When the Acadians were exiled from their home in Nova Scotia, what was then called Acadie, families were torn apart. Some were deposited along the northeastern seaboard of America; some were sent to France; some wound up in the Caribbean islands. Many subsequently found their way to Louisiana. But, many remained behind in Canada. For the better part of two and a half centuries, the Acadian Diaspora was not thought worthy of a mention in Louisiana history texts. Most Louisiana Acadians knew their ancestors somehow came from Canada, but had never heard the whole story.

That has changed over the past two decades. Now, many Cajuns have traced their family trees back to Canada. Some have found long-lost Canadian families, and, like James Bourque and his family, have reconnected in person, attending the Congrès Mondial Acadien.

There are still many, however, who would like to trace their genealogy, but don’t know where to begin.

The best place to start, said Bourque, a member of the Lafayette Genealogical Society, is with the eldest living family member. “The most important thing is to gather your own information within the family. People have to go from themselves at least two or three generations back.”

It’s important to preserve not just the names of ancestors, but also family history, said professional genealogist Cindy Hofmeister of New Iberia. “You want to know exactly. Get the stories. That’s a lot of history. If people don’t preserve it now, it’s going to be lost.”
Another good starting point is the local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which has gathered genealogical information on millions of people—not just church members. The church allows the public to view genealogical information they have recorded on CDs.

Entering information on pedigree charts and family charts is essential, Bourque said. Otherwise the search can become confusing. He knows from experience. "I started out wrong," he said. Charts are available from the genealogy society or from the LDS office.

Once the line is traced back to the exile, more ancestral names can be found in books by Stephen White of the University of New Brunswick, Canada, and Canadian Bona Arsenaux, both available in public libraries.

Another great source for bringing genealogy to life is the University of Louisiana's Center for Louisiana Studies, said UL history professor Carl Brasseaux, who is also the center's director. "The center has in excess of 2 million records on microfilm," Brasseaux said.

The commander's records for the Spanish period of Louisiana history, like courthouse records, give details of day-to-day life, Brasseaux said. "You never know what will come up—a fist fight between neighbors caused by a cow jumping a fence and eating corn in somebody's garden."

Brasseaux also recommends using the database at the Acadian Memorial in St. Martinville, which contains about 4,000 pages of information.

To link up with lost cousins in Canada, it's necessary to find one of them who has done their own family tree and compare notes.

Bourque found Rhea Bourque of Shediac Cape, New Brunswick, during a trip to Canada. Both had traced their ancestry to Antoine Bourg and Antoinette Landry, who married in France and lived in Acadie.

Finding the Canadian branch of the family can be rewarding on both sides, according to Bourque's wife, Lona, and her sister, Clothilde Broussard.

"If you go (to the Acadian provinces) in your own car with a Louisiana license plate," said Lona Bourque, "they stop you. They want to talk to you."

But, finding those Canadian contacts can be difficult for the novice.

Brasseaux advises getting in touch with local family associations with the same last name as the ancestors being researched. They have already been in contact with their northern cousins through the Congrès Mondial family reunions of Louisiana and Canada. Lists of family associations can be obtained through the Confederation of Associations of Families Acadian, of which Bourque is a member. Even if there is no formal association for a given surname, members may be able to provide leads.

"These people have not only compiled the generations for the Louisiana branches, but have also contacted the Canadians who have done the same and have established Canadian databases," Brasseaux said. "All the heavy lifting has been done."

Brasseaux offers one caveat that all professional and experienced amateur genealogists agree upon: Verify information you get from others.

"The down side of that when you're getting a freebie is you're getting what you pay for," he said. "You're assuming the people who did this were serious researchers, but that's not always the case."