

Who Were The Huguenots?

Huguenots was the nickname given to French Calvinists, the followers of the teachings of John Calvin. The name came into common use about 1560. The Reformation in France was influenced initially by Martin Luther, but John Calvin became the primary influence after 1536, leading to the formation of a French Reformed Church that was established in the city of Paris by 1555.

Martin Luther was a Catholic priest who became one of the early leaders of the Reformation. In 1517 he issued his Ninety-five Theses against the practice of selling indulgences, an act that became a rally point for those seeking to reform the Catholic Church. Long before Luther there were many demands for change, but Luther's action is considered to be the start of the Protestant Reformation.

John Calvin was born and educated in France, but settled in Switzerland in 1534, first in Basel and later in Geneva, where he became an ecclesiastical and civil leader. In 1536 he published Institutes of the Christian Religion that was the major theological work of the Protestant Reformation. Themes of Calvin's theology were predestination – all things are governed by God, including man's actions; Jesus Christ is the absolute authority; the Scriptures are the supreme rule of faith and life; the church is a community bound by one doctrine; and the church and state are complementary institutions, each making contributions to preserve order and promote piety.

John Calvin's teachings were instrumental in the establishment of Reformed Churches on the Continent during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, primarily in the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, and, to a lesser extent, in Germany, as well as Presbyterian Churches in Scotland and England. He called for both ecclesiastical and political change: a separation from the "Catholic Christian Church" and establishment of a theocracy, joining together ecclesiastical and civil governance.

Like Calvinists throughout Europe, members of the Reformed Church of France, even before they were called Huguenots, were persecuted and tried as heretics for their beliefs. Unlike the Calvinists in other countries, however, in France their members were drawn largely from the nobility and aristocracy, at least through the sixteenth century.

Despite earlier persecution, by 1560 the Huguenots, acting as a political party and led by members of the nobility and the military, were granted the right to worship and form self-governing communities outside the cities in France, almost like states within a state. These Huguenot communities were both democratic and autocratic, i.e., they had democratically elected officials, but also were subject to strict, autocratic rules set down by their religious leaders. Even though the French government allowed the Huguenots this freedom, seven religious wars were fought in France from 1562 to 1598, pitting the Huguenots against the Catholics.

The rights gained in the second half of the sixteenth century did not last, and by 1610 the Huguenots' security began to erode. By 1629 they were again made subservient to the state and lost their status as a political party. In 1685, having lost all their rights, there was a massive exodus of between two hundred and three hundred thousand Huguenots. In fact, over the many years of persecution in France, as many as one million Huguenots left the country.

Many went to the Netherlands where the Dutch Reformed Church welcomed them, while others went to Scotland or England where the Presbyterian Church did likewise. For many, however, the stay in the Netherlands, Scotland, or England was just a stopover until they could immigrate to the American colonies.

Probably the largest number of those who came to America, particularly those who had fled to the Netherlands, settled in the Dutch communities in New York and northern New Jersey, communities that were founded by the Dutch West India Company when this area was under control of the Dutch and called New Netherland with its principal city, New Amsterdam (New York). When the English conquered the Dutch colonies in America in 1664, the Dutch communities were allowed to continue virtually unchanged.

A somewhat similar situation existed in the Delaware colony. The settlers of the Dutch colony on the Delaware at New Castle in 1651, Fort Casimir and New Amstel, were members of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1656 Peter Stuyvesant, Director General of the Dutch West India Company and Governor of New Netherland, ordered that only the Dutch Reformed religion should be observed in the Delaware Colony. When Fort Casimir and New Amstel fell to the English in 1664, the Dutch settlers were allowed to assimilate into the new English town and to keep their religion. Most of those who came from England to New Castle were Scotch and Irish – and Presbyterians. Because there was a shortage of clergy, both Dutch and English, the Dutch Reformed and English congregations got together, often having the Dutch language one Sunday and

English the next. By the time the current Presbyterian Church in New Castle was built in 1707, the Dutch were completely assimilated and all were Presbyterians.

Records indicate that there was a French Reformed Church (Huguenot) in New Bridge, a settlement across the Hackensack River from Kindermaack, both near the community of Hackensack. The church was destroyed by fire in 1696. This may have been an unusual case, since the Huguenots, when they emigrated from France to the Netherlands and then to America, frequently did not seek to establish their own French Reformed Churches, but rather simply joined existing Dutch Reformed or Scotch Presbyterian congregations in the communities in which they had relocated – after all they were all Calvinists. In fact, many of the Huguenots, when they came to America, because of their association with the Dutch and the Dutch Reformed Church were believed to be Dutch rather than French.

The first records of the Allee family in America are found in the archives of the Dutch Reformed Church in Hackensack, Bergen County, New Jersey. Nicholas d'Allee, grandfather of Abraham Allee, is believed to have emigrated with a group of Huguenots and Dutch Reformed Calvinists from the Netherlands where he had taken refuge to America in about 1682. There is some evidence that he first attended the French Reformed Church near Kindermaack, but after it burned, he joined the congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church in Hackensack. He is not listed in the Dutch church records, nor is his son John. Perhaps these records were destroyed in the burning of the French Church, but his other children's births do appear in these records, indicating that he had become a member of the Dutch Reformed congregation in Hackensack.

John, Abraham's father, was born in 1665, and he immigrated with his father to America in 1682. He spent the next fifteen years or so in the Dutch communities in Bergen and Essex Counties of New Jersey. In 1706 he purchased Woodstock Bower in Delaware, and in 1710 he and his family moved to Kent County.

Abraham Allee was born in 1696 in Hackensack and moved with his parents to Delaware in 1710. His early childhood, his formative years, were in a Dutch community in Colonial America. He probably is best described as a descendent of a Huguenot family rather than as a Huguenot, and he may have been more Dutch than French when he arrived in Delaware.

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