

Harry Nunez

(de Villavicencio) Legacy

History of His Never Known Isleño Family Heritage

William DeoGracias

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FOREWORD

By Emily Cogburn

Twenty-four years ago, I faced the decision of whether to finish my dissertation at Ohio State University or move to Louisiana with someone I'd been dating for less than a year. I chose to leave Ohio and embark on the great unknown journey in the U-Haul.

As a personal decision, it was the smartest thing I ever did, since the person I was dating, Jon Cogburn, and I have been happily married since 2000 and we have two wonderful children. My education didn't suffer either. In our new home of Baton Rouge, I learned to cook gumbo and red beans and rice, obtain beads at Mardi Gras parades, articulate the difference between Cajun and Zydeco music, and appreciate sweet tea. I read *Louisiana Hayride*, *The Earl of Louisiana*, and *Bayou Farewell*, among other great books about the state. My social education continued with jobs at a rural library, the state's second largest (now largest) newspaper, and Louisiana State University. I also wrote and published two novels, *Louisiana Saves the Library* and *Ava's Place*, both of which are set in Louisiana.

All this is to say that I thought I knew quite a bit about my adopted state. When I began to edit William DeoGracias' fascinating book, I learned just how much I still didn't know. Had I heard that Spanish-speaking people from the Canary Islands had settled in Louisiana? Maybe. I knew Spain had control over the state for a while way back in the depths of history and that some people in Cajun country have Spanish last names. However, like many people in Louisiana, even some who grew up here, I wasn't aware of the deep, rich history of the settlers from this group of islands near Africa.

DeoGracias' book isn't a dry history of Spain's colonization of the Canary Islands and subsequent efforts to move some of those colonists to the newly formed colony of Louisiana. It also isn't a forced march of genealogy through dusty, old names of Nunez ancestors with no stories to accompany their gravestone carvings. Instead, DeoGracias begins from the wonderfully evocative memories of his grandfather Harry Nunez, who was born in 1890. Drawing from storytelling sessions with

his now-deceased grandfather, DeoGracias brings the reader back to the days of trappers, fishers, and sugarcane farmers in the marshlands of South Louisiana. From there, he reaches deeper into history, drawing out not only the names, but also the surprising and fascinating stories of his Nunez ancestors from the Canary Islands back to Spain. Through historical documents and contemporary accounts, he brings alive these people and the time periods they lived in, detailing their struggles and triumphs through generations.

When we discussed this book, DeoGracias told me that he wondered if anyone outside of the Nunez family and others of Isleño heritage would be interested in the story he had to tell. After reading it, I can say with confident assurance that anyone who is at all curious about history will find this book riveting.

INTRODUCTION

The eighteenth-century immigration of the Spanish Isleños from the Canary Islands to Louisiana has been well documented. Since the early 1900s, accomplished writers and historians have published books and articles on every aspect of the Canarians' adaptation to living and successfully raising their families in a "not so friendly environment." Like many of Isleño heritage, I have read and studied most of them. I have also written and published some short stories based on our history. Despite the wealth of publications on the subject, however, invaluable, unambiguous information about the history of Louisiana Isleño families before the eighteenth century has been consistently missing.

In my mid-seventies, I realized this lack and began to dig deeper in order to satisfy my curious desire to know more about my own Nunez bloodline. I specifically wanted to know what events characterized their lives before Manuel Felix Nunez de Villavicencio, who in 1778 boarded the *Santisimo Sacramento* in Santa Cruz de Tenerife with his wife Josefa Suarez and their five young children bound for Louisiana. Even more specific than that, what notable events of the Nunez bloodline could be discovered before the year 1505? That was the year when my twelfth grandfather, Alonso Nunez de Villavicencio, native of Jerez de la Frontera, Spain, moved to La Laguna, Tenerife.

I began my search by geographically tracing the family bloodline down the Iberian Peninsula as they participated in fierce and deadly Reconquista battles against the Moorish Muslims. I followed them from the Christian kingdom of Castile all the way to Granada and Seville as they conquered the Islamic kingdom of Andalusia in 1492. What happened on the battlefield in the year 1212 to the second oldest man recorded in the Nunez de Villavicencio family bloodline? What happened in Seville with Alonso's mother in 1505-1506? Was there a surprising event in Alonso's life in 1535-1536?

To satisfy my need to know, I put together a 180-page study for my family and for my own future lineage, mainly for them to have knowledge of our history. My research and fact-gathering work produced a heightened interest in the Nunez family history back to the 1400s. I delved even further back to the closing 1100s when studying the Nunez de Villavicencio family name distinction that has been used for centuries. Even today, it is attached to many Nunez family names all over the world. Many thousands who have other family surnames are unknowingly inheritors of this name through marriage. The historical timeline for the de Villavicencio name and how it originated are included in this book.

After I shared my work with my immediate family and some close friends, many encouraged me to write a book so that others of the Nunez family could learn about the information I had uncovered. Daunted by the challenge of authoring a book, I just put it off for as long as I could. I even searched for another writer who could put my research into a book. Most were too busy or showed little interest in the subject. I understood completely. With few other options available, in November of 2020, I began to write. Now, looking back, I realize that to achieve my vision for the book, I had to do it myself. It would have been impossible for another writer to author my thoughts and research findings in the manner that I required.

As I gathered these historical facts, I felt deeply dismayed at how the fifteenth century Spanish royalty with the support of the Church approved the ongoing and final, brutal decimation and enslavement of the Guanche men, women, and children. Lost forever was the natural spirit of an ancient race of people who were the aboriginal inhabitants of the Canary Islands. On the other hand, my family's bloodlines are direct descendants of those Isleño ancestors who benefited from those awful events, and we may indeed by God's divine providence be alive today because of them. My research uncovered the possibility that my twelfth grandfather and his brother participated in the final Guanche conquest of La Laguna, Tenerife. Though it's hard to accept, it is most likely that many of us have a dark spot in our past family history, when traced

back far enough. Overall, however, I do believe that the Nunez family line has been, through the centuries, an honorable people.

To launch the journey into the past centuries, I decided to begin the narrative through the life of the Nunez who lived to be the oldest in my immediate family, my grandfather, Harry Nunez. He was born on the banks of Bayou Terre aux Boeufs in Woodlake, Louisiana in 1890. I share some highlights of his adventurous journey from age eleven to the close of his life, nearly ninety years later. He grew to be a family man away from the marshes of Louisiana, marrying and fathering three children while working and traveling with Addie Geneva, his beautiful Welsh wife. While writing about his early life, it helped immensely that I had firsthand experiences as a child and young man growing up on the marshes along Bayou Terre aux Boeufs and the Reggio Canal. I treasure the talks and times I spent with my grandfather as mentoring experiences. For the record, my mother was a Nunez and my father's mother was a Nunez.

The main focus of my writing was to produce an accurate storyline based on historical facts for the Harry Nunez family line. Much history of Spain and the Canary Islands is included. I was able to access the national archives in Madrid, Spain and communicate with some of their representatives. I also talked to university professors and genealogists and purchased a variety of incredibly old books and writings. I was able to find some information on the internet, however, only ten percent of Spain's immense historical records are digitized. My studies and writings are no more than moments in the chronological Nunez timeline. Perhaps in the future, another curious soul with the aid of advanced research tools will reach past the Middle Ages and untangle additional Nunez history.

I took care to choose and piece together the stories and past living descriptions of the numerous characters that would interest the curious reader, especially those of Isleño heritage, but also people of any culture who may have a similar kindred interest in past family history. I transported myself in thought to a point of

bygone medieval settings, and thereby received a visual glimpse of my ancestors as their centuries-old adventures and experiences took life in the form of typed words. I was glad to be able to add pictures throughout to compliment the narrative. This will give the reader focal and visual clarity, placing them at the exact subject location while the stories unfold. I also thought it was important to add imagined conversations to reveal personal feelings and emotions of the characters who had a part in those historical Nunez family timelines.

As my work progressed and I uncovered more details about the Nunez bloodline, the story became ever more interesting. The Nunez history is filled with adventure, passion, heroics, and danger, and to a considerable degree, achievements of success with historical honor. My hope is that in tracking their 580-year journey from Castile in the Iberian Peninsula, and ultimately to New Orleans, Louisiana in 1778, similar feelings can be awakened in the reader, especially those of the de Villavicencio and Nunez heritage.

I devoted many hours of study and reflection to the battles and wars of both the Iberian Reconquista and in the Canaries with the Guanches. I was profoundly impressed reading the earliest accounts written by King Alfonso VIII, Friar Alonso de Espinosa, and others describing some of those wars. In addition to my own descriptions of these battles, I added some excerpts of their writings because few if any readers will ever access them. I decided to add those accounts in hopes that others would be as moved as I was with the original insight and candor of the writers. I included the last three Guanche battles exclusively to introduce Alonso Fernández de Lugo, who led the final conquest of Tenerife for the Castilian crown. Both Alonso Nunez de Villavicencio and his older brother Nuno had direct business and political associations with the de Lugo family.

From the beginning of the Nunez family story to current times, there is one descriptive word that needs to compliment any written or spoken words, one that is not found in any past writings about

their distinguished history. It is “courageous.” This word not only describes the Nunez family but applies to all of the Isleño fathers and mothers for their unselfish sacrifices in the face of countless hardships. Their courage and tenacious spirit provided a pathway for their children not only to survive and endure the challenges of life, but to be successful, generation after generation.

Three chapters of this book are devoted to many memorable highlights of the life journey of Harry Nunez. He was never fully aware of his ancestral Hispanic roots. Documented events of his past family history, covering the good and bad times that they lived in, are now revealed. Some are painfully dramatic, and some are perilously exciting.

The ending of the story also reveals that many in the Nunez family bloodline have passed through this life without the least bit of knowledge of very important events concerning their rich heritage, events that have been obscured for centuries. With the information presented here, future generations will have gained back at least some of their past family history, which was once lost.