

## HUGUENOTS IN RHODE ISLAND

**T**HIS story has its beginning in the marriage of Gabriel Bernon and Esther LeRoy at the little town of La Rochelle, France, in 1673. It was a beautiful wedding, one which united two of the most influential of the town's families and yet was a true love match. And it is the subsequent career of this young husband and wife that we shall attempt to follow.

The first few years were passed joyfully enough. Gabriel was frequently gone for months on long sea voyages, but each absence only made his return a happier reunion. After the three children . . . little Gabriel, Marie, and Esther . . . were born there was more to bring the fiery-eyed and fiery haired young father back in eagerness to La Rochelle. Unfortunately the years of happiness came first. The sequel of later years were made more bitter because of it.

La Rochelle had long been an oasis, safe from the persecution of the Roman Catholics, but the town could not hold out forever against the oppression which threatened its Huguenot inhabitants. Thus it was that both Francois LeRoy and Andre Bernon, the fathers of the young couple, spoke to Gabriel of the bitter persecution and exile they believed would soon come and advised him to transfer his young family to the New World, there to make a fresh start and carry on the Huguenot faith.

It was a sad yet brave parting when Gabriel Bernon set out for Quebec with the hope of founding a new home for his loved ones. Tales of great danger and suffering at Quebec had come to La Rochelle, and the little family feared that it might never be re-united. But it was not danger from the Indians or suffering from any privation which Gabriel had to face. Quebec, in 1685, was a Jesuit stronghold, and these fanatical priests and missionaries were only too anxious to pounce upon any Protestant invaders of their territory, subjecting them to immediate persecution and exile. Gabriel Bernon was a man of keen

vision and a hard worker, a man needed by the settlement in its development, yet his allegiance to his faith sealed his fate and he was shipped back from Quebec to La Rochelle. Here he was confined at once in the Lantern Tower of the town, scarcely having time to bribe a cabin boy to take a message to his wife before his jailers took him from the ship.

The news of the imprisonment came as a bombshell into the quiet family Bernon had left behind. At once Esther set out for the tower, and, after knocking at the great barred door, was secretly admitted to speak with Gabriel. They talked of ways of escape if the authorities would not grant him his freedom, and, leaving him with parting words of courage, Esther returned home to plan the best way of securing his release. But entreaties were fruitless. The authorities were obdurate. Only when Gabriel became so sick that his death seemed certain did they let him go to his home and the care of his wife. Here the first strategy was planned. The young man supposedly grew worse and died, but in reality he regained his strength and was successfully smuggled into Holland, planning to have Esther and the children meet him later in England.

Perhaps he would never have left La Rochelle had he known the terrors in store for his loved ones. The day following his escape Esther and the children were taken to a convent where they were kept prisoners and daily exhorted by the sisters to renounce Protestantism. Worn out by weeks of this kind of torture, Esther finally feigned conversion. So overjoyed was the Holy Mother with her apparent success in making a convert that she left the door of Esther's cell open. It was the awaited chance, and without delaying a precious moment the brave young woman slipped out of the convent with her children. Fortunately she was able to join other refugees immediately and continue her escape to England, where she located her husband.

But England was only a stopping place, though a hospitable one, and the year 1689





THE MAIN BANK BUILDING OF THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS,  
86 SOUTH MAIN STREET, PROVIDENCE, R. I.  
ERECTED IN 1896.

found the little family on the good ship *Dolphin* crossing the Atlantic to Boston. In the Massachusetts town they found a warm welcome. Plans were discussed for establishing a French Colony near Worcester. Esther was overjoyed at the kindness of her new neighbors. Gabriel found plenty to do in trying to start the new settlement, and the son, Gabriel, had taken an interest in trading and was busily engaged. All seemed well, but again the first few pleasant years were to give way to troubles and persecution of a new sort. The Huguenots began to find themselves held in the same disapproval by the Boston Puritans as had Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. Finally like these others, they too turned southward toward a colony where they might find a true religious haven.

To Newport came the Bernons in 1698, to the Newport that barred from its welcome neither Jews nor Quakers and that offered a splendid chance for all with commercial ambitions. With them came others of their faith, the Tourtellots, and Dr. Ayrault and his family. Zealously adhering to their beliefs, they only waited long enough to build homes and get settled before drawing up a petition to be sent to Lord Bellemont asking that the Church of England send a minister to Newport. Response to the petition was both prompt and constant and, through the aid of Lord Bellemont, the tiny Church of Trinity was founded.

But though Newport provided a true refuge from religious persecution, Esther LeRoy was not satisfied. Tired out by all the suffering to which she had been exposed, she wanted only to have a quiet home with her husband and children about her. Gabriel was not one to settle to a quiet business life in Newport. His keen mind conceived many enterprises which carried him all over Rhode Island, keeping him from home many a day in succession. And his religious zeal made him only the more anxious to be ever travelling about the countryside, trying to help the scattered settlers and Indians in their understanding of the Bible and doing his best to establish outposts of the Church of England. The young Gabriel, his son, was also of a most active disposition and hardly inclined to remain near at home. His was the life of

a sailor with long absences between his short visits to land. On one of these visits, however, Esther persuaded him to take her across the bay to Narragansett and was as merry as a child at the thought of the excursion.

Before they started the father, Gabriel Senior, returned from Providence in time to join them, and the three crossed with their horses over the Jamestown ferries to Narragansett and the Willett farm. It was a beautifully clear day for such an outing, and Esther found her spirits returning. At the Willett farm they were given refreshments before going on over the fields and rough roadways, to the high ridge at Pettaquamscutt. Here, as they looked in admiration at the gorgeous view of the ocean and countryside, the father announced that they were on his own land, a tract which he had bought only recently. Then onward they went, changing horses at the farm of Henry Gardiner, and continuing northward to Wickford where they passed the night. But in the morning the elder Gabriel went on to Providence, while Esther and her son were ferried back to Portsmouth. She was lamenting her husband's frequent absences once more, but the young Gabriel patiently explained the constant labors of his father in behalf of religion.

Poor Esther! She was unable to understand the inner fire that drove her husband to act as a missionary to those who, as pioneers, had become separated from any organized religion. And soon she was to have an added sorrow, for in 1701, Dr. Ayrault brought the terrible news of the death of young Gabriel, drowned in a blizzard off Newport. As a last consolation after this tragedy her thoughts began to turn once more to the happy days in La Rochelle. She was never to see France again, but she bought land in Wickford and found solace in imagining that its busy little harbor was that of her French home. Nine years after the death of her son she died and was buried in the old part of the Newport Cemetery.

Two years afterwards Gabriel, her husband, married Mary Harris, the grand niece of William Harris of Providence. For a while they lived in Wickford, but later came to Providence, living near the spring. Gabriel also remembered La Rochelle and



built his house out over the sidewalk so that the people could walk under its arches, following the custom of building in the old French town.

By this second wife he had three daughters, Suzanne, Mary and Eve, as well as a son Gabriel who died as an infant. In 1724, he again went to England hoping to get aid for the establishment of a Church

of England in Providence. While there he was received at court. He died in 1735 at the age of 91, and the name Bernon died with him. But his influence in colonial Rhode Island was lasting, and the blood of his proud, zealous heart has passed on through the Tourtelots, Powells, Whipples, and Crawfords to temper much sturdy Rhode Island stock.

## RHODE ISLAND FERRIES

**T**HROUGHOUT the world, ferries have ever played a mighty part in the development of transportation. In early Colonial days they were extensively used along our Eastern seaboard and, even in these modern times, there are still many plying to and fro. True, they have changed in type, power and carrying capacity with the passing years, and many, of course, have become obsolete or unnecessary through the building of bridges, small at first, but increasing in size to the huge spans of this modern day.

Yet, despite the most magnificent achievements in bridge architecture, ferries are still doing a steady and profitable business in many localities. If ferries are still an important means of transportation, how much more so they must have been in Colonial days when the post roads ended on opposite shores and the ferry was the only means of communication between.

Wherever there was a stream or a body of water to be crossed they were a vital necessity, but nowhere were they more needed than in our own little State of Rhode Island, located as it is on both shores of the great inland waterway, Narragansett Bay. The early settlements in Rhode Island were built along its shores, on the islands in its waters, or on the banks of the rivers emptying into it.

The first ferry boats were operated under the principles of the old English common law but they were controlled by the towns which granted franchises to private owners and operators. For a long time, before the

business became recognized as profitable, towns had great difficulty in obtaining men to run the ferries, grants of land sometimes being offered as an inducement to take the position. Later on we find rich men, like Benjamin Ellery, of Newport, and Deputy-Governor Abbott, of Providence, making exceptional efforts to secure ferry franchises.

After the ferries became an established feature, many Acts were passed by the Assembly for their management. By 1690, post riders were rated as free passengers and by 1747, an Act provided that ferrymen must be ready to transport passengers from 5 A. M. to 8 P. M., from March 10th to September 10th, and from 6 A. M. to 7 P. M. during the balance of the year "if the weather will permit boats passing." However, "Physicians, Surgeons, Midwives, and Persons going to fetch Physicians, Surgeons, or Midwives were to be carried at any Time of Night."

Also, by 1747, laws required that ferry wharves be well built and kept in good repair, that all boats be good and sound, and that ferrymen give good service. A later provision stated that each boat must have two good oars and a boat hook. Ferries had to be kept afloat at all times and kept at the ferry landings except when laid up for repairs. The penalty for all inexcusable absences from the landings was fixed at ten dollars per hour.

In many instances, ferrymen also kept inns near their wharves and countless subterfuges were practiced to obtain the patronage of their passengers over night. And,

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