

The French Connection

On the banks of the Susquehanna River about 10 miles below Athens, Pennsylvania, in a horseshoe bend of the river, is the remains of a French settlement begun in 1793 and ending ten years later. It was considered to be one of the more successful French settlements designed for the French citizens fleeing the French Revolution. Nothing remains except an empty, peaceful, beautiful landscape with a few artifacts displayed in an 18th century log cabin that was moved to the site and one foundation that possibly was a wine cellar. There is also an interesting house that can be toured, built in 1836 by John LaPorte, the son of one of the original settlers. The area is now an Historic Site in Pennsylvania. I urge you to visit next summer because this is where “our” French settlers went when they left Greene. Let’s begin with a short history on how these families arrived in Greene and then left for Azilum.

Before the French settlement in Greene there was another in the Town of Butternuts. A key player in land speculation was the Frenchman James Le Ray de Chaumont. James was in the U.S. trying to recoup money his father had loaned the Americans in their fight against the British. While here, he bought vast tracts of land, especially in the north country of New York State and one in Otsego County in the Town of Butternuts. His land agent there was William Cooper and Cooper had sold enough lots to have a small French colony thriving by 1790. It was near what now is the village of Morris. Simon Barnett, a French refugee from Martinique, had sold his house in Philadelphia to James Le Ray and had settled on one of the lots in Butternuts.

Charles Felix Bue Boulogne was a Parisian lawyer who became the land agent for Malachi Treat and William W. Morris for the land tract east of the Chenango River in the Town of Greene. We know of three families who contracted with him in France to buy land in Greene: D’Autremont, LeFevre and Brevost. Madame D’Autremont was a widow with three sons; the LeFevre and Brevost families had two children each. They were fleeing from the French Revolution like thousands of others who were loyal to the king and arrived in Philadelphia in July, 1792.

It is possible that James Le Ray was with Boulogne and the group traveling to Greene and that’s why they went to Butternuts first, to see how his land was doing. They probably came up the Hudson River to Albany, then to the Mohawk River and then who knows on what trails to Otsego Lake and then to the Butternut Valley. Simon Barnett, a carpenter who spoke English, continued on with the group to Greene and they arrived here in the fall of 1792.

They endured many hardships while here and everything I read points out that these citizens of Paris did not know how to live in the wilderness. They had not experienced such cold winters, they were not used to the isolation, most did not speak English, they did not know how to clear land and probably hardest of all, it was very difficult to get provisions to the colony and their money was giving out. They knew that Charles Boulogne had bought the whole tract with a mortgage for a good portion of it and they had no money to pay him and he had no money to pay Treat and Morris. Upon arriving, they were helped out by Stephen Ketchum who had settled here earlier in the year.

In 1793, Charles Boulogne began to help build another French settlement financed by Robert Morris-Asylum, Pennsylvania, or as the French called it, Azilum (a made-up word because there were other Asylums and the French word *asile* referred mainly to a place for the mentally deranged. So Azilum sounded good.) He helped to choose the site and to improve the property by building log houses. There were great plans for Azilum. The houses were two stories in height with large fireplaces, glass windows and porches. A town plot covering three hundred acres was laid out. Four hundred and thirteen lots of

about half an acre each were marked off. Most exciting of all, perhaps it would be the refuge for Queen Marie Antoinette. There were plans to help her escape from France. *La Grande Maison* or the Queen's house was a huge building- eighty-four feet long and sixty feet deep.

The French colony in Greene now had about eight families and was struggling to survive. There are conflicting reports about when the families began to leave for Asylum where they thought it would be a better life. Some accounts say they all left as early as 1794 but Mildred Folsom states that the D'Autremonts and the Brevost families didn't leave until later. There is a letter written in 1795 by Alexander D'Autremont, the second son, to Boulogne describing the terrible living conditions but it's impossible to tell whether he wrote it in Greene or Asylum. It's clear in the letter that he was now head of the household. The story in Greene is that when Talleyrand, the prince of diplomats, came to visit, he took back the oldest D'Autremont son to France as his personal secretary. Whatever the time frame might be, after Charles Boulogne drowned in a creek near Asylum, on his way to Philadelphia in 1796, all the families' papers and what money he had were lost and the Greene colony was doomed. There had never been a mortgage payment made on the land and Treat and Morris reclaimed it. But the D'Autremonts, Brevosts and LeFevres sold their land to Joseph Juliand and Peter B. Garnsey very cheaply. Perhaps they had partially paid for theirs when the contract was made in France. Simon Barnett had paid \$150 for his land to Charles Boulogne but as the land reverted back to Treat and Morris, he had to pay \$150 more for half the land he had before. He was the only one of the original group who stayed here. He lived to be 93 and was a prominent figure in Greene. He named his first son Charles Felix Barnett, so Charles Felix Bue Boulogne must have been very well respected. There was a law suit against Charles Boulogne's widow who inherited the tract but nothing ever came of it as she returned to France.

After Asylum learned of the death of Marie Antoinette, the life went out of the colony.

It continued on but never became the shining light that the French émigrés had wished it to be. Fifty log cabins were built and there was some commerce. At its height, there were around two hundred inhabitants. The *Grande Maison* was used as a residence and as a social center for music, cards and dancing. Then two of the backers went bankrupt and improvements stopped. The colonists were discouraged and tired of all the hard work.

In 1802, word came that Napoleon Bonaparte had issued an edict giving the émigrés permission to apply for repatriation and restoration of their properties. In a year, the town was nearly vacant; not all went back to France but many did. Others went to warmer climates in Charleston, Savannah and New Orleans.

"Our" three French families did not go back to France. The D'Autremonts settled in Angelica, New York and prospered. Her two sons had ten children each so there are many descendants. She and her sons are buried in Angelica. The LeFevres stayed around Asylum and had an inn near there. The Brevost family reportedly settled in Maryland or Louisiana. Mrs. Folsom says that the name perhaps was changed to Bravo or Bravos.

The *Grande Maison* was taken down in 1842 and no other houses remain. The French were here and then in a few short years they were gone. Their experiment of living in the wilderness did not work out for most of them. But they leave their legacies in their names, in their descendants and in the legends that have been built around some of them (was that Frenchman who lived on Muller Hill in Georgetown really one of the royal family?). There is something very appealing about imagining these cultured urbane people coming to the wilds of upstate New York and northern Pennsylvania trying to eke out an

existence. It was an admirable and brave attempt. The next time you travel west on Route 17 (Route 86) and see the sign for Angelica, think about Madame D'Autremont and her three sons. They have quite a history, some of it right here in Greene.