

# *French Pioneers in Lancaster County*

By Dr. Simone Vincens

**A**t the time of William Penn's settlement during the last two decades of the 17th century the first white inhabitants in Lancaster County were French. They were not farmers in the full sense of the word; for although they did own land, cultivated it and lived out of it for their basic needs their main source of income was the fur trade.

Why Frenchmen? Why fur traders?

1. Lancaster County was not a part of Penn's purchase before 1700 and could not be allotted to Quakers coming from England. It is not until 1688 that a deed was signed for the purchase of land reaching the Susquehanna and not until 1696 that a number of subscriptions for sundry lots could be made; even after that it was not possible for Penn to do anything about it since the exile of James II deprived him of his proprietorship for several years. So no white settlements could be found in our part of the world until after the turn of the century.

As for fur traders, it was necessary for William Penn to engage in the fur trade in order to be able to maintain his colony; in the Treaty of Shakamaxon, Penn insisted that trading with Indians must be done under supervision in the open market at Philadelphia; this was to discourage any cheating on the part of the whites; but coming to the city was not the most convenient way for the Indians, and for years it looked as if Penn's territory was quite destitute of Indians. It is true that they were not quite visible:

a) The Delawares who had signed the treaty of Shakamaxon had moved west on the northern branches of the Susquehanna, compelled to do so because

their game had already been destroyed by Dutch and Swedish traders.

b) The Susquehannocks defeated by the Iroquois in 1675 had accepted adoption by their conquerors and had become members of the Confederacy of the Five Nations, and as such had moved to Seneca territory.

2. Another hindrance to the fur trade in Pennsylvania were the restrictions imposed by the governors of Maryland and New Jersey. William Penn was always very eager to behave decently and kindly towards others and took many precautions not to incur the enmity of his neighbors (for instance he wrote a letter to Governor Frontenac in Quebec addressed to "the Emperor of Canada" and dated 21 June 1682). But Lord Baltimore in Maryland and Governor Dongan in New York imposed a kind of monopoly on their trade: their Indians were not supposed to trade with white men from other colonies.

*H*owever, back in England in 1684, Penn who needed some revenue was selling parts of his immense territory (45,000 square miles) to Quakers and non-Quakers alike. Among them, in 1686 Sir Mathias Vincent bought a lot of 10,000 acres on the Schuylkill and was looking for a manager. It happened that in the same year a French Huguenot family had just arrived in London, forced to leave their homeland after the disastrous Revocation Edict (Fontainebleau, 1685) which started a new persecution against Protestants. This family consisted of Captain Jacques Letort, 35 years old, his wife Anne and a son Jacques (10 years old). London had always welcomed Protestant refugees: after the 1572 St. Bartholomew Massacre a certain Mullins family had emigrated to England and was later found on the Mayflower, then in Plymouth. Priscilla Mullins, sole survivor, married John Alden.

This time, on Sept. 13, 1686, Sir Mathias Vincent gave a free hand to Capt. Letort "to look after his Pennsylvania estate." Letort received 400 acres on the river (now Spring City) 30 miles north of Philadelphia. The Letorts sailed immediately and arrived in December 1686. The next year Sir Mathias Vincent died and his widow sold the property to Dr. Daniel Coxe, physician to Charles II (and later Queen Anne); the good doctor was also absentee Governor of West New Jersey (from 1684-1689). Daniel Coxe was a man of ideas; not content to plant corn and vegetables he dreamed of founding a "New Mediterranean Sea Company" based on the fur trade similar to the Hudson Bay Company. The "New Mediterranean" was Lake Erie. This is how Captain Letort became unexpectedly a fur trader.

After receiving merchandise for the trade, he started to make contacts with the Delawares who used to come down the Schuylkill from the north. In 1688 Coxe sent him to investigate possibilities around the Mississippi. When he returned in 1689 another Frenchman was on his plantation, Pierre Bezaillon, whose qualities were invaluable to him. Letort certainly was an educated man

and quite able to administer the estate, but Bezaillion knew everything about game resources, including western paths and Indian cultures and languages.

The five Bezaillion brothers had settled in Canada a few years before. In 1686, Pierre had gone with Henri de Tonty in search of Cavelier de La Salle who had mysteriously disappeared. After that, he enlisted as a fur trader with two bushrangers who were trading with Albany against government regulations. It is possible that fearing some punishment from the authorities if he returned to New France, he eagerly joined Jacques Letort in Pennsylvania. Bezaillion was certainly welcome when Letort had to go to England in 1690 to bring furs to Coxe; Letort was away for three years; partly because his boat was captured by the French Navy. He was sent to the galleys, miraculously escaped, reached London in 1692 to find that Coxe had tired of his marvellous projects and sold the estate to the West Jersey Company. But his contract was renewed and at the end of 1693 he was able to sail back to America.

Upon his return he discovered that Bezaillion and Anne had acquired a new friend and collaborator, Martin Chartier. Chartier was even more colorful than his friends. Born in 1650, he had been a member of the La Salle expedition in 1679; after a violent disagreement with La Salle he had left the group, roamed through the wilderness for a few years and in 1683 came back to Fort St. Louis, the trading post built by La Salle on the Illinois River (now Peoria). He struck a friendship with the Shawnee Indians, a tribe from the Cumberland Valley (Kentucky).

When the Shawnees returned eastwards in the spring of 1690 Chartier followed them in August, alone in a canoe, and for 40 days travelled 800 miles until he found them. Was it love who guided him? We would like to think so since he married a Shawnee girl; however it is less romantic but probably closer to the truth to assume that since Canada was again at war with the Iroquois and since bushrangers were drafted, Chartier, who hated war, preferred to stay with the peace-loving Shawnees. They set their camp on the Maryland shore, north of Chesapeake Bay, just across Havre-de-Grace; the Maryland authorities took umbrage at Chartier – who acted as an interpreter, called himself Captain, and strutted in a magnificent beaver coat – they put him in jail.

Not for long because it would not do to incur the wrath of the Shawnees. Very soon Chartier was exploring the Schuylkill and in doing so he met Bezaillion and Anne Letort. They became friends, signed a contract assuring them the monopoly of the trade with the Shawnees, and started a thriving business. So Jacques Letort could only rejoice at the news.

But in 1696 he had to go back to England again and nothing more was heard about him. Anne may have heard of her husband's demise; the unfortunate event was probably the reason for Anne's and Bezaillion's moving away. From the beginning they had been persecuted by nasty denunciations from envious

traders. They moved close to Chartier's headquarters (now in Kent County, Delaware) in the spring of 1697. One year later the Shawnees and their friends were on the Susquehanna, at the mouth of the Pequea River, not far from the new settlement of Conestoga. Indeed it is because they heard about the return of the Susquehannocks (now called Conestogas) that they decided to move and trade with them. There were 40 warriors and the same number of Shawnee men, altogether 80 families.

Such was the situation when Penn arrived in Philadelphia for his second visit in December 1699. Immediately Penn decided to secure release of the land from the Susquehannocks in two treaties granting concessions to those persons who had already subscribed for land in 1696. But no one seemed interested any more; only three white families stayed on that land — the Chartiers, the Letorts, and the Bezaillions.

**P**enn needed fur traders as much as farmers; he was more successful this time thanks to his man-of-all-trades, protege, secretary, attorney, etc. . . . , James Logan, who had come with him in 1699 and was going to stay as the real steward of the Penn family. Logan was a man of superior intelligence. Being more a Scotsman than a Quaker, his motto was "in business it is unnatural to do something for nothing" and consequently was prepared to be as ruthless and unscrupulous as necessary. Those qualities served him well. He became successively or sometimes simultaneously Secretary of the Province, Commissioner of Property, member of the Governor's Council, President of the Council, Chief of the Supreme Court, Receiver of the Proprietary Rents, Specialist in Indian Affairs, etc.

But he did create a lucrative and lasting Indian trade in Pennsylvania with first-class collaborators: Bezaillion, Chartier, and Jacques Letort's son, Jimmy. Their association started in 1704 after Logan met them through a planter-trader named Edward Farmer. Despite innumerable difficulties caused by the jealousy of other traders and of people who hated Logan, the organization continued to grow. As the commerce developed Logan hired other traders, but the Frenchmen always held a special status. They served as interpreters, public relations agents, diplomats, indispensable members of all negotiations with Indians of any origins since they spoke the various languages of the Algonquin and Iroquois tribes.

While Scotch-English traders would hesitate to venture far west, the Frenchmen would gladly embark on a western expedition. In 1708 we find them building a cabin on the upper branches of the Potomac in West Virginia and they also traded with Detroit, where Bezaillion had a brother.

In 1715 the three families were living in Conegohela (Washington Boro), but they also owned several trading posts along the Susquehanna, among them Paxtang (Harrisburg). From 1712 to 1720 Logan's supervision of the fur trade gave him supreme power in Pennsylvania. His own possessions multiplied five

times in eight years. His employees did not fare so well. Peter Chartier, Martin's son, learned it the hard way. When his father died in 1718 Logan had a nice epitaph for him: "He was a very honest man but too generous to thrive".

Logan did not suffer from the latter since his policy was to allow traders to have large tracts of land on which he could foreclose if they could not pay their bills. Before he died, Martin Chartier had expressed a wish to have issued to his son the warrant for land where they had lived some years. But he died with a debt of 450 pounds; it could have been refunded soon enough but Logan took advantage of it to seize the land. The outraged Peter Chartier moved his Shawnees west on the other side of the river (New Cumberland).

After Anne Letort's death in 1720 Jimmy Letort followed his friend and built a trading post on the Yellow Breeches (Carlisle). He too would have to suffer from Logan's greed in the future. Then Peter Chartier took his Shawnees on the Allegheny river at Chartier's Town (Tarentum, Allegheny County). Letort settled not far from it, a few miles south of Kittaning (Shelocta, Indiana County). We don't know when and how Letort died after 1742, but we know that an aging Peter Chartier (then 53 years old) gave his allegiance to the French in 1745, received a Captainship and the assignment to harass with the help of his 400 warriors all the English traders who dared to venture on the Ohio. That was the beginning of the French-Indian War.

Old sins cast long shadows. Bezaillion, too old to move (he was almost 60 in 1720), stayed in Pennsylvania with his second wife Martha Cooms. While keeping their land in Washington Boro and their trading post at Paxtang, they settled on a 500-acre farm in Caln Township, Chester County (now part of Coatesville) in 1729. Bezaillion died there in 1742 when he was 80 years old and is buried in the cemetery of St. John's Episcopal Church, a few yards from the Lancaster County line. His widow Martha, twenty-five years younger died in 1764, apparently with no direct heirs. Her descendants bear the name of her nephews *Hart*. So, today, not a drop of French blood is left from these first pioneers in Lancaster County.

It is another French family who was to give us hundreds of descendants, that of Marie Ferree. She and her husband were Huguenots who, like the Letorts, had to leave their homeland in 1686. They moved first to the Palatinate, but the French invaded and burnt the Palatinate in 1689. Marie, then a widow, looked for a shelter in England and was able to go there in 1707 with her six children and her son-in-law Isaac Lefevree. She was kindly welcomed by William Penn, who introduced her to Queen Anne. They received passports for the New York colony, where the Huguenots had had a settlement in Esopus on the Hudson River since 1660. Then in September 1712 they were granted tracts of land in the Upper Pequea Valley (Strasburg, Pa.).

We have a record of Marie Ferree's arrival in Lancaster County in 1712:

It was on the evening of a summer day when the Huguenots reached the verge of a hill commanding a view of the Valley of the Pequea. It was a woodland scene, a forest inhabited by wild beasts, for no indication of civilized life was very near.

Scattered along the Pequea, among the dark green hazel, could be discovered the Indian wigwams – the smoke issuing there from in its spiral form. No sound was heard but the song of the birds. In silence they contemplated the beautiful prospect which Nature presented to their view.

Suddenly a number of Indians darted from the woods. The females shrieked, when an Indian advanced and in broken English said to Madame Ferree: "Indian no harm White; White good to Indian; go to our Chief; come to Beaver". Few were the words of the Indian. They went with him to Beaver's cabin, and Beaver, with the humanity that distinguished the Indian of that period, gave to the emigrants his wigwam. The next day he introduced them to Tawana who lived on the great flats of Pequea and was a Chief of a branch of the Conestoga Indians who at that time occupied the region.

The friendship formed between the Red Man of the forest with the Huguenots upon their arrival was maintained for many years, each race giving the other assistance in time of need.

A dozen Mennonite families would shortly join them and live quietly among the peaceful Conestogas.

Very soon the days of colorful explorers, bushrangers, and adventurers would be over in this part of Pennsylvania. The future belonged to those who toiled the land, but that land had first been cleared by Indians for their own farming and villages and the roads had been established by Indian hunters and their trader friends like Bezaillon, Chartier, Letort. The lines of traffic had been designed by Indian communication ways. The Whites merely had to reap what they did not sow.

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