

Eastchester's Unknown French Connection

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Historians unlike journalists whether they write about global, national, or local topics must not only base their information on valid sources but they must reveal those sources. The fascinating aspect of writing about history is that new sources of information, primary sources, force the historian to reevaluate what was previously thought was true. In the summer of 2008 it has been uncovered that there was a link in both blood and land between the descendants of the English Puritans that started Eastchester in 1664 and the French Huguenots that founded New Rochelle in 1687.

At the southeast corner of Eastchester on the west side of California Road on an acre of land lays one of the five oldest and most historic homes in the town. The Coutant family that purchased this property in 1821 is related to the original settlers of French Huguenot and English Puritan descent that pioneered the colonial settlements between the Bronx River and the Long Island Sound.

Who were the Coutants? Jean Coutant was a French Huguenot who migrated to New York City in 1692. The Huguenots were French Protestants who were being persecuted by their Catholic monarchs for their religious beliefs. In 1687 twenty three years after ten Puritan farm families of English descent started Eastchester on the west bank of the Hutchinson River French Huguenots founded New Rochelle as a haven for religious refugees where French customs, culture, and language would be preserved. Jean with his new wife, Susan Guion, moved to New Rochelle in 1703.

The Huguenots that settled New Rochelle were composed of merchants, traders, and people of means. The Huguenots were boat builders, millers, tanners, tailors, doctors, carpenters, butchers, harness makers, and professional people like lawyers, and doctors. The majority of these French pioneers were farmers who engaged in other seasonal occupations not merely for income but to contribute the well being of the community. Jean Coutant fathered five children who in addition to farming became well known in New Rochelle and New York City for the manufacturing of their fine quality chairs.

The specialty of the Coutant clan in addition to farming became the making of chairs. One of Jean's sons, Jacob was a chair maker and farmer who built a house in 1727 on North Avenue across the street from present day Iona College that stood for 200 years. His son David continued to produce chairs in the last half of the eighteenth century. The chair factory was located west of his house on North Avenue. Power was provided by a steam that used to flow from the lake that is still situated in front of New Rochelle High School. By the time of the American Revolution the family of Isaac Coutant, another son of Jean, had a farm and homestead located south and west of where Eastchester Road intersects with Webster Avenue in New Rochelle. Isaac passed away in 1747 but his second wife Catherine would outlive him by 29 years. She passed away the very day that the British were fighting the Battle of

Pelham, October 18, 1776. The British with their Hessian mercenaries took possession of New Rochelle in the early fall of 1776. The military authorities would not allow Catherine's burial to be made in the cemetery in the main portion of New Rochelle, and it became necessary to bury her in a corner of the farm near Eastchester Road and Webster Avenue. Today the Coutant cemetery remains well preserved by the city of New Rochelle on the same lot at the corner of Webster Avenue and Eastchester Road.

In 1821 James Coutant a grandson of Jean, the French Huguenot who originally moved to New Rochelle, purchased 17 acres for a farm between present day California and New Rochelle Road in the town of Eastchester. But the Coutant and New Rochelle connection with Eastchester goes back way before the purchase of this farm. A very recent study of family histories, deeds, and wills show that some of the original families in New Rochelle and Eastchester were joined by marriage and land.

The Bertine family was also one of the original French Huguenot families that moved to New Rochelle in colonial times. The Bertines purchased land in Eastchester in the eighteenth century and still live in Bronxville today. In 1757 during the French and Indian War Isaac Coutant married Susanne Bertine. By 1775 the Guion family (Susan Guion was the first matriarch of the Coutant clan in New Rochelle) had built a tavern in then southern Eastchester. George Washington on his way to take command of the Continental Army in Boston stopped to have a drink there. In 1789 the same year that the Constitution was ratified Hannah Bertine married William Henry Pickney, a descendant of one of the original ten Puritan farm families that started the town of Eastchester in 1664.

The Coutants continued to live in their farm house throughout the nineteenth century.