

Why History?

by Vic Berecz

I advertise myself as a “historian wannabe.” Many of you may ask why would anybody want to waste their time on history ... *it's history!* I am a strong believer in what's called a *Liberal Arts* education ... philosophy, history, literature, economics, mathematics, etc. Unfortunately, the Florida Governor has targeted Liberal Arts at our state universities as being useless expenses. Sure, there is a place for job-oriented education for those focused on very specific employment

opportunities. Whether it's Community Colleges to prepare people for careers in trades and services, or Engineering, Business, Law, or Medical Schools for their respective professions, these institutions do a great job of preparing people to succeed in a specific employment area and to “get on with it” as quickly as practical. But, I believe, a liberal arts education prepares people to succeed in



life, not just a job ... and for many, such an education as a precursor to a professional education leads to the best of both worlds. A liberal arts education focuses on developing the underlying intellectual processes that enhance adaptability, communication, problem-solving, and responsible citizenship. That makes it a great fit for success in our rapidly changing world.

Now, let's take a step from generalities toward specifics and discuss the discipline of *History* itself. History is the record of what has happened in and to this world of ours. It records not only dates and events, but how trends and events have effected every aspect of the lives of people. It is often said that we should study history so as not to repeat it. Actually, that statement presumes that nothing good has happened in the past ... nothing worth repeating. I don't believe that for a minute. Rather than using history as an avoidance mechanism, I believe we can and should *learn* from history. Therefore, I'd like to present to you an analogy that I hope provides you a new perspective on the true value of history.

When I began work as a young engineer at Sikorsky Aircraft in 1962, there was an orientation meeting for the group of new hires. That meeting featured a very enjoyable lecture by Igor Sikorsky himself. He had long since sold his company to United Aircraft Corporation (now United Technologies) and was a retired consultant, who largely functioned as a PR man for the concept of helicopters. He built his first helicopter in Russia in 1909, but gave up on it, as he later explained: “I had learned enough to recognize that with the existing state of the art, engines, materials, and -- most of all -- the shortage of money and lack of experience, I would not be able to produce a successful helicopter at that time.” After great success designing and building fixed-wing aircraft, first in Russia and then in the United States, he persevered and personally designed and piloted the VS-300 helicopter 30 years later in Connecticut ... kicking off his third and best remembered career.

I vividly remember one statement made by Sikorsky at that meeting. He said: “Gentlemen, theory is great, but the only important result is what occurs in actual tests.” Think about it, how

do we test our theories? By living them. How do we maintain a record of our lives? By writing down our experiences ... those tests we lived through. Writing them down ... whether on paper or other media ... means these results aren't held hostage to the frailties of a single individual's memory. And, aggregated together, what is that written record of our lives and experiences. You got it, it's history! **So, in fact, history is our test report on life.**

That's why history is so important. We can read about how humankind succeeded, and emulate it. We can read about how we've failed, and can avoid it ... or maybe devise a better approach, and try it. It's all about learning how to make for a better life, for ourselves, our kids, and hopefully for many generations to come.

Finally, let's take the final leap from history in general to the area that I've personally spent so much time and effort on in recent years ... family history. A couple of years ago, I wrote a piece titled "No one admits they're Polish" in response to a *Time* magazine article. It's listed in the archives of this website, check it out if you haven't read it. The idea was to show how the study of family history can be both fun and useful, even though (as I said then) "I'm neither Jewish, a WASP, a Southerner, a Democrat, nor Polish."

I've spent an inordinate amount of time over the last few months totally reorganizing my *Family History* website. The decision to undertake that long-needed update resulted from two family history projects I'd been working on for the previous six months. Both come from the far corners of our daughter-in-law's amazingly diverse family history. One related to an error in what her late grandmother understood to be their 19th century ancestry in Cuba. I was made aware of the probable error a few years ago, but since Cuba is a difficult place to gather information, it wasn't until a recent breakthrough, brought to my attention by a distant relative, that I had could be reasonably confident about the true history of that part the family. I hate to be responsible for errors, and so it's great to be able to correct them. But, the second project was equally important and certainly a lot more fun.

We knew of a Puerto Rican ancestor named Julio Dubocq who was married to Juana Roux. They lived in the mid-19th century. We knew virtually nothing about them, though we traced our daughter-in-law's lineage to one their daughters with great certainty. I was always intrigued by the Spanish given names attached to obviously French surnames. Less than a year ago, I received an e-mail with a photo of Julio Dubocq and a little information about him from someone else doing genealogy. That kind of e-mail (of which I get a couple each week) is why I have the family history website in the first place.

Anyway, that e-mail touched off an effort that carried me from France to Haiti to Philadelphia to Kentucky to Alabama to Saint Thomas (Virgin Islands) and finally to Puerto Rico ... and that's only the mainstream of the family's travels! It was an exciting venture that proved the Internet is a constantly improving resource for research of all sorts, and proved the value of the old workhorses of family history: church registers and census records. I've written a short research report on this family's migration titled "Our French Connection." But, I've got enough additional information to write a full-fledged biography, and I've got ideas for additional research. Here are just a few of the areas I needed to research to pursue this little corner of our family's history.

- The history of the slave trade from the port of Nantes in northern France to the west African coast and then the French colonies in the Caribbean.
- How differently the *French Revolution* played-out vis-à-vis the *American Revolution*, including the side issue of converting dates recorded in their revolutionary calendar.

- The *Slave Rebellion* in Haiti and how simply being white-skinned became a virtual death sentence.
- How the pendulum swung among the early American elite from being strongly Francophile to strongly Anglophile.
- What congressmen missed the most during the blockades of the War of 1812. Would you believe French wines?
- The life and work of noted painter James Peale.
- The relationship of a group of Napoleonic exiles to Texas independence.
- The real-estate machinations (we call it *flipping*) that went on in Kentucky when the construction of the Louisville and Portland Canal was under consideration.
- The only bill ever passed by Congress that gave a private group a special deal in the sale of Federal lands.
- The congressional investigation of bad loans made by the *Bank of the United States*.
- A US Supreme Court decision regarding Alabama property disputes between a group of immigrants and a group of southern red-necks.
- The makeup of the mercantile community of Charlotte Amalie in the Danish West Indies.
- Bills of lading for merchandise carried between various Caribbean ports and the U.S. during the early 19th century.
- The operation of ranches and sugar plantations in Puerto Rico, as well as what city life was like in 19th century Ponce.

And that's just a start! I learned so much about the good and bad of life in the fifty years from 1790 to 1840 in France, the U.S., and Spanish Puerto Rico that it's hard to believe it's all related to one family ... *our family*. That's really the bottom line. Learning the lessons of history in a context to which you can relate ... your family's ancestors ... is humbling, fun, and very educational. Give it a try!

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By the way, the painting at right from the collection of the *Speed Art Museum* in Louisville is by James Peale and is titled *Madame Dubocq and her Children*. When I found it on the Internet after typing "Dubocq" into Google, I decided *this little corner of the family* was worth a bit of extra effort. Little did I know!

