OPERATION GRANNY FILES

Raíces Research Kit

A glossary, a surname decoder, a two-registry chart, and a worksheet — everything you need to open a Mexican parish book and read it

Field Guide & Quick-Reference

Mission 39: Raíces

Clearance Level: Biscuit-Tin Operative

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QUICK-GRAB SUMMARY

Your Mexican or Hispanic line likely has records that run centuries deeper than you were told — Catholic parish registers from the 1500s and 1600s, and a civil registry from 1859 onward, most of it digitized and free on FamilySearch. This kit gives you the four tools the mission promised: a Spanish-to-English glossary of the three dozen words that make a record legible, a decoder for the two-surname system (the detail that hands you a mother's maiden name straight out of the record), a chart showing which registry to search for which years, and a fill-in worksheet for pinning down the exact parish. Find the town, keep both surnames, check both registries, always pull the original image.

Section 1 — Spanish-to-English Record Glossary

You do not need fluent Spanish to read a baptism, marriage, or burial entry. These records are formulaic; the same few dozen words repeat in nearly every entry. Learn the ones below and the block of old script turns into a set of extractable facts.

Vital events and record types

Spanish	English	Where you'll see it
bautismo / bautizo	baptism	Parish baptism book; often within days of birth
nacimiento; nació / nacido / nacida	birth; was born / born (m./f.)	Civil birth records; some baptism entries
matrimonio / casamiento	marriage	Parish and civil marriage books
información matrimonial / diligencia matrimonial	pre-marriage investigation file	Separate parish files; may name grandparents and witnesses
amonestaciones	marriage banns	Marriage entries, informaciones
defunción	death	Civil death records; parish death books
entierro / sepultura	burial / interment	Parish burial books ("di sepultura a..." = "I buried...")
partida	a parish record entry (partida de bautismo)	Parish books
acta	a civil record entry (acta de nacimiento, acta de defunción)	Civil registry
libro de bautismos / matrimonios / defunciones	book of baptisms / marriages / deaths	Volume titles in the FamilySearch catalog

People named in a record

Spanish	English	Note
padre / madre	father / mother	
hijo de / hija de	son of / daughter of	Introduces the parents' names
hijo legítimo / hija legítima	legitimate child	Born within a recognized marriage
hijo natural / hija natural	child born outside marriage	Often only the mother is named
padrino / madrina / padrinos	godfather / godmother / godparents	Baptism entries; a cluster-research lead
testigo / testigos	witness / witnesses	Marriage and civil records
abuelo / abuela / abuelos paternos / maternos	grandfather / grandmother / paternal / maternal grandparents	Common in civil records
esposo / esposa; cónyuge	husband / wife; spouse	
viudo / viuda de	widower / widow of	Names the deceased spouse
soltero / soltera	unmarried man / unmarried woman	
difunto / difunta	the deceased	Death and burial records
párvulo / párvula	small child	Burial records
vecino / vecina de	resident (householder) of	A term of civic standing — not just "neighbor"
originario de / natural de	native of	The birthplace — your next research coordinate

Places, officials, and formulas

Spanish	English
parroquia	parish
párroco / cura	parish priest
feligresía / feligrés	parish membership / parishioner
pueblo / rancho / hacienda	town / small rural settlement / estate
municipio	municipality (the civil-registry-era unit)
juez del Registro Civil / oficial del Registro Civil	civil registrar / registration official

Spanish	English
en el pueblo de… a [día] de [mes] de [año]	"in the town of… on [day] of [month] of [year]" — the standard opening
bauticé solemnemente a…	"I solemnly baptized…"
con el mutuo consentimiento	"with mutual consent" (marriage phrasing)
compareció / comparecieron	appeared (before the registrar)

GRANNY PRO TIP

Dates in these records are written out in words, not numerals — "mil ochocientos noventa y cuatro" is 1894. Learn the number words for the decades your family lived through and you'll date an entry in seconds. FamilySearch's Spanish Genealogical Word List has the full set; keep it open in a second tab.

Section 2 — Double-Surname Decoder

This is the section that decides whether you find your ancestor or lose her inside a perfectly good record. Get the surname structure right and a single entry hands you two generations of information. Get it wrong and one person becomes two strangers.

The structure. A full name runs: given name(s), then the **apellido paterno** (the father's first surname, listed first), then the **apellido materno** (the mother's first surname, listed second). Both are permanent parts of the person's legal name from birth. Neither is a middle name. Neither is hyphenated. Neither changes at marriage.

How it passes to children. Each child takes the father's first surname and the mother's first surname. The second surname of each parent drops off. A child of Juan García Hernández and María Rodríguez López is recorded as García Rodríguez — not a hyphenated compound, not a married name, but two independent, permanent surnames that are part of that child's legal identity from birth.

Person	Apellido paterno	Apellido materno	Where each came from
Father: Juan García Hernández	García	Hernández	His father's and mother's first surnames
Mother: María Rodríguez López	Rodríguez	López	Her father's and mother's first surnames
Child: García Rodríguez	García	Rodríguez	Father's first surname + mother's first surname

Notice the gift inside the rule: the child's second surname *is* the mother's own paternal surname. One correctly read record gives you her birth family's name with no separate maiden-name search.

Married women keep their names. A woman keeps both of her birth surnames for life. Her name in church and civil records does not change when she marries. What you may see instead is a social "de" form: dropping her own second surname and adding *de* plus her husband's first surname. María Torres Alvarez, married to Eduardo García Gómez, might appear socially as "María Torres de García." That is a label pointing at her husband, not a legal name change. From the post: I nearly walked right past a woman in an index once because she was listed as "María Torres de García" in one record and "María Torres Alvarez" in another, and I assumed I had two different women. I didn't.

Worked example from the post — the name trail. Start with an American-side clue: a 1919 border-crossing manifest at El Paso names "Jose Ramirez, natural de Jalisco, México." A later naturalization petition narrows it further: "Degollado, Jalisco." With "Degollado, Jalisco" in hand, you turn to FamilySearch's Jalisco Catholic Church collection and find a baptismal entry: a priest, in March of 1894, baptizing a boy named José, legitimate son of Pedro Ramírez and Concepción Torres, with Manuel Torres and Refugio López standing as godparents. Read plainly, two things resolve immediately. José's mother's surname — Torres — arrives with no separate maiden-name hunt required; the record hands it to you. And a Torres godparent standing alongside a Torres mother is a plausible cluster clue pointing toward her extended family. The trail keeps going. A 1919 Registro Civil marriage record — filed after José's return from working in the United States — lists his full legal name as José Ramírez Torres, marrying María Hernández Solís. This civil record adds something the baptism didn't carry: both sets of grandparents' names.

Record	Name as recorded	What it tells you
1919 border manifest (US)	Jose Ramirez, natural de Jalisco	State only; no accents, one surname
Naturalization petition (US)	birthplace: Degollado, Jalisco	The town — your parish coordinate
1894 baptism (parish)	José, hijo legítimo de Pedro Ramírez y Concepción Torres	Both parents; mother's surname delivered; godparents named
1919 marriage (Registro Civil)	José Ramírez Torres	Full legal double surname; both sets of grandparents

How to search both surnames. Indexes are the weak point. An indexer working fast can drop the apellido materno as a "middle name" or flip the order. So:

- **Search each surname alone** — Ramírez, then Torres — with the given name and a date range.
- **Search the pair in both orders** — "Ramírez Torres" and "Torres Ramírez."
- **Search a woman under her birth surnames** — never under "de [husband]" or a Mrs.-style married name.
- **Try the accent-stripped form too** — US records and some indexes drop the tilde and accent entirely: Ramirez, Jose.

- **Pull the original image on every promising hit.** The index is a finding aid; the record is the evidence.

BONUS INSIGHT

Because each generation carries two surnames, the surname pattern itself can confirm a match. If the José Ramírez Torres you found marrying in 1919 has a father named Ramírez and a mother named Torres in his baptism, the two records are almost certainly the same man. When the second surname doesn't match what the earlier record predicts, stop — you may be looking at a cousin.

Section 3 — Parish Book vs. Civil Registry

Two record systems, overlapping in time, remembering different details. Use this chart to decide where to look for a given year — and remember that after 1859 the answer is usually "both."

	Catholic Parish Registers	Registro Civil
Kept by	The parish priest (párroco)	The civil registrar (juez / oficial del Registro Civil) of the municipio
Years covered	From the 1500s-1600s in central Mexico (Mexico City from 1514, state of México from 1567, Querétaro from 1590); later in the north (Sonora from about 1657); continuing to the present	Established by decree 28 July 1859; adoption slow and uneven; enforced after 1867; many municipios not consistent until the 1870s-1880s
Records	Bautismos, matrimonios, defunciones/entierros, confirmaciones, informaciones matrimoniales, parish censuses (padrones)	Nacimientos, matrimonios, defunciones
Typically names	Child, parents, godparents, sometimes grandparents; priest; legitimacy; the family's pueblo or rancho	Child, parents with ages and occupations, often both sets of grandparents; witnesses; exact hour and street
Record term	partida	acta
Best for	Anything before 1860; godparent cluster clues; pre-marriage witness testimony	1867 onward; grandparents' names; ages, occupations, residences

	Catholic Parish Registers	Registro Civil
Where to find them	FamilySearch: "México, [state], registros parroquiales" collections (search by state; some indexed, some image-only); diocesan and parish archives (archivo diocesano, archivo parroquial) for what isn't filmed; Ancestry's Mexican church-record collections	FamilySearch: "México, [state], Registro Civil" collections; the local or state Registro Civil office for certified copies and post-1930s records; Ancestry's Mexican civil-registration collections

Reading the chart in practice:

- **Event before 1859** — the parish book is the only record. Go straight to it.
- **Event 1859-1880s** — a civil act may or may not exist. Check the parish first, then look for the civil act; treat its absence as normal, not as evidence.
- **Event after the 1880s** — check both. The baptism gives godparents; the civil birth act gives grandparents. Together they give the whole family.
- **Coverage varies by state** — central Mexico is deep and early; northern frontier parishes start later and run thinner. A thin trail in one collection is not proof of a thin trail everywhere.

GRANNY PRO TIP

When the FamilySearch collection for your state shows a camera icon and no index, you are not stuck — you are browsing, the way parish research always worked before indexes. Find the right parish and volume, then page to the year. Baptism books are usually in date order, and the priest's opening formula puts the date in the first line of every entry.

Section 4 — Find-Your-Parish Worksheet

Nothing in this kit works without a specific place. Fill in what you know, then follow the steps to fill in the rest.

Part A — What the American-side records say

Ancestor's name as recorded (US spelling): _____

Name with double surname restored: _____

Source that names a Mexican place (manifest, petition, draft card, obituary): _____

Place as written in that source: _____

Part B — Pinning the jurisdiction

Town / rancho: _____

Municipio (and its cabecera, the municipal seat):

_____

State: _____

Diocese (from the FamilySearch Wiki state page):

_____

Parish name (usually a saint's or Marian title, e.g., Parroquia de Santiago Apóstol):

_____

Earliest surviving register, by book (bautismos / matrimonios / defunciones):

_____

Civil registry district (oficialía) and earliest year:

_____

Part C — FamilySearch catalog place-search steps

1. **Open FamilySearch → Search → Catalog.** In the *Place* field, type the town name and choose the entry that reads in the hierarchy Mexico › [State] › [Municipio] › [Town]. If the town doesn't appear, search the municipio's cabecera — small ranchos were served by the seat's parish.
2. **Look under "Church records" and "Civil registration."** Each listing shows the parish or oficialía, the record types, and the year range. Write the earliest year for each book into Part B.
3. **Check the camera icon.** A camera means images are viewable online; a magnifying glass means indexed. Note which you have — it decides whether you'll be searching or browsing.
4. **Open the FamilySearch Wiki page for the state** (for example, "Jalisco, Mexico Genealogy"). It names the dioceses, links the state's collections, and often includes a parish list or map. Record the diocese in Part B.
5. **Search the 1930 Mexican census** for the family as a bridge record. It confirms the municipio and often the specific locality before you commit hours to a parish book.
6. **If the parish isn't filmed,** note the diocesan archive for that diocese as your next step. Many keep their own catalogs; some answer written requests.

Part D — Search log

Surnames searched (each alone, and both orders):

_____

Collections checked (indexed / image-only): _____

Best hit and original image reference: _____

Next question this record raised: _____

GRANNY SAYS

"Find the town, not the country. Keep both of her surnames, always. And go check the parish before you decide the trail is cold — it was almost certainly still writing when your English cousins' trail went dark."

Notes

Use this space for personal notes and discoveries.