

A FAMILY SECRET REVEALED:

New book explores one man's journey for ancestral proof in colonial Louisiana

By: Anita R. Paul

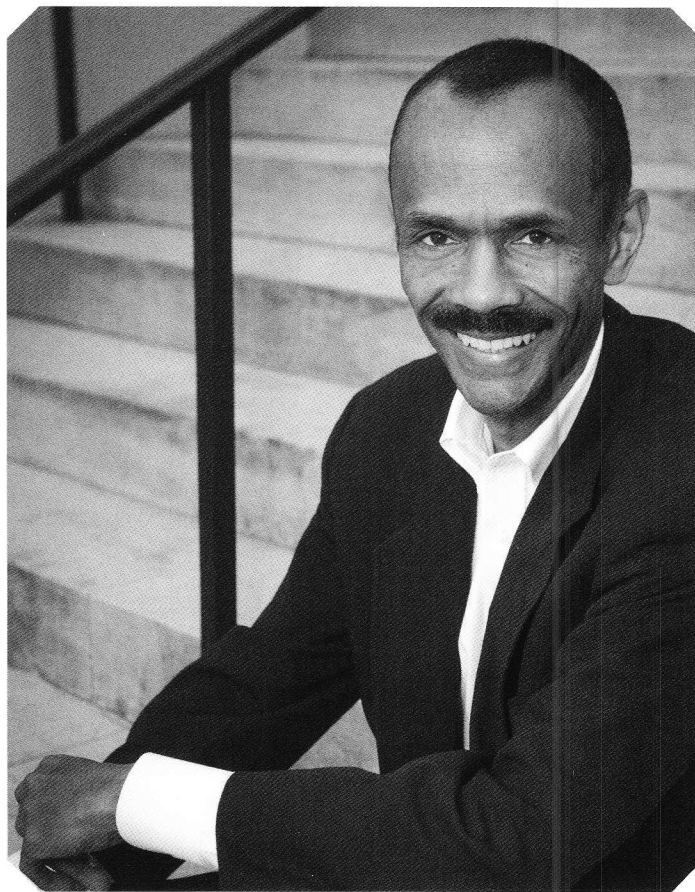
Most people avoid cemeteries at all costs; not Michael Henderson. Like many family history researchers, he gravitates to them curious about the lives of those who lived centuries ago. This curiosity is what got him started down the path of researching his roots.

"It all began when I was a kid," recalls Henderson, a native of New Orleans, Louisiana who currently resides near Atlanta, Georgia. "I asked my mom why her mother's maiden name was spelled Mathieu instead of Matthew." She credited it to the family being Louisiana Creole and simply chose to spell the surname that way. Fortunately for Henderson, that answer did not satisfy him, so he sought a more suitable explanation. In the midst of his searching, which eventually became a hobby during much of his naval career, he uncovered one fact after another about his family's history and soon became the family historian, a role that did not always meet with genuine excitement from his relatives.

"When you start digging into the past, some family members get nervous. They're afraid you might uncover some deep, dark secret that's been buried for generations," Henderson explains. Others, mostly those of the younger generation, simply shrugged off Henderson's many attempts to share his findings. "My nieces and nephews have never been keen on listening to my ancestral stories, except, of course, when the time came for a school project."

As his genealogy research continued, a conversation with a distant cousin opened a genealogical can of worms, and Henderson was off on what would become a nearly 30-year journey to discover his Louisiana Creole ancestry. Now a retired lieutenant commander, Henderson has written a memoir about some of his findings, *GOT PROOF! My Genealogical Journey Through the Use of Documentation*. "The book title says it all. The focus of my research has been finding documents to prove the family lore and uncover answers to the mysteries that have been kept secret and hidden for so long."

In *GOT PROOF!* Henderson takes readers on his genealogical journey which led him to discover the 1779 manumission, or freedom papers, of a woman named Agnes. With the assistance of a third party, Agnes engaged in a year-long court battle to gain her freedom, which she eventually won on December 16, 1779. Agnes is Henderson's fourth-generation great-grandmother. As Henderson discovered, the third party who assisted Agnes in her quest for freedom is his fourth-generation



Michael Henderson

great-grandfather, a Frenchman named Mathieu Devaux. Although unable to marry due to the laws of the day, the two maintained a 31-year relationship and produced seven children who were all born free prior to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

Uncovering this relationship revealed the answer to a haunting statement that had been in Henderson's family for generations: "They wouldn't allow us to use Daddy's last name." As Henderson discovered, Agnes assumed the first name of her French consort, Mathieu, as her own surname and passed it on to her mixed-race children and the generations following. This answered the question about the spelling of Henderson's maternal grandmother's surname and consequently exposed the answer to the generations-long lament about not being able to use "Daddy's last name."

Throughout *GOT PROOF!* Henderson leaves bread crumbs of tips to help readers understand how he reached his own success as a genealogist, and how they can do so as well. His journey included visits to archival depositories across the United States, meetings with noted history and genealogical scholars and researchers, attendance at conferences, and a trip to Marseille,

France, where he met with an unlikely French cousin. With each bit of information uncovered, Henderson desired to connect with a more experienced genealogist to assist and guide him to the answers he sought. He uncovered one document after another, most written in French or Spanish, that revealed an engaging tale of love and freedom in the midst of Louisiana's involvement in the American Revolution. As the story of a free woman of color and her French consort unfolded, Henderson sought a viable source to tell the story of his ancestors on a broader scale. Little did he know that he would eventually become both the historian and the storyteller he sought.

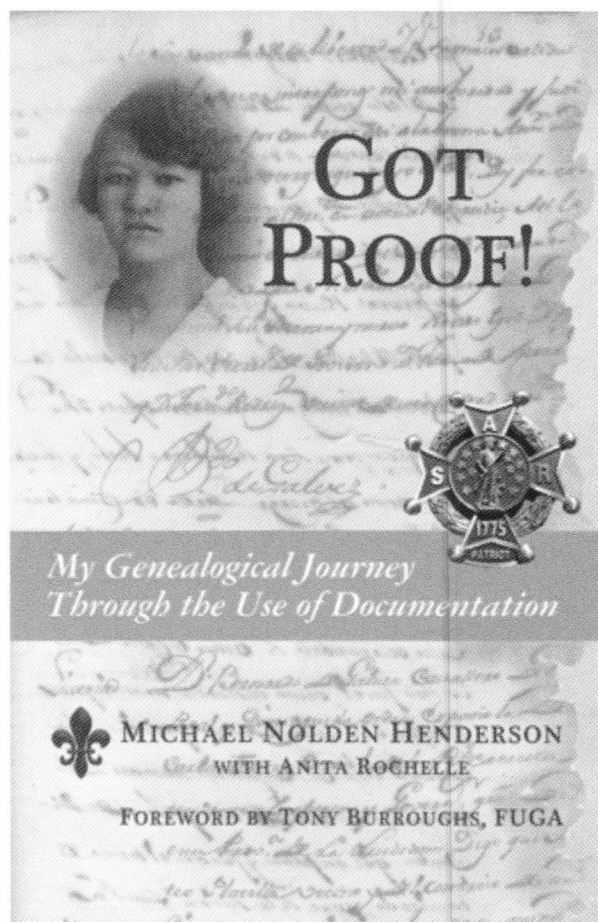
"In my travels, I meet people from many backgrounds, some who don't believe they could ever prove their ancestral link to American history. I suggest they dig deep and find proof to connect their ancestors to the rich history of this country. We all have a part to play in the narrative of America."

GOT PROOF!

My Genealogical Journey Through the Use of Documentation

is available on www.Amazon.com.

To view the PBS segment of "History Detectives" which features Henderson's research, visit:
<http://to.pbs.org/hiMl62>



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Thanks so much for sharing an awesome release with profound historical insights.
 ~E. Brackins-Brown

Too many of our country's warriors' heroism and sacrifices have been lost and forgotten through the passage of time. It's uplifting to see people do something to change that in cases like SFC Early. Thank you for your attention to our veterans and their memories. I read the article on SFC Early and watched the video. VERY POWERFUL!
 ~P. Ronbrede

Just picked up a copy of the magazine and followed the link from the Civil Rights Civil Wrongs article her to the website. I must say I AM IMPRESSED! Very rare to find a publication in print or online that has such a positive tone and no trash. I would not hesitate to send my Pastor here or to give him a copy of the magazine. Very rare these

MAILBOX

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days not to hear divisive and derogatory language and / or half naked poor role models being glorified for their shameful actions. Thank you for standing up and and standing out!
 ~D. Scott

Wow, marvelous site! The photos are phenomenal, not to mention the content!. I think I have found my new favorite site!
 ~J. Keagle

...I am a history buff by nature, however my biggest interest lies in African-American history and the road our people have traveled to become who we are today. Very rare to find a source that provides access to both visual and textual information in an entertaining way that is not loaded with negativity and derision. Thank you!
 ~Dr. Muncie