

## A COLONIAL RECORD ODYSSEY

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I thought I'd found the client's immigrant ancestor. His children, born beginning in 1699, were listed in a Quaker meeting in New Jersey, which does not necessarily mean they were all born there. Had he emigrated alone, as a child with his parents, or with a wife and some of his children? My efforts to answer this question led to an odyssey through colonial records, only a portion of which are discussed here.

### NEW JERSEY

My favorite way to document information about migration is through land records. The first transfer from the "government" to an individual (a grant) varied from colony to colony. In New Jersey, the proprietors of East Jersey and West Jersey granted land. He was not in the proprietors' records.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, we rely on deeds recorded at the county level. In the colonial period, there was usually no requirement that deeds be recorded. In New Jersey, there are only a few county-level deeds, and he was not in them.

In the colonial period we also find that many records we expect to research on a county-by-county basis are to be found at the colony level, sometimes because they were recorded there, sometimes because they have been physically centralized. The big bonus in colonial research is that much of this material is published in easy-to-consult format. In New Jersey, this is in what we call the "New Jersey Archives." I checked the index for every single volume. The immigrant's surname was not found in the land records. He did have a will, but it didn't help with the "when did he arrive" problem.

### PENNSYLVANIA

Periodicals are especially useful in the colonial period. It was in them that I found the immigrant in several Quaker records, including his marriage in Philadelphia in 1697.

On a recent research trip to Salt Lake City I tracked down more than half-a-dozen compilations about the family. Taken together, they told a thrilling story of Huguenot immigration.

Around 1685, the immigrant's father was shot during the dragonnades, and his wife and five children fled to the caves and forests in France, where they were concealed for several months until they could escape to England. While in England he became a Quaker and around 1690 came to Pennsylvania, where in 1697 he married the 16-year-old daughter of a Huguenot from New York. Shortly after his marriage he went to James River, Virginia, but he didn't like it and finally settled in New Jersey, where the family became known for their fruit orchards.

The family histories reported on several family heirlooms—the original Quaker marriage certificate, a curious

carved wooden box said to be filled with gold brought from France, and a hand-colored coat of arms that had been in possession of the family since their first arrival in America. The chain of ownership of the items in America was given, although different publications did not agree entirely on it.

Based on the family histories, I searched surviving English and continental Huguenot records, but found no mention of the surname.

I persisted in collecting as many of what I call "real records" as possible, digging deeply into a variety of sources. Once again I turned to land records. He bought two pieces of land in Pennsylvania around that time and sold them within a few years. We see, again, a difference in colonial records. The purchase and sale of his lot in Philadelphia—which gives his occupation as that of a weaver—are recorded at the county level, but the purchase and sale of his lot in Germantown is recorded at the town level.

As I always do in research, I constructed an extensive chronology for him, including estimated dates of vital events, migration, and other events in the family histories. A couple of things about it bugged me, including some long gaps.

I tried a different approach, creating a chronology with nothing but the "real records" that I had examined myself. A different picture emerged. The first record for him was not until 1696 in the monthly meeting in Pennsylvania when he requested a clearness certificate to marry. Next he bought the two pieces of land. One full year after his original request, the first intentions of his marriage were presented, along with a certificate from Virginia of his conversion and clearness for marriage.

So much for him converting to Quakerism in London. And so much for him going to Virginia *after* his marriage, unless he went twice.

### VIRGINIA

I began research on him in a third colony. You won't be surprised that I began with land records, checking the published Virginia patents. Colonial Virginia insists on using the term patent rather than grant for first transfer of land. Differences in terminology are very prevalent in the colonial period.

I found him in the records under an altered name! He had patented two small tracts in Henrico County in 1683 and 1684.

So much for the children hiding in the caves in 1685, then going to England, then emigrating in America. The records clearly indicate that he was an adult. I would have to move his estimated birth date earlier.

I located the land near the James River, below present-day Richmond and close to an early Quaker meeting, albeit one without early records.

Unlike the structured books of the federal period, the earliest colonial records in any given locality were often kept in a single book that might include land transactions, probates, taxation, vital records, ear marks, appointments, and anything else with which the town or county was concerned, all recorded together chronologically.

Often these record books have been combed for particular kinds of information, and abstracts published that create pseudo “will books,” etc. Such is the case with Henrico County, which has a published “will book” and a published “deed book,” created from a combination of two surviving sets of record books. For the immigrant, these contained the 1685 indenture of a servant and two deeds of sale, in 1684 and 1685. On the deeds of sale, his wife Mary released her dower.

Hmmm. None of the family histories mentioned a prior wife. I would need to change the compiled genealogy.

There is ambiguity about both his given name and his surname, so I examined the microfilm of these record books, hoping that a clerk had recorded a facsimile signature (see my article, “How Did Your Ancestors Sign their Names?” in *Ancestry Magazine*, 22[January/February 2004], 28–33). The microfilm I had access to had a thorough name index, with several page numbers not in my list of “real records.” This is a problem with pseudo books. Some entries don’t fit the description and get left out entirely.

Some of the omitted entries provided additional details about the records I already had, but two were quite significant. On 1 June 1685 a complaint was brought against the sheriff for negligence because he did not serve papers before our Huguenot immigrant “departed ye County . . . w’ch was late on Thursday last (this being Munday).”

As genealogists, we are always trying to document migrations, but I must admit that this is the only time that I have been able to pinpoint a departure to late in the afternoon of Thursday, May 28!

The sheriff pleaded that he “was ill-disposed, his child very sick & his under Sherr’f abroad about other businesse relating to ye Court” and was found not at fault. Later that day, another action charged that our Huguenot immigrant had “contrary to law privately departed this County (of

w’ch he is an inhabit’t) and is indebted to him ten pds Sterling.”

So much for the box filled with gold.

The court allowed the attachment of 2 cows, 1 heifer, 1 steer, 1 horse, 1 gun, & 1 cowbell. A detailed reading of records often gives us insight we can obtain in no other way. Who would have thought that a cow bell would be an item of such value that it would be taken to satisfy a debt? Notice also the indication that persons were, under law, inhabitants of a specific place, even in Virginia.

The other item of interest, in 1686, concerned the indentured servant, who “was from him Run-a-way.” It had cost “one hh’d of tob in search after his s’d serv’t to the south besides his own great trouble & pains in search after him & pursuit from Summerton to this County.” Notice that the “currency” here was tobacco, not cash. The servant liked it better in Henrico, so the master sold the indenture (lengthened by one year for the servant’s misbehavior).

But where is Summerton? A gazetteer reveals that it is in South Carolina.

#### SOUTH CAROLINA

Another colony to research! I am continuing the odyssey by digging into another set of records, with its own set of peculiarities.

#### SUMMARY

In the early colonial period there were no major roads, and all travel was by water. This is readily apparent here. The immigrant first appeared in Virginia up the James River from Williamsburg. His residence in South Carolina was up the Santee River from Charleston. His residence in Pennsylvania was in the port of Philadelphia. In New Jersey he resided in a coastal community.

When doing colonial research, particularly early colonial research, one needs to be flexible and to be aware of the great differences that might be found in the records, their location, and the environment that created them, with variances over time in a single locality and between localities at the same time.