

CHAPTER 2

ORIGINS

Determining the origin of the Melansons has presented an interesting challenge to historians and genealogists alike. Research has established some facts and, at the same time, raised new questions.

NATIONALITY

Though Pierre and Charles Mellanson lived in a French community and were married to French women, they, themselves, were not French. Over the years, their family origins have been the subject of various claims, among which are the following:

Scots from the Scottish colony. For a long while, historians believed the Melansons to be Scots from the Scottish colony that existed at Port Royal in Acadia from 1629 to 1632. This conclusion was founded on information¹ provided by Cadillac, a Frenchman who lived at Port Royal from about 1683 to 1691. (His full name was *Antoine Laumet dit de Lamothe Cadillac*. The French word “dit” is pronounced “dee” and means “called” or “known as” or “alias”.)

In his memoir, Cadillac tells of a family at the Scottish colony that was saved from being massacred by Native Indians. He goes on to state that while living in Acadia about 1685, he became acquainted with two members of that family. They were brothers who had renounced Protestantism and married French women. He also knew their mother whom he had met in Boston, where she had remarried.

Researchers easily identified the two men as Pierre and Charles Mellanson, for they were the only brothers in Acadia who fitted the description. And so it was concluded that the Melansons were Scots, having come from the Scottish colony.

Melanson tradition. The Melansons themselves, including my late father-in-law, have also held that the family was originally Scottish. The basis for their belief is a long-standing tradition passed from one generation to the next.

¹ Antoine Laumet dit de Lamothe Cadillac, extract of 1692/93 memoir given to Duke of Orleans in 1720 and quoted by the Rev. Clarence J. d'Entremont in “New Findings on the Melansons”, *French Canadian and Acadian Genealogical Review* [hereafter cited as *FCAGR*], Vol. 2, 1969 [1976], p. 220.

The Acadian declarations. In 1767, the Acadian exiles who settled at Belle Ile en Mer [bell-eel'-on-murr] in France, gave declarations concerning their family backgrounds. The statements were later compiled from the parish registers and published in 1889.¹

Nine of the declarations give a country of origin for Pierre or Charles. The one that refers to Charles says he came from England. Of the eight that refer to Pierre, six say he came from England, while two say he came from Scotland. These results strongly suggest that Pierre and Charles were English.

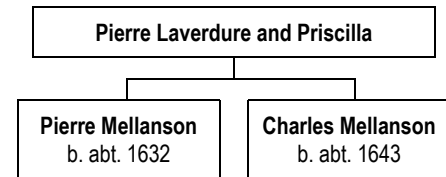
English. In the late 1960s, Pierre and Charles' mother in Boston was finally identified.² She was a woman called **Priscilla**.

Another discovery was a letter written in 1720 by John Adams, a respected New Englander and member of the government council at Annapolis Royal (formerly Port Royal), Nova Scotia. Adams, who had visited Pierre Mellanson just that summer, states that Pierre was ...

“an aged English Gentleman who came into this Country with S^r Thomas Temple and lived here ever since”³

Putting the evidence together – the declarations, John Adams' letter, and even Priscilla's decidedly English name – it now seemed fairly certain that the Melanson family was English, not Scottish.

English and French. In the early 1970s, it was learned that father Melanson was not English at all. A petition⁴ submitted by Priscilla in 1677 to the general court at Boston stated that she was an Englishwoman and her husband was a Frenchman named **Peter Laverdure**. Presumably his first name was really the French **Pierre**, although the document uses the English form of the name.



One would think that this evidence directly from Priscilla would end the matter, but not so. Yet another claim was soon to be made regarding the origin of the Melansons.

¹ *Collection de Documents inédits sur le Canada et l'Amérique* [hereafter cited as *DI*], Vol. 2, 1889, pp. 165-194, and Vol. 3, 1890, pp. 5-134. English translation: “Belle Isle en Mer Registers”, *The Acadians in France*, Vol. 2, 1972.

² d'Entremont, “New Findings ...”, *FCAGR*, Vol. 2, pp. 219-239.

³ John Adams to the Hon. Paul Dudley, 22 Sep 1720, The Baxter Manuscripts edited by James Phinney Baxter, *Collections of the Maine Historical Society* [hereafter cited as *Maine HSC*], Series 2, *Documentary History of the State of Maine*, Vol. 9, p. 461.

⁴ Petition of Priscilla Laverdure, Boston, 3 May 1677, Massachusetts Archives, Suffolk County Supreme Court Files [hereafter cited as *MA Suffolk*], Vol. 18, p. 1592.

Scottish MacMillans. In 1979, Reverend Somerled MacMillan, bard and historian of the Scottish clan MacMillan, announced that the Melansons were originally McMellans (a variation of MacMillan). He told of a mariner named Peter McMellan who sailed with his wife and family to Boston, New England, where they remained until 1657. The family then went with Sir Thomas Temple to Port Royal, where they were left in charge of the fort. Peter, Jr., and his brother Charles married Acadian girls and changed their names to Mellanson.¹

In answer to my enquiry, Reverend MacMillan's widow said that she had no documentation or knowledge of the matter other than recalling that many years previous, her husband had received a letter from France from a man named Mellanson who claimed that his forebears were originally MacMillans. She had no idea of the whereabouts of the letter nor any further particulars about the writer.²

Without knowing Reverend MacMillan's sources of information, here are some observations regarding his assertions.

Scotland and France had a long history of friendship, and as a result, there were many Scots in France. While Pierre Laverdure himself was French, his father might conceivably have been a Scot named McMellan, and the name could later have been changed to Mellanson. Many Scots removed the "Mc" or "Mac", which means "son of", from the beginning of their names and replaced it with the English "son" at the end.

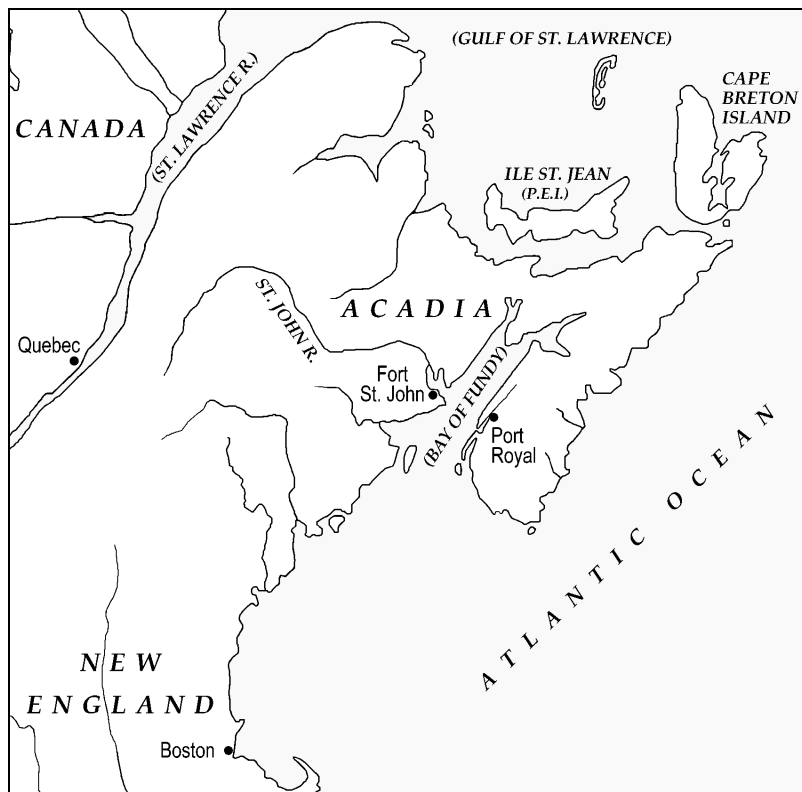
It is generally accepted that the Melansons/Laverdures arrived in Acadia in 1657 with Thomas Temple. Because Temple did stop at Boston en route,³ it is possible the family joined him there, as the Reverend claims. Without supporting evidence, however, it seems more plausible that the family would have been among the group of people that Temple recruited and brought with him from England.

The Reverend says that Peter McMellan was put in charge of the fort at Port Royal, but a statement by Priscilla in her 1677 petition infers that the family resided at or near Fort St. John on the St. John River. Also, there had recently been a French military commander at Port Royal by the name of Germain Doucet dit [dee] La Verdure. There is a good chance that the Reverend, as other historians have done, was confusing that La Verdure with our Pierre Laverdure.

¹ Rev. Somerled MacMillan, "Scotland's Heritage", *Clan MacMillan Society of North America – Newsletter*, Dec 1979.

² Janet S. MacMillan to Margaret C. Melanson, 15 Jan 1985.

³ Capt. Peter Butler to English Navy commanders, 12 Nov 1657, quoted in *Acadian-Cajun Genealogy & History: Acadia 1654 to 1670*, Tim Hébert's internet website.



Map 2: Fort St. John and Port Royal

Summary. A Scottish connection has been such a persistently recurring theme in Melanson history that it is difficult to abandon. The evidence leaves little doubt, however, that the origin of the Melansons, at least back as far as Pierre Laverdure and Priscilla, is French and English.

THE NAME

The only historical record¹ we know of that definitely refers to the father of Pierre and Charles Mellanson calls him Peter Laverdure. This has made people wonder where the name “Melanson” came from.

From Pierre Laverdure. It was common knowledge that the name “Laverdure” was closely associated with the Melansons. Pierre, Jr., was often referred to as Pierre Mellanson dit La Verdure, or just plain La Verdure. According to French custom, “Mellanson” would have been his family name or surname. This is consistent with others in Acadia who were known as La Verdure; for example, the aforementioned Germain Doucet dit La Verdure, whose surname was Doucet.

¹ Petition of Priscilla Laverdure, 3 May 1677, MA Suffolk, Vol. 18, p. 1592.

It's logical to assume, then, that Pierre and Charles' father was also Pierre Melanson dit Laverdure (or possibly *de Laverdure*), even though in Boston he was called Laverdure rather than Melanson.


Name appendages were common among the French. Some were inherited or officially conferred titles. Some were assumed for purposes of prestige. Others were simply nicknames. Where a family possessed multiple names, it was not at all unusual for father and son(s) to go by different names.

Historical evidence of Melansons in France in the 1600s or earlier would go a long way towards confirming a connection between the name "Melanson" and Pierre Laverdure. So far, however, searches have not turned up early Melansons. Melansons do appear in French records of the 1700s and later, but they are the Acadian descendants of Pierre and Charles Mellanson.

From Priscilla. A suggestion has been made that "Melanson", instead of being Pierre's name, might have been Priscilla's maiden name.¹ British records were consulted for historical evidence to support this idea but, once more, no early Melansons were found.

Some encouragement was derived from the existence in British records of several names with the potential of being variations of "Melanson". In particular, the name "Mallinson", which is known to have existed in England, mainly in Yorkshire, since the mid-1500s, was thought to be a good candidate. Other look-alike names appearing in Britain prior to 1700 are Malinson, Mallenson, Mallingson, Mallison, Malynson, Melleson, Melleson, Mellison, Milleson, and Millison. While the resemblances are undeniable, at present there is no evidence connecting any of these names with "Melanson".

Often used as evidence in favour of Melanson's being Priscilla's maiden name is Priscilla's signature, PM, penned at the bottom of an inventory² of the household goods she brought into her second marriage. The initials are surprising because they should have been PW, not PM, for Priscilla was now Priscilla Wright. This, plus the simple penmanship and the use of initials instead of her full name, make it fairly evident that Priscilla was illiterate, but somewhere along the way, had learned to print what had previously been her initials.



Whether the signature adds support to the "Priscilla's name" theory is debatable, for it seems to evoke more questions than answers.

¹ d'Entremont, "The Melansons of Acadia Had a French Father and an English Mother", *FCAGR*, Vol. 6, 1978, pp. 53-55.

² See Document 11, p. 50.