record, and

reservist status. If the roll is unindexed, it is often possible to locate the record if you know birthdate & place of residence (and are willing to leaf through many pages).

F. French family names

1. Family names from the 12th century on
2. The world's record for number of last names vs. population!
3. But: spelling variants...
4. Example: Geneanet's Origin of Last Names heatmap for the family name GAUVIN

G. French regional given names

1. Some first names are very popular in certain regions
2. From the 18th century, individuals often had two or even three given names
3. Registrars have their say about given names (!)
4. Example: The first name Tanguy is widespread in Brittany and Normandy.

H. French vs. American genealogy: comparison

1. French archives go way back to the 17th century or even earlier!
2. Standardized cote (reference) codes, for example series 3 for vital records
3. Free online access to (unindexed) archives, with privacy limitations
4. Death records (even recent) are easy to obtain in France, as they are public information. However, you will not find a cause of death
5. Cemetery concessions are of limited duration. Leases may run 10 or 30 years, but if not renewed, graves are dug up for the families on the waiting list
6. DNA tests remain illegal in France, unfortunately

7. 1.6 million family names, regional first names -> great clues!

II. A concrete example to get you started

- A. Review of searching and locating genealogy records of Charles Michel FRANÇOIS, born between 1880 and 1890 somewhere in France. We will locate birth and military records and references to marriage and death records.
- B. Review of the "secret code" of French genealogists, cryptic notes which can help a genealogist track down a document quickly and easily.

III. Going further

A. Visiting the Archives Départementales (AD)

1. 95 to choose from, so plan your visit. Look for references in inventories; make contact with the AD. You will likely need to show photo ID to obtain an access card
2. Unusual treasures can be found! *Archives notariales*, unpublished censuses, *tables de successions*... some of these may be online at the AD, but unindexed. The AD may have offline finding aids in the reading room, ask an archivist!
3. It is usually permitted to take nonflash photos of documents with your smartphone; some ADs provide pairs of 45° spotlights to avoid glare. Scanners are generally not permitted. Contact the AD beforehand for guidance.

B. The Tables Décennales

1. From 1790 on, index every ten years of births, marriages, deaths
2. The original finding aid of vital records registrars
3. Useful if you know the municipality, but not the date
4. Find other family members!

C. Newspapers and periodicals

1. Birth/marriage/death announcements which reveal the municipality and date
2. Promotions, medals

3. Legal matters
4. Geneanet's Genealogy Library has indexes to millions of pages

D. Alsace-Lorraine

1. A region between France and Germany which has changed administration five (!) times since 1648
2. Records in Latin, German, or French sometimes for the same person!
3. I wrote an article which may be helpful:
<https://en.geneanet.org/genealogyblog/post/2023/08/finding-your-ancestors-from-alsace-lorraine>

E. Jewish genealogy in France

1. Jews accorded full civil status following the Revolution; some moved to Paris
2. Two historical centers: Ashkenazi in Alsace, Sephardim in Bordeaux
3. Interesting records can sometimes be found in the AD, e.g. circumcisions in Lyon
4. World War II: influx of Jewish refugees, internal displacement of Alsatians, Vichy/Nazi roundups resulting in thousands of deportations from the Drancy transit camp near Paris
5. Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris has a library open to researchers
6. Jewish sections in cemeteries in Paris and elsewhere

F. The Huguenots

1. The Wars of Religion set the stage for migrations and recordkeeping issues
2. The Desert, between the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) and the Edict of Tolerance (Versailles, 1787)
3. Founding settlements in New England and elsewhere by refugees

G. French territories and former colonies

1. Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM)
<https://recherche-anom.culture.gouv.fr/>
2. Civil vital records in Algeria, French West Africa, Indochina, Madagascar, French equatorial Africa
3. Archives created in Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, Saint-Pierre et Miquelon, Nouvelle-Calédonie, French Guyana
4. Penal colonies: *La bagne*

H. 19th century emigration: mostly Europeans

1. There was, of course, extensive emigration from France to New France in the 17th and 18th centuries. For example, the thousand women of the *Filles à marier* and the *Filles du Roi* are the ancestors of 20 million people in North America. Geneanet even has a collaborative project documenting all of those women and their families. We have also just mentioned the Huguenots. Concerning the 19th century, the peak of European emigration to the United States, emigration from French ports was mostly Europeans from beyond France's borders: Germans, Alsatians, Swiss, Italians, Eastern Europeans.
 2. Passenger lists: Unfortunately, there are few, if any. Concentrate on the immigration side.
 3. Le Havre was historically the main port of emigration. It was easily reachable by train from Paris, a five-hour journey, and trains stopped right on the quays, a cost saving for travelers who didn't have to find temporary accommodations.
 4. Cherbourg became a major port after World War I, with traffic peaking in the interwar years.
 5. Marseille had links to North African ports and was also a port of call for transatlantic ships originating in Naples.
 6. Dieppe has had a long-running permanent ferry link to Newhaven, East Sussex, in particular for the daily cargo of letters and parcels.
 7. Nantes, Bordeaux, Brest were minor ports of emigration.
- I. **Napoléon's Soldiers.** The Emperor recruited men for his *Grande Armée* from France and conquered lands in Europe. 1,191 registers from

1802-1815 have been digitized by France's military archives (*Service Historique de la Défense*), published online in 2013. These are organized by units and without knowing a soldier's unit, it's just not possible to leaf through hundreds of thousands of pages. Volunteers at Geneanet have indexed 1.3 million of the ~2 million soldiers and indexing is ongoing!

<https://en.geneanet.org/fonds/search-event/76/napoleon-s-soldiers>

J. Challenges in French genealogy

1. Identifying the *département* (county)
2. Identifying the *commune* (town or village)
3. Many *départements* have not been indexed yet -> look for sources in trees
4. DNA testing for genealogy remains illegal, and unfortunately that's unlikely to change anytime soon
5. Strict privacy laws make finding living cousins quite difficult
6. Destruction from wars: World War I, Normandy after D-Day, Paris in 1871
7. Reading old handwriting!

K. **Getting help.** Many French genealogists can be found to answer basic questions or orient you. They can be found in:

1. Facebook groups such as The Genealogy Squad or France Genealogy - Just Ask.
2. Local genealogy societies which can be very helpful, however don't expect everyone to speak English!
3. Geneanet which has an English language forum for French research.