

Pierre Morrisett - Escape from France

[JN: I believe this is chapter 1 of "The Morrisettes of North Carolina and other southern states" by Edna Morrisette Shannonhouse. I found this text online, uncredited. The book is currently unavailable at any price. Chapter 2 is about the descendants of Peter Morrisette..

Description: iv, 186 pages, 24 unnumbered leaves of plates : illustrations ; 29 cm

Contents: Description of arms for family of Morrisette --

pt. 1. Early history : Escape from Paris ; Daniel Faure and Pierre Morrisett --

pt. 2. The descendants of Peter Morrisette : Peter Morrisette, Sr. ; Peter Morrisette, Jr. ; Jones ; Cornelia Morrisette Sawyer ; Garlington ; Wilson ; Garrett --

pt. 3. The descendants of Cason Morrisette : Cason Morrisette ; Bennett, Thorburn, Capel ; Fearing ; Monford Morrisette Bible --

pt. 4. The descendants of William Morrisette : Peter T. Burgess --

pt. 5. The descendants of Joseph Morrisette : Joseph Morrisette ; Enoch Morrisette ; The death of Spartana Morrisette ; Jonathan (John) Morrisette ; Isaac Morrisette ; Keziah Morrisette ; Stone -- Morrisette.

Before I start I would like to clarify a misunderstanding about Morrisettes in the new world. Pierre Morrisette was not the first Morrisette in the new world. There were Morrisettes in the Quebec area of what would become the Dominion of Canada, decades before Pierre arrived in what would become the United States of America, in 1787. Most, but not all, of the "Canadian" Morrisettes spell their names with 2 "S"s and most were and still are Catholic.

Pierre Morrisette (spelled variously) is believed to have been born in LaRochelle, France on 1 May 1675 to Jean (pronounced John) Louis Morrisette (spelled variously) and Antoinette Brucho. They were Protestants grouped into a poorly defined caste known as Huguenots (pronounced Hu-gen-noes in French). We can assume they were well-to-do and perhaps even minor aristocrats

On page one of Edna's Shannonhouse's book *The Morrisettes of North Carolina and other Southern States*, she tells a well worn story of the first Protestant, New World Morrisettes. Until she wrote it down it would have been called an oral history. Sociologists will sometimes lend considerable weight to such stories, in that it is believed that such stories have some basis in fact; but not so much with genealogists.

Winston Churchill was, supposedly, once asked if the story of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table was true. He replied, "It is - or it least it ought to be." And so it might well be with our ancestors.

Edna stated, "I always loved this story and it appears in my mind's eye like a swashbuckling grade B movie. I hesitate to try and put it into words as when I try to recall it, it is so vague as to details."

This was an old story when told to Edna. Of course no one is alive or even knows anyone who was alive when this story was first passed down. When we received it, from Edna, in 1972, the story had been reduced to just 3 paragraphs.

I have decided to "reverse engineer" the story. I have taken the story, as told by Edna, and removed obvious historical errors, added back in historical facts that had been dropped and added a peppering of

conjecture. I also removed the twin brother Thomas because I no longer believe he existed. This then is my telling of the story.

There is an old oral tradition that has been passed down through the generations. It is the story of a young Frenchman who is my sixth, generation great grandfather. His name was Pierre Morrisette. We believe he was born in La Rochelle, France of high birth, on the 1st of May 1675.

He was born into a Huguenot family. French Huguenots had alternately suffered oppression and enjoyed the tolerance of the Kings of France. But always, the Huguenots had been a source of irritation to the Church and the King, going back into the 12th century. When Pierre was born, the Huguenots were enjoying a season of peace, being protected by the Edict of Nantes ordered by King Henry IV (pronounced Ohn-Ree). The Huguenots were allowed to worship according to the dictates of their hearts, hold positions in court, enjoyed the privileges of title and they amassed fortunes.

In 1685, when Pierre was just 10 years old, King Louis XIV (pronounced Lou-ee) rescinded the “uncancellable” Edict of Nantes and replaced it with the Edict of Fontainebleau. The oppression and persecution of the Protestants started anew. It was so brutal as to catch the attention of all Christian nations. This Huguenot exodus out of France was the origin of the word we now know as “refugee.” Hundreds of thousands of these French Protestants fled France; some escaping with only their lives. Their homes, churches, schools and places of employ were burned or seized.

As a boy, Pierre would have kept company with other spirited youths of noble or high birth. But, as they grew into young men they had to keep their associations and politics secret.

(While it is totally a work of fiction, The Three Musketeers was set in place and time near Pierre’s home and school and the road between. The images given to me by Hollywood just help me to imagine the times, the clothing and speech of my very real ancestor.)

Pierre and his friends would have all been expert horsemen, swordsmen as well as capable shots. They dressed in the finest clothes and wore the tallest hats and highest collars that could be purchased anywhere in Paris. They spoke with an air of authority perhaps trending toward defiance and they walked with a swagger. We can assume they spoke, English and Latin as well as French. They may have also had, at least, a passing knowledge of other romance languages.

Almost certainly, they were educated within the walls of The University of Paris. This university was one of the four universities attached to Notre Dame, which of course was a Catholic institution. This university had been the most liberal of the schools to be found in Paris. While Catholic theology was still taught in the school it had been separated from the department that taught secular law. Needless to say it was a breeding ground for dissention by those who disliked or distrusted the Church or State.

Our group of young men was not unaware of the political and religious turmoil around them. As their society was plunged into near revolt the young men grew more and more rebellious. Not the least of the oppressions, some or all of these young men endured, was the practice known as “dragooning.” The King billeted hand-selected dragoons in the homes of the most influential Huguenots. The coarser the Dragoon the better suited he was for the task. Their mission was to wreak havoc within the walls of the homes of the most defiant of the Huguenots. The King’s goal was to destroy the Huguenots from the inside out.

One day one of the members of Pierre’s group had taken all he could bare and committed a crime

against the State. This was not a good thing for King Louis had pronounced that, “Je suis l’Etat” (I am the State). Whatever was the offense, it was capital in nature so he was dragged off to a mockery of a trial and sentence to be hanged. (The guillotine would not be used in France for another hundred years.)

Pierre and the remaining young men of the group were themselves not unknown to the authorities that had just sentence their friend to be executed. They probably feared that they too might soon be dragged off to an untimely demise. Perhaps they even thought it inevitable.

One night the young men, under cover of darkness, met and discussed their futures and made plans to rescue their young companion. It was obvious they would not be inheriting the lands and titles of their fathers, although some of them did still had their personal fortunes.

They knew their intended course of action would mean they would have to leave their homes, forever. But a pact was made and plans were set into motion. There was not much time, for French executioners never waited long. The group learned of the execution date of their friend. These executions were very public and served to warn other dissidents of the consequences of defying The Church and King. They swore that they would rescue their comrade or die trying.

The night before their friend’s execution the young men escaped their dragoons, mounted their horses and met at the agreed upon place. There they waited for their friend to be taken to the gallows.

Shortly before dawn, the cart came out of the prison courtyard, with their friend bound inside and flanked by several guards. The young men, mounted on horseback, with rapiers raised to the sky, surrounded the cart. They overpowered and killed the ‘gardes’, and set off at full gallop, with their relieved friend.

Once secure in their hiding place, they now needed to charter a boat to take them out of France. There was a thriving business in ferrying out Huguenots refugees, in LaRoche. It would not have been hard to find a vessel there that would take them to England.

The real trick in their escape plan was that their departure would have to be secret and probably made at night. For the most part, the refugees left France, in all directions and the King’s Men simply stood by and watched, perhaps taunting them as they left. For, although the King was not opposed to executions, exile was sufficient for his purposes. The King’s Men however would be looking hard for the ‘malfaiteurs’ that had killed the ‘gardes’ and stolen their condemned prisoner.

A night crossing would necessitate a bright moon and favorable winds and tide. While they waited for just such a night, the young men’s celebration of their success must have slowly settled into the realization that their lives were now forfeit and never be the same. They would never again see their homes and families and sweethearts. How they must have longed for their ‘amoureux’.

They almost certainly donned rough garments and burned their finery. They probably also turned their mounts loose. There would have been two reasons for these actions. First, their fine clothing and saddles would help to identify them as the criminals they had become. Second, each young man would have been carrying with him his own inheritance or the remains of their father’s estates. They dared not make themselves a target for the King’s Men or the thieves that were routinely robbing the escaping refugees.

The night finally arrived. The group slipped aboard a vessel and was secreted out of the county. This

was no simple crossing of the Channel. It is 750 miles, by sea, from La Rochelle to Dover. It would have been shorter to travel overland from Paris to Calais and then across the channel, however the chances of being captured were just too high. Instead of riding on horseback or in coaches these young men skulked into a rat infested hold, or even ensconced themselves in empty hogsheads, lashed on deck.

When they did arrive in England, except for the coins in their chests and purses, there would have been little to prove their former nobility and privilege. They had become invisible; surrounded by nearly one million other refugees that fled France for religious and political reasons under the reign of the king they called Le Roi Soleil (The Sun King).

Pierre was an educated man and not without means and the wherewithal to better himself in England. He was, as we already know, high spirited. A docile life in London may not have held as much appeal as would a journey to the New World. Talk was plentiful among the refugees of adventures and fortunes to be had in the English Colony of Virginia.

As a nation, the British had taken pity on the French Protestants that were being cruelly persecuted by King Louis XIV. England allowed many tens of thousands of the French Huguenots to find refuge in England. However, because of their great numbers, it soon became necessary to get some of the Frenchmen out of England or at least off of the island. The English government translocated large numbers of these refugees to various English colonies throughout the Empire.

On the 2nd of May, 1698, a nobleman by the name of De la Muce, proposed to England's King William III to lead a company of about 100 Huguenot families to the English Colony of Virginia. De la Muce was himself a Protestant and had been forced out of France, losing much of his personal fortune. Undoubtedly he hoped to regain a fortune in the Virginia Colony.

King William III agreed to the proposal and funded the project in part with monies from the Huguenot relief fund raised by the people of England. Pierre likely saw this venture as an opportunity to grow his wealth and reclaim some of the stature he knew in France and so secured himself a place in the company. The company was assembled in Gravesend, on the Thames, and in the very early spring of 1700, a contract was let with the owners of the Mary and Anne, captained by George Hawes.

In some sources the ship's name erroneously appears as the "Mary Ann." This ship was actually named for two royal princesses, Mary and Anne." I have found multiple mentions of ships that bear that name. I have possibly identified the vessel as a 300-tonner out of London. She is mentioned on page XI in the introduction of the log of Sir Thomas Allin, as it appears in the Publications of the Naval Record Society Vol. LXXIX.

A ship named the Mary and Anne is also mentioned, in passing, in the will of a Col. Bridger from the Virginia County of Isle of Wight, on 8 May 1686. Whether this is the same ship that brought the Huguenots to the colonies is not known to me, for certain.

On the 2nd of May 1700, after a cruel journey of 13 weeks the "Mary and Anne" weighed anchor in the mouth of the James River close to Hampton. The refugees, however, did not disembark. The original plan was to settle them south of present day Norfolk which at times was claimed by both the Virginia and Carolina Companies. For that reason, the Virginia Colonial Governor decided to resettle them 25 miles above the falls (Richmond area) on the James River. This site was not in dispute and it would have been easier for the governor to continue to provide English aid to the refugees, there.

The site chosen was an abandoned Indian village. This site already had cleared land for cultivation. Small trees had started to reclaim the fields. It did not take great effort to remove these trees and sow their crops. The site came to be called Manikintown (spelled variously over the centuries). The origin of this name is from the confederation of Indian tribes that had been forced out of the area. They were known as The Monacans whose chief was named Powhatan who was the father of Pocahontas.

Peter was manifested on “Ye List of French Refugees at Manikin Towne, in the Douglas Register, 23 Jul 1700”. Another 389 immigrants were reported to live in Manikintown that year.

Life in Manikin Towne would have been hell compared to the niceties found in London. Pierre probably lived in a wickiup left by the Monacans or in a primitive daub and wattle hut built by some of the new immigrants. But Pierre had a vision and the wherewithal to see his dream come true.

In 1708 he married Elizabeth Faure who was probably one of the “deux enfants” that accompanied Daniel Faure aboard the Mary and Anne, eight years earlier. That same year, Elizabeth gave birth to their first child. Her name has been recorded variously but appears to be some form of Jeane or Jane. Two years later little Pierre was born into the family.

While the Morrisette family was growing, in 1710, the population of Manikintown had dwindled to 150. The major reason the village dwindled was because navigable waters, on the James, were 25 miles away below the falls at Richmond.

On 31 October, 1716 Pierre was granted 139 acres of land in Henrico County (somewhere near the village of present-day Richmond). Pierre would have been 41 years old at that time.

In 1719, my direct line ancestor Jean (anglicized to John) was born and in 1723 Katherine was born.

In 1727, county lines were redrawn and parts of what had been Henrico County were now in Goochland County. The last child born to the family was Judith. She was born in 1734. Her birthplace has been recorded by some as the Village of Goochland, County of Goochland in Virginia. The source of this information is unknown.

Pierre, the elder, reportedly died in Jun of 1734, in Dale Parish and in Henrico County. Family records say that Elizabeth's died on 17 Dec 1746, in Chesterfield in what would then have then been Goochland County, in Virginia. By 1750, the Village of Manikintown was totally abandoned and dead as Pierre and Elizabeth.

Please allow me to insert some minor historical notes here for future researchers. In 1747 another county realignment created Chesterfield County which may have changed who our ancestors paid taxes to. Just 30 years later, in May 1777, the county lines changed to their current configuration. Some of what was our ancestor's neighborhood is now in Powhatan County. The current unincorporated area of Manakin-Sabot is now governed by Goochland County.

Another misunderstood fact about the area was the concept of Parishes. There were two principle Parishes that show up in most citations about our family. They are The Parish of Dale and King William Parish. Parishes were ecclesiastical divisions (which minister had responsibility for you). Parish boundaries like county lines shifted over the years. Both of these Parishes predate the counties they served. In many ways the Parishes were much more important in their lives than were the

counties.

It is a finer point but during the lifetime of Peter, Elizabeth and all of their children Virginia was either a proprietary colony or a Royal Colony of England definitely not a state, commonwealth or even territory of a country that would not exist until 1783.