

# ANN LETORT

*The second in a series on noteworthy women in Lancaster County history, this article on Ann Letort by Marian Wallace Reninger brings new attention to the courage and versatility of pioneer women.*

Ann Letort was a French Huguenot who came to America with her husband James in 1686. They left France, as did many others, during the religious persecutions after the Edict of Nantes. A letter from their pastor, Le Sauvage, which is now in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania files in Philadelphia, testifies that they were members of his congregation at Alencon. They had a fine and substantial background. That they were people of strong character and high principles, their record shows. They were threatened with death or torture and fled to England with their pastor, Le Sauvage. In London they wondered what to do next.

James Letort considered going to Bavaria where he was offered a position in the service of the Prince of that German state. He was taking a great interest in the French Protestants banished from their home land.

According to the article about the Letorts by historian Evelyn Benson, Le Sauvage wrote Letort a letter recommending him to the Elector of Brandenburg as a sincere Christian and a man endowed by the grace of God with many fine qualities. Le Sauvage describes James Letort as "of medium height, age 35, an eminent man of good birth, very genteel family." As a loyal Christian who kept the faith, the pastor prayed God to bless Letort and all his family.

The plans to go to Brandenburg were changed when the Letorts met William Penn in London. Penn granted Letort 30,000 acres on the Schuylkill, upon which to settle a group of Huguenots. A few families came with the Letorts and settled there; but on account of the remoteness these French colonists soon left the settlement. However, Ann and the family remained while Letort made a trip back to England, about five years later, to arrange for more settlers in his colony. His ship was captured by the French and he was taken to Toulon, narrowly escaping the gallows.

Governor Markham, William Penn's cousin, wrote about him as follows:

"After a long and hard usage in England he became acquainted with the West Jersey Company. They understood that his house stood upon the Schuylkill upon a convenient place for trade with the Indians, so the Co. contracted with him to trade furs for them there and wrote their agents to supply the goods."

Although the Letorts had less reason to favor the French king, they spent many uncomfortable days under suspicion of their neighbors in Pennsylvania who were English. Before 1704 the Letorts moved their cabin trading post from the Schuylkill to Conestoga, Indiantown, Lancaster County, where their home was in the forest near many of the Indians in that region. These were a branch of the Potomac Indians who had pushed north along the Susquehanna river. The Letorts were friendly to the Indians, with whom they traded. Madame Letort kept the trading post while her husband was west of the Susquehanna on long trips.

The Letorts made every effort to deal fairly with the Indians — to give them useful goods, warm blankets, pots, hardware, in exchange for furs. The Indians often complained of dishonest traders who came with rum to trade for furs. They could not resist the rum, but when it was gone, their furs were gone too. The Indians were poor and cold, with nothing to trade for their necessities. On one occasion two traders, one a Swede, and an Englishman named Polycarpus Rose, brought rum to entice the Indians at Madame Letort's very doorway. She took a horsewhip and in a fury drove the traders away so that the Indians could settle with her for honest goods.

The Letorts were Lancaster County's first white family. While the husband and later the son also took long trips in search of furs, etc., Ann maintained the store and home.

Ann Letort frequently corresponded with the Governor of the Pennsylvania province. When he wanted accounts of the Indians' behavior toward the colonists, she wrote to him. But the English and Palatine colonists made complaints against Mme. Letort. She was brought before the Council in Philadelphia, where she and her husband and several other French settlers were accused of being dangerous. At the trial she denied everything and was let off very easily.

When Penn made his pact of peace with the Susquehanna Indians in 1701, pledging mutual friendship and amity, one of the witnesses to this treaty was James Letort. Among others was Edward Shippen. In this treaty it was stated that the Indians should have the right to trade with only those who were permitted by Penn's representatives in the province. James Letort regularly applied for and received this right. The Susquehannocks gave permission to Penn's friends to settle on both sides of the Susquehanna river, which was considered their territory up to this time.

From the annals of the Susquehannocks and other Lancaster, Pa. Indians, by H. Frank Eshleman, 1909, in the Lancaster County Historical Society *Papers*, we read:

"Prior to 1600—but how long before is not known—the Susquehannocks were seated along that river from which they have derived their name. They had a war with the Mohawks from the north for 10 years. They were the most easterly of the Iroquois tribe. Near what is now Safe Harbor they cut their strange images in rocks—pictures of trees, birds, animals and men."

A very interesting excavating project is now going on under the leadership of Prof. Charles Holzinger of Franklin & Marshall College, at what is

called the "Ibough Site." Many Indian relics and skeletons have been dug up, and all this is on the site near where the Letorts and a few other Frenchmen traded.

Before 1609 these Susquehannock Indians were very powerful and the Algonquins — Virginia Indians who knew Capt. John Smith — were afraid of them. These Susquehannocks, according to Jenkins' "History of Pennsylvania," were in trade with the French before Penn's settlement of Pennsylvania.

It is interesting to note that one Indian complaint to the governor stated that Madame Ann Letort's pigs had strayed into the Indians' corn and destroyed some of it. This is one of the first accounts of the raising of corn in Penn's woods — and note, not by colonists but by Indians.

An account in the Colonial Records, Vol. 2, tells of a Council meeting held in Philadelphia, August 17, 1703, as follows:

"James Letort who about 2 years ago went out of this province to Canada and returned last spring was examined before several of the Council and Magistrates. No occasion was found to suspect him of any evil designs against this Gov't . . . he having hitherto behaved himself unoffensively was seduced by the investigators of some others, without any evil intentions that could be made to appear in himself.

"But now in town together with Peter Bezallion, another French and Indian trader, it was deemed necessary to call them before Council. They were each obliged to give security in 500 pounds sterling, that they should behave themselves as good subjects of the Queen and this gov't. and hold no correspondence with the enemy but at all times during the War should come to the Gov't. with all designs that should come to their knowledge of trying to turn the Indians against the English."

In 1718 the Letorts moved to a point on the Susquehanna along a small run which is now the upper part of East Donegal township. Later, Letort established a trading post near what is now Carlisle.

Another account of Ann Letort tells that there appears from a letter from Mme. Letort of Conestoga, dated March 15, 1703-04, that "the Towittois (Iroquois) Indians had come down and cut off 2 neighbor families of Indians at Conestoga. The Indians there were all under great apprehension of further mischief from them and were preparing to demand succor from the gov't of the Province in case these disorders should be continued." This subject was then considered in the Council March 22nd. It was resolved that "messengers be forthwith sent to Conestoga via New Castle to investigate this information."

In 1728, the Pennsylvania Archives tells of James Letort, Jr. being sent as interpreter to the Indians at Shamokin, from the Governor of the province of Pennsylvania, in which he states, "neither the Christians nor the Indians should believe any report of each other without sending to inquire the truth from the parties themselves."

Again, in 1730, the Indians at Allegheny sent a message to the Governor by James Letort, as follows:

"Indians would request the Gov. to regulate the Traders from coming into the woods in such numbers and bringing large quantities of rum, that one Indian had killed a white man while intoxicated."

In 1731, Letort reports to the Governor that "some French from Canada have come down with designs to draw off English interests," and that "they have gained great influence over the Shawnee Indians and daily try to improve it."

Ann Letort presumably died a few years after her husband at her Conestoga home, about 1728. Her son, James Letort, Jr., continued actively in the Indian trade for many years. He served often as interpreter for the Indians at Treaty meetings. Later he followed the Indians and the fur trade to the western lands. Writes Mrs. Benson: "That her family had more members than one son is shown by a remark of James Logan. When speaking of Madame Letort he wrote he 'would like the old gentlewoman to have some and for her grandchildren.' "

When and where James Letort died, and what became of the other members of the family, there is no trace. But Ann Letort holds the record as the first white woman in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, as wife, mother and storekeeper."

*Lancaster, Pennsylvania*

MARION WALLACE RENINGER

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## GOING DOWN IN HISTORY: LANCASTER, 1959

*An annual feature by M. Luther Heisey  
reciting in a light vein (and not-so-light  
occasionally) matters of interest in Lan-  
caster.*

Jan. 1. City Council passed a wage tax to be effective this date. Actually through legal proceedings the tax did not become law until 30 days later.

Jan. 3. By proclamation of President Eisenhower Alaska became the forty-ninth state in the union.

Jan. 4. The Conestoga Transportation Company raised the city bus fares from ten to fifteen cents; two tokens sold for a quarter dollar. Ten cents had been the fare since 1950.

Jan. 9. Fire damaged the old structure next to Elizabeth Mansion at Brickerville; this was the building in which Hessian prisoners were quartered during the Revolutionary War. (Since the fire the building has been neatly repaired.)