

THE FAMILY SECRETS OF THE LE NEUF ORIGINS IN FRANCE

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This version is based on the draft sent to the publisher in 1990 with some minor grammar and spelling corrections and formatting changes. I have resisted making any substantial changes. Any additional comments I do make will be found in the footnotes between square brackets.

Although I stand by what I wrote in 1990, please understand that much more research has been done on the Le Neufs since that date. It is essential to consult the work of Roland–Yves Gagné published in the *Mémoires de la Société généalogique canadienne–française* starting in autumn 2012 for the most up–to–date information on the Le Neuf family. Most importantly the reader should understand that Gagné’s research indicates that the Canadian Le Neufs are not an example of downward mobility and degradation, but rather all the Le Neufs—both in France and Canada—were upwardly mobile and went to great effort to hide their mutual bourgeois ancestry.

Full citations for the published works regarding the Le Neufs can be found at <http://habitant.org/leneuf/index.htm>.

THE FAMILY SECRETS OF THE LE NEUF ORIGINS IN FRANCE

John P. DuLong, Ph.D.*

Historians and genealogists have accepted the noble origins of the Canadian Le Neuf family in France for several centuries without adequate genealogical proof. The Le Neufs in France claimed nobility that reaches back to the fourteenth century. The founder of the family was supposedly Raoul Le Neuf who migrated from England to France. However, the King of France's own genealogist, Louis-Pierre d'Hozier, was skeptical of this claim and only accepted their pedigree from Richard Le Neuf, sieur de Vaucongrin who flourished in the mid-fifteenth century.¹ The published pedigree in the *Armorial général de France* is elaborate and extends from the fifteenth century up to the mid-eighteenth. However, none of the known documents or publications indicate how the Canadian Le Neufs are related to their illustrious French kinsmen.²

In 1675 Jacques Le Neuf, sieur de La Poterie, voluntarily submitted his proofs of nobility to the Sovereign Council of New France.³ Although the evidence he submitted was legally sufficient for the Sovereign Council to recognize his claim to nobility, it is inadequate for genealogical purposes since it fails to document his ancestry. The testimony of his Le Neuf kinsmen back in France explicitly states that the Canadian Le Neufs are “. . . of the same family and carry the same name and arms. . . .”⁴ However, this testimony does not state the exact relationship between Jacques Le Neuf and his French kinsmen. The modern family researcher must ponder why Jacques Le Neuf failed to provide a detailed pedigree of his descent from Richard Le Neuf. This is especially frustrating when

*I wish to thank Jeanne Marie Cazin and Alain Heude who gathered some of the key data for this paper in France. Mary J. Barry, Robert A. Lonsway, and the late Leona C. Derosia also gave me assistance and encouragement.

¹ Louis-Pierre d'Hozier, *Armorial général de la France*, 13 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1738-1908), vol. 9, part 2, 5th registry, pp. 861-868 including a large fold out pedigree chart.

²Besides d'Hozier, see François-Alexandre Aubert de La Chenaye-Desbois, *Dictionnaire de la noblesse, contenant les généalogies, l'histoire et la chronologie des familles nobles de France*, 19 vols., 3rd ed. (Paris: Schlesinger, 1863-1876), vol. 14, pp. 918-922. Also see Louis Charles Waroquier de Méricourt de la Mothe de Combles, *Tableau généalogique et historique de la noblesse*, 9 vols. (Paris: Noyen, 1786-1789), vol. 3, pp. 319-325.

³Georges-Pierre Roy, *Lettres de noblesse, généalogies, érections de comtés et baronnies insinuées par le Conseil Souverain de la Nouvelle-France*, 2 vols. (Beauceville: L'Éclaireur, Ltée., 1920), vol. 1, pp. 57-65. For an edited translation of these Le Neuf documents see Mary J. Barry, trans., and John P. DuLong, ed., “The Le Neuf Family Nobility Evidence,” *Michigan's Habitant Heritage*, forthcoming.

⁴Roy, *Lettres de noblesse*, vol. 1, p. 58, my translation. Jacques Le Neuf used for his arms: *De gueules, à trois coussinets d'or, les houpes posées en sautoir* [On a red field three golden cushions with tassels placed two and one]. This is the same coat-of-arms as used by the Le Neufs in France. His brother Michel Le Neuf used: *D'argent, à trois hérissons de sable* [On a silver field three black hedgehogs placed two and one]. An obvious canting arms referring to his title sieur du Hérisson (that is, a pictorial pun on a name). Édouard-Zotique Massicotte and Régis Roy, *Armorial du Canada Français*, 2 vols. (Montréal: Librairie Beauchemin, 1918), vol. 2, pp. 24 & 113. Compare to French Le Neuf arms in d'Hozier, *Armorial général*, vol. 9, part 2, p. 861; and Édouard D. de Magny, *Nobiliaire de Normandie*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie Héraldique d'Auguste Aubry, 1863-1864), vol. 2, p. 113.

other associated Canadian families, such as the Le Gardeurs, provided clearly documented pedigrees as proof of their nobility.⁵

I believe that the Canadian Le Neufs were trying to conceal two family secrets and that this explains why their nobility proofs are a genealogical failure. The first secret is that back in France they were Huguenots. In New France they had to keep their religious preference hidden in the all-Catholic colony. The second secret is that the Canadian branch of the Le Neuf family while in France had experienced derogation of their noble status. The immediate ancestors of the Canadian Le Neufs, though related to established noble cousins, had gradually drifted into the bourgeoisie and had lost their standing as nobles.

This paper will do the following: (1) review and summarize the pertinent facts about the Le Neufs who came to Canada; (2) document their origins in Normandie; (3) prove their Huguenot background; (4) deal with their derogation as nobles; and lastly (5) suggest several paths for further research on their noble origins. The ultimate goal of this research is to find out how the Canadian Le Neufs tie into the French Le Neufs. I intend this paper to be a platform for launching a more extensive research project.

The Known Facts

The first two noble families to settle permanently in New France were the Le Neufs and Le Gardeurs. They were led by Jacques Le Neuf, sieur de La Poterie, and his brother-in-law, Pierre Le Gardeur, sieur de Repentigny.⁶ Accompanying La Poterie was his mother Jeanne Le Marchant, the widow of Mathieu Le Neuf, sieur du Hérisson, his brother Michel Le Neuf, sieur du Hérisson, his sister Marie Le Neuf, and their dependents. The party of Pierre Le Gardeur consisted of his mother Catherine de Cordé, the widow of René Le Gardeur, sieur de Tilly, his brother Charles Le Gardeur, sieur de Tilly, his sister Maire-Marguerite Le Gardeur, and their spouses and children. The families were united through the marriage of a La Poterie to Marie-Marguerite Le Gardeur. In addition, the Le Neufs and Le Gardeurs brought approximately forty settlers with them.⁷

The ship that had carried the Le Gardeur and Le Neuf families was part of a fleet of eight vessels which escorted Charles Huault de Montmagny, the newly appointed governor, to New France.⁸ In this same fleet were several missionaries including Father Isaac Jogues, the future Jesuit

⁵For the Le Gardeurs see Roy, *Lettres de noblesse*, vol. 1, pp. 7–12.

⁶For the sake of clarity, I will usually refer to Jacques Le Neuf as La Poterie and his brother Michel Le Neuf as Du Hérisson. This will avoid confusion when we have to deal with their similarly named Le Neuf kinsmen back in France. Besides, their contemporaries usually referred to them only by these aliases.

⁷The Jesuit Superior, Le Jeune, claimed that they arrived with forty-five people including six damsels. This number must include some of the Le Neuf and Le Gardeur family members. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 73 vols. (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Co., 1896–1901), vol. 8, p. 221.

⁸Marcel Trudel, *Catalogue des immigrants, 1632–1662* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, Ltd., 1983), pp. 48–65. Felix Martin, *The Life of Isaac Jogues*, trans. John Gilmary Shea, 2nd ed. (New York: Bensiger Bros., 1885), pp. 26–27.

martyr. The fleet left from the harbor of Dieppe, in Normandie, on 8 April 1636.⁹ On the 11 June 1636 they arrived at Québec City after a ten week voyage.¹⁰

Father Paul Le Jeune, the superior of the Jesuits in New France, heralded their arrival as a great event. He referred to Pierre Le Gardeur and La Poterie as “gallant Gentlemen” who have come to Canada with settlers to stay. He continued to say:

. . . I leave you to imagine if joy did not take possession of our hearts, and surprise of our minds. . . . All of this was doubled in their presence; their elegance, their conversation showed us the great difference there is between our French and our Savages.¹¹

The reasons behind the Le Neufs’ decision to migrate are unknown. However, a contributing factor must have been the desire for land. On 16 April 1647 the Company of New France confirmed the title of the seigneurie of Portneuf to La Poterie. The Company had originally given him the land on 15 January 1636 but had neglected to issue a title of concession until eleven years later.¹² Portneuf is on the north side of the St. Lawrence River between Québec and Trois–Rivières. Soon after their arrival the Le Neufs settled in Trois–Rivières and the Le Gardeurs in Québec. On 12 December 1636, at Trois–Rivières, Du Hérisson and his sister Marie were the godparents at the baptism of an Algonquin girl.¹³

The Le Neufs and the Le Gardeurs soon became crucial players in the colony’s affairs and assumed important roles in business and government. According to the historian Benjamin Sulte, they became the “family pact” when they were joined in marriage with the Godefroy and Robineau families.¹⁴ The descendants of this family pact became the core of the Canadian elite and they held several important posts in Canada, Acadia, Louisiana, and the Caribbean. The Le Neufs and the Le Gardeurs were the start of the Canadian noblesse. Until the intendency of Jean Talon in 1667, when more nobles came over and the King ennobled several French–Canadians, the Le Neufs and the Le Gardeurs were the two leading resident noble families in Canada.¹⁵

9. Benjamin Sulte, “La famille Godefroy,” *Mélanges historiques*, ed. Gérard Malchelosse, 21 vols. (Montréal: Éditions Édouard Garand, 1918–1934), vol. 11, pp. 7–38, p. 12.

¹⁰ Marcel Trudel, *Catalogue des immigrants*, p. 49.

¹¹ Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*, vol. 9, p. 143.

¹² Sulte, “Godefroy,” vol. 11, p. 12. Québec Legislative Assembly, *Titles and Documents Relating to the Seigneurial Tenure* (Québec: E. R. Fréchette, 1852), pp. 364–365, no. 303. Archange Godbout, *Les Pionniers de la région trifluvienne (1ère série: 1634 à 1647)* (Trois–Rivières: Les Éditions du Bien Public, 1934), p. 52.

¹³ Sulte, “Godefroy,” vol. 11, p. 14.

14. Benjamin Sulte, “La Compagnie des Habitants,” *Mélanges historiques*, ed. Gérard Malchelosse, 21 vols. (Montréal: Éditions Édouard Garand, 1918–1934), vol. 1, pp. 44–49, p. 46.

¹⁵ Talon reported only four noble families in Canada, but he does not name them. According to Parkman, Talon supposedly was referring to Repentigny, Tilly, Poterie, and Ailleboust, but, unbeknownst to Parkman, the first two are really Le Gardeurs. Francis Parkman, *The Old Régime in Canada in France and England in North America*, 2 vols. (New York: Library of America, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 1282. This over simplifies the Canadian noblesse. We know that René Robineau was living in Canada by 1645, see Trudel, *Immigrants*, p. 157. Also, by 1663 there were at least eighteen noble families living in Canada, see Marcel Trudel, *La Population du Canada en 1663* (Montréal: Fides, 1973), pp. 120–131.

From the day of their landing the Le Neufs led people to understand that they were nobles. No one mistook them for the higher nobility. After all it was unlikely that members of the court nobility would come to the wilderness of New France as settlers. However, contemporary observers easily saw them as part of the lower Norman nobility. The few important court nobles who did come over to Canada, came with official positions and titles and only remained for the tenure of their office or died in the position. In contrast, the Le Neufs came to stay. No one hints that they were less than what they appeared to be. Le Jeune's comments clearly give the reader the impression that an important set of Catholic nobles had arrived to settle in New France. There is no mention made of any religious peculiarities on the part of the Le Neufs by Le Jeune or their fellow passengers. If the religious authorities had known of the Huguenot preferences of the Le Neufs, then it is very unlikely that they would have neglected to comment on it. The logical conclusion is that by 1636 the Le Neufs had decided to either abandon their reformed faith or to conceal it. Because Du Hérisson and Marie Le Neuf acted as Godparents at the baptism of an Indian child it is evident that they were not living openly as Huguenots. Eventually, the Catholic hierarchy in Canada would have less than kind things to say about the Le Neufs. However, they never attacked them as Huguenots. They arrived in Canada with their family secrets intact. Only their in-laws and neighbors back in France, the Le Gardeurs, could have known about their background.

Although the Le Neufs claimed to be nobles from the moment of their arrival, their behavior was stereotypical of the money-hungry bourgeois. They seemed to be unaware of principle of *noblesse oblige* and were not fond of the noble tradition of military service. They avoided as much as possible the acceptance of military responsibilities during the 1651–1652 Iroquois raids which devastated the area around Trois-Rivières. The local habitants did not hold them in esteem. In fact, the Le Neufs came to rule the town of Trois-Rivières in a dictatorial fashion.¹⁶ They became active in the disreputable side of the fur trade and sold brandy to the Indians. They did nothing for the colony by way of exploration or encouraging settlement. They consistently used the public offices they sought for their favor in their own business interests. They had a disrespect for other office holders and their rulings. They often ignored the court system when they were unable to control it. Their relations with the Catholic Church, especially the Jesuit missionaries, was far from ideal. In short they had a well-developed seventeenth century business sense. Douville calls them “clever Norman merchants.”¹⁷ Lamontagne says of La Poterie that “He was a wily business man who often had brushes with the law.”¹⁸

In this particular case, I believe that the Le Neufs' rapid assumption of business behavior and values, especially in regard to the fur trade, supports the other facts indicating their bourgeois background.¹⁹

¹⁶Raymond Douville, “La dictature de la famille Le Neuf,” *Les Cahiers des Dix*, vol. 20 (1950), pp. 61–89.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁸Léopold Lamontagne, “Leneuf de la Poterie, Jacques,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* [hereinafter *DCB*], 12 vols. (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1966–1988), vol. 1, p. 467.

¹⁹I realize it is not fashionable to editorialize about our ancestors. However, except for their presumed noble pedigree and adventurous spirit, there is little in the character of the Le Neufs to recommend them to their descendants. I find them repulsive in many ways. And yet, I am in the awkward position of being their descendent and being fascinated

According to the available evidence Jeanne Le Marchant, the mother of the Canadian Le Neufs, was the widow of Mathieu Le Neuf, sieur du Hérissou.²⁰ Previous researchers had learned little about her birth and parentage. They only knew that she came to New France with her children. She settled at Trois-Rivières and appeared in the parish register several times until 1647. The date and place of her death and burial is unknown though she undoubtedly died in New France. Researchers knew from the marriage of their daughter that her husband was already dead by 1622. Mathieu probably died near Caen or Thury-Harcourt where the family had been living. There was no evidence uncovered to indicate his parentage.

Michel Le Neuf, sieur du Hérissou, was their eldest son.²¹ He was born around 1601 probably near Caen. His marital status is unclear. However, he did have a daughter named Anne who married Antoine Desrosiers in 1647 at Trois-Rivières. Both historians and genealogists have carefully noted that her exact relationship to Du Hérissou is undocumented. Some call her his daughter, others his illegitimate daughter, and a few suggest that she was his adopted daughter.²² Her origins are another family secret that has yet to be revealed. Du Hérissou was active in the fur trade. He was a co-founder of the Community of Habitants fur trading company in 1645. From 1661 to 1662 and from 1664 to 1672 he was a lieutenant general of the civil and criminal court. He held the seigneuries of Vieuxpont near Trois-Rivières and the fief of Dutort near Bécancour. He died before 26 October 1672 at Trois-Rivières. The exact place and date of his burial is unknown. He never married in Canada and his descendants are through his daughter Anne.

Jacques Le Neuf, sieur de La Poterie, was the second son.²³ He was born around 1606 near Caen. He married Marie-Marguerite Le Gardeur around 1630 probably in her village of Thury-Harcourt. Like his brother, he was active in the fur trade and one of the co-founders of the Community of Habitants. He was the governor of Trois-Rivières off and on from 1645 to 1662. Besides being the seigneur of Portneuf since 1636, he was also the owner of Ile-aux-Cochons granted in 1649, and of La Poterie (or Niverville) granted in 1660, both near Trois-Rivières.²⁴ Lastly, he had a joint interest with Charles Le Gardeur and others in a seigneurie called Cap-des-Rosiers in Gaspé. La Poterie and Marguerite had two daughters and a son: Marie-Anne the wife of René Robineau, sieur de Bécancour, chevalier in the Order of St. Michel, and Baron de Portneuf;²⁵ Catherine the wife

with their lineage and even in their less than honorable character. Needless to say, we do not have to like our ancestors or approve of their ways to do genealogical research on them. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that our ancestors would approve of us and our modern enlightened ways.

²⁰Unless otherwise noted the genealogical facts relating to Jeanne Le Merchant and her children come from René Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles du Québec* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1983), pp. 509, 713–714, & 718; or Archange Godbout, *Pionniers*, pp. 19–20, 29, 52–53, & 71–72.

²¹For details about his career, see Raymond Douville, “Leneuf du Hérissou, Michel,” *DCB*, vol. 1, pp. 467–468.

²²Jetté, *Dictionnaire Généalogique*, p. 713. Trudel, *Immigrants*, p. 61. Godbout, *Pionniers*, p. 19.

²³For more information about La Poterie see Lamontagne's biography of him in the *DCB*, vol. 1, p. 467.

²⁴La Poterie might also have been the seigneur of the Marquisate de Sablé. Despite its exotic name, the Marquisate was not a titled property. It never conferred the title of marquis on any of its owners. There is also some doubt if it ever truly existed. Roland-J. Auger, “The Letters of Nobility,” *French Canadian and Acadian Genealogical Review* 2:4 (Winter 1969): 209–211, p. 210.

²⁵La Poterie ceded the seigneurie of Portneuf to his son-in-law in 1671 and it was elevated to a barony in 1681. See

of Pierre Denys, sieur de La Ronde; and Michel Le Neuf, sieur de La Vallière, who became the governor of Acadia.

La Poterie almost became the governor of New France. The ailing Governor Augustin de Saffray de Mézy, a fellow Norman, from Caen, appointed La Poterie to succeed him in case of death.²⁶ Saffray died on 6 May 1665. La Poterie registered his commission to act as governor on 13 May. However, the Sovereign Council denied him the full powers of the governorship on 27 May. They argued that only the King had a right to appoint a governor and that Saffray was out of line in commissioning La Poterie. His own brother-in-law on the Sovereign Council, Charles Le Gardeur, voted against La Poterie assuming the full powers of governor. He continued to act as intermediate governor of New France but only with limited power over the militia until 12 September 1665. On 18 October 1666, perhaps chagrined by his treatment, La Poterie travelled aboard the *Moulin d'Or* first to Acadia and then back to France on family business.²⁷ While in France, he may have gathered some of the information he submitted in 1675 to prove his nobility.

La Poterie returned to New France before 22 May 1668. Like his mother and brother, the place and date of La Poterie's death is unknown. He died after 4 November 1687 probably around Québec.²⁸

Marie Le Neuf was the eldest daughter. She married Jean Godefroy, sieur de Linctot, a fellow Norman in Québec. Her marriage contract was drawn up on 15 December 1636 at Trois-Rivières. No religious record of their marriage has been found. However, this is not surprising since the parish register of Trois-Rivières does not record any marriages until 1654. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church is referred to twice in the document so it is very likely that a wedding took place in a Catholic Church. This contract has a clause revealing important information about the origins of the Le Neufs.²⁹ It states that the sieur du Colombier, her brother-in-law back in France, is to send her 1,800 livres after the consummation of the marriage. This sum was accorded to her in an act passed before the tabellions of Thury[-Harcourt]. This means that the Canadian Le Neufs had made financial arrangements in France before their departure with tabellions back in Thury-Harcourt. Her mother and brother Du Hérisson both signed the contract.

The last known member of the family is the youngest daughter who remained behind in Normandie. Madeleine was the wife of Jean Le Poutrel, sieur des Coulombiers.³⁰ She had married him on 24 November 1622 at the parish of St-Jean in Caen. The Le Poutrel family had ties to the

Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, pp. 713 and 998.

²⁶W. J. Eccles, "Saffray de Mézy (or Mézy), Augustin de," *DCB*, vol. 1, pp. 587-590.

²⁷Lamontagne, *DCB*, vol. 1, p. 467.

²⁸Douville, "Dictature," p. 86, suggests that La Poterie may have died in Acadia while visiting his son Michel Le Neuf, sieur de la Vallière, the governor of the colony. However, he admits to having no proof to back this supposition.

²⁹For a transcription of this contract see Sulte, "Godefroy," vol. 11, pp. 15-17.

³⁰Jetté, *Dictionnaire généalogique*, p. 718. Archange Godbout, *Origine des familles Canadiennes-Françaises: Extrait de l'État civil Français* (Lille: Société St-Augustin, Desclée, De Brouwer & Cie., 1925; reprint ed., Montréal: Éditions Élysée, 1979), pp. 84-85. Benjamin Sulte, "La famille Poutrel," *Mélanges historiques*, ed. Gérard Malchelosse, 21 vols. (Montréal: Éditions Édouard Garand, 1918-1934), vol. 19, pp. 65-69.

village of Argences west of Caen. They eventually settled in Thury–Harcourt and Jean died there after 22 July 1648. Madeleine and Jean appear to have been Catholics since their children were baptized at St–Jean in Caen or at St–Patrice in Argences. Although they did not come to Canada, three of their children did settle in New France: François at Montréal; Guy, sieur de Bellecourt, at Trois–Rivières; and Marie–Madeleine who became a Catholic nun and was known as Mère de St–Michel at the Hôtel–Dieu, Québec.³¹

Although several documents claim that the Le Neufs were from Caen, the best available evidence suggest that their final ties in France were to the neighboring village of Thury–Harcourt. Their sister Madeleine was living there with her husband, their sister Marie had legal ties to tabellions there, and La Poterie’s in–laws were from the village. The data also shows that Madeleine was living as a Catholic and that Marie married within the Church. Again this reinforces the idea that by 1636 the Le Neufs were living as Catholics or at least hiding their true beliefs both in Canada and in France. The fact that a niece becomes a nun shows that at least one member of the family was sincerely Catholic.

It is ironic that although many Canadian noble families are related in some way to the Le Neuf family, none of the Le Neufs left descendants of their surname in Canada.³² The Le Neufs eventually became important colonial official and returned to France with the conquest of Canada. Their descendants in Canada trace their descent through daughters. Some of the related families in the first few generations carry the following surnames: Godefroy, Desrosiers, Le Gardeur, de Villieu, Bertrand, de Gannes, Aubert, and Robineau. With these illustrious names from Canadian history associated with them it becomes clear that the Le Neufs made an important contribution to the elite of New France.

To summarize, the available genealogical data fails to identify the parents of Mathieu Le Neuf and his wife Jeanne Le Marchant. Several clues point to a specific area of Normandie for further research. However, for reasons to be covered in the next section, it is difficult to follow through on these leads. La Poterie’s failure to document clearly his ancestry in his nobility proofs in the light of these difficulties becomes even more frustrating.

Difficulties in Tracing the Le Neuf Origins in France

All the previously published evidence points to the Canadian Le Neufs as coming from the town of Caen or the nearby village of Thury–Harcourt just sixteen miles south. Both towns were in the diocese of Bayeux, in the former province of Normandie, and are now in the department of Calvados. They are on the Orne River in the fertile plane of Lower Normandie. In the seventeenth century Caen was the second city of Normandie. It was next to Rouen in importance. The abbey

³¹Godbout, *Pionniers*, p. 29, suggests that Gaspard le Pouterel may also have been their child and may have settled at Trois–Rivières.

³²Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations*, vol. 8, p. 310, fn. 58. Thwaites says that according to Sulte the Le Neuf surname became extinct in Canada after the Conquest.

of St-Étienne for men on the west side and the abbey of the Trinity for women on the east side surround the city. William the Conqueror and his wife established the abbeys. A fortified citadel still dominates the middle of the city. It had a fairly large university but was not the scene of the provincial parliament or of the diocese. It had a mix of agriculturally related industries such as leather tanning and textile manufacturing.³³ A pertinent fact for this article is that Caen was the center of the Protestant movement in Normandie. Approximately one-half to three-quarters of its citizens were Huguenot in the mid-sixteenth century. Even after several decades of persecution about one-quarter were still Huguenot in the 1590's.³⁴

Caen overshadowed neighboring villages including Thury-Harcourt. Apparently, many bourgeois living in these neighboring villages kept a tie to Caen. They did so to be known as *bourgeois de Caen* and thereby take advantage of certain tax breaks.³⁵

Most of the records of genealogical interest for both Caen and Thury-Harcourt should be in the Departmental Archives of Calvados at Caen. Regrettably, the Invasion of Normandie bombings in June 1944 destroyed many of the departmental records in this archives. The Allies had to bomb the city to eject the Nazi occupiers. Although some records escaped destruction, the bombing ruined the Catholic parish registers for the sixteenth and much of the seventeenth centuries. However, the notarial and tabellionage records have survived.³⁶

Archange Godbout, the famous French-Canadian genealogist, had the opportunity to view the records of Caen during the 1920's on his genealogical sweep through France. Other than finding some mention of the Le Poutrels, he found nothing of interest for the Le Neufs.³⁷ The reason for his lack of success is unclear. It might have been because time had run out on his trip, the records may have been too difficult to find or read, he might have searched thoroughly and found nothing, or perhaps he just was not that concerned with the Le Neufs. Godbout was the only one who had the opportunity to do original research in France on the Le Neuf family. Other researchers have found it necessary to rely on his work, on the records available in Canada, and on the limited resources published in France.

In addition to the loss of the Catholic records during the war, there are several other problems that make it difficult to search the records in the Departmental Archives of Calvados. Among these are the lack of willing professional genealogists capable of working with sixteenth and seventeenth century script in the Departmental Archives of Calvados. The staff of the Departmental Archives of

³³Maryelise Suffern Lamet, "Reformation, War and Society in Caen, Lower Normandy: 1558-1610" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Univ. of Massachusetts, 1978), pp. 2-65.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 187 & 383.

³⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

³⁶*Tabellions* were scribes who could draw up legal contracts and sign them but they had to register them with a notary. Their papers are referred to as a *tabellionage*. Although they were common in France, they are relatively unknown in New France.

³⁷Godbout, *Origine des familles*, pp. 84-85.

Calvados is too limited to take on the task of doing difficult genealogical research. Furthermore, microfilm copies of notarial records are not available for Calvados.³⁸

To overcome these limitations several descendants banded together as a temporary informal group in 1985 to fund further research on the Le Neuf family.³⁹ They hoped that some information might be found in the notarial records or other sources in France. This group is now defunct, but it did have some initial success. The genealogist they employed, Alain Heude, uncovered several notarial documents mentioning the Le Neufs, including references to a Mathieu Le Neuf and his brother Michel, bourgeois of Caen.⁴⁰

Eventually a breakthrough was made by a volunteer of the Genealogical Circle of Caen, Jeanne Marie Cazin. To her must go the credit of uncovering the crucial document that unraveled the Le Neuf family secrets.

Important New Findings

I made contact with Cazin when I was trying to get a recommendation for a professional genealogist I could hire to research the Le Neufs. In my letter to her I explained a little about the Canadian Le Neufs and I mentioned that I was seeking the marriage record of La Poterie to Marie–Marguerite Le Gardeur. Although Cazin could not find a genealogist willing to take on the project, she took an interest in the case and on her own initiative started to do some free research for me. Like every good genealogist, she welcomed a challenge.

Cazin searched the notarial records of Thury–Harcourt for clues about the Le Neufs and found a crucial document. The document is dated 11 July 1619 and states in part that “. . . Jehanne Le Marchand, widow of Mathieu Le Neuf, sieur du Hérisson. . . .” is the guardian of her underaged children. It also mentions “. . . the reformed church of the said Caen. . . .”⁴¹ This information shows that Mathieu Le Neuf was dead by 1619 and that Jeanne Le Marchand was connected to the Huguenot church. Using this information Cazin decided to search through the Huguenot register. It is an ironic twist of fate that the Protestant registers of Caen have survived, with some gaps, through the period of religious persecution and the destruction of war.⁴²

³⁸According to the archivist of Calvados, many of the notarial papers were bound together, probably in the nineteenth century, as an act of preservation. This makes their microfilming or photocopying problematic. Also, these records are not indexed. Charles–Henri Lerch to John P. DuLong 7 June 1989.

³⁹The group included Robert A. Lonsway (who initially organized it), Mary J. Barry, Leona C. Derosia, and myself.

⁴⁰Series of letters between Alain Heude and Robert A. Lonsway, 20 November 1985, 19 March 1986, and 19 June 1986, photocopies in my possession.

⁴¹Obligation between Jean Le Neuf, sieur de Vaux, and Jeanne Le Marchand, Tabellionnage of Thury–Harcourt, 11 July 1619 (8E 3599), Departmental Archives of Calvados, Caen. Unfortunately, Cazin abstracted only a portion of this document in her letter, Jeanne Marie Cazin to John P. DuLong, 25 January 1990. Apparently, the document does not explain the relationship of Jean Le Neuf, sieur de Vaux, to either Mathieu Le Neuf or Jeanne Le Marchand.

⁴²Lamet, “Caen,” pp. 532–534. Part of these registers have been published, see Charles E. Lart, ed., *The Register of the Protestant Church at Caen (Normandy), 1560–1572* (Vannes: Lafolye frères, 1907). The complete registers are

In the Huguenot parish register Cazin found the following promise of marriage:

Mathieu Le Neuf	The Sundays 21 and 28th days of November and 5th day of December 1599. The announcements of promises of marriage between Mathieu Le Neuf s ^r du Hérisson living at St–Sauveur of Caen son of the deceased Jean Le Neuf and of the lady Marguerite Le Gardeur during their lives bourgeois of St–Sauveur of Thury of the first part and the lady Jeanne Le Marchant daughter of the late M ^e Gervais Le Marchant in life S ^r de la Cellonière and de la Rocque lieutenant of Monsieur le bailey of Condé–sur–Noireau and the lady Venote de St–Germain her mother and father of the parish and town of the said Condé of the second part have been witnessed without impeachment.
Jeanne Le Marchant	

Gilles Gaultier⁴³

This document presents us with the parents of Mathieu Le Neuf and Jeanne Le Marchant. Unfortunately, it does not tie the Jean Le Neuf mentioned here to the known published lineages. Therefore, more research must still be done. Nevertheless, this marriage information provides important clues about the background of the family. It helps to explain why La Poterie provided such weak genealogical evidence of his nobility. It definitely shows that the Le Neufs were Huguenots.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the document refers to the Le Neufs as bourgeois and not as nobles.

Although they were married at Caen, the groom and bride were from nearby rural parishes. According to Lamet, it was not uncommon for Huguenots of surrounding towns to marry at Caen.⁴⁵ Condé–sur–Noireau is a place not previously connected to the family. It is about 12 miles south of Thury–Harcourt. It was one of the seven rural centers of Huguenots in the nearby Colloque de Falaise.⁴⁶ The marriage promise also shows that the Le Neufs were a geographically mobile family

also available on microfilm at the Family History Library, “France, Calvados, Caen, Protestant Church, 1560–1657,” LDS reels 0658417–0658418. Lastly, the thirteen original registers (C 1565–1577) and a microfilm copy (5 MI I R 52) are also available at the Departmental Archives of Calvados, Caen. Gildas Bernard, *Les familles protestantes en France, XVI^e siècle – 1792: Guide des recherches biographiques et généalogiques* (Paris: Archives nationales, 1987), p. 118.

⁴³Promise to marry between Mathieu Le Neuf and Jeanne Le Marchant, 5 December 1599, Family History Library, “France, Calvados, Caen, Protestant Church, 1560–1657,” LDS reel 0658418, my translation. Transcribed in Jeanne Marie Cazin to John P. DuLong, 25 January 1990. Photocopy in my possession. Gaultier was the Protestant minister who served Caen. The bailey was an official position equivalent to a bailiff in England.

⁴⁴Although the surname Le Neuf does not appear in Lart’s published portion of the Protestant register of Caen, the surnames Poutrel, Marchant, and St–Germain do appear in the early records, Lart, *Register*, passim. Cazin has also found evidence that some of the Le Gardeurs in France were Huguenots, Jeanne Marie Cazin to John P. DuLong, 16 June 1990.

⁴⁵Lamet, “Caen,” pp. 193–194.

⁴⁶Samuel Mours, *Essai sommaire de géographie du protestantisme réformé français au XVII^e siècle* (Paris: Librairie Protestante, 1966), p. 13. A colloque is a Protestant conference or roughly the equivalent of a diocese in Catholic terms. In the Colloque de Caen the village of Colombières is noted as a Protestant center. This place is associated with the Poutrel family.

with ties to Caen and Thury–Harcourt. Moreover, there is a location called La Poterie nearby. This might be the place where Jacques Le Neuf acquired his title sieur de la Poterie.⁴⁷ Another intriguing clue shows that the Le Neufs were already tied to the Le Gardeurs through Jean Le Neuf's marriage to Marguerite Le Gardeur. Her relationship to her grandson La Poterie's wife has yet to be determined.

Despite the destruction of records and the difficulty of doing research in Caen, this crucial document proves there is hope of finding more information about the family in Normandie.

The Huguenot's Need for Secrecy

In our age of relative religious tolerance and egalitarianism it is difficult for us to understand why the Le Neufs found it necessary to hide from their past. We must look at what it meant to be a Huguenot in France and in Canada during the seventeenth century.

Although Henry IV issued the Edict of Nantes proclaiming toleration in 1598, the France of Louis XIII was not kind to Protestants. Cardinal Richelieu, the King's minister, crushed the Huguenot uprising at La Rochelle in 1626. In the following year the Cardinal forbid Huguenots to settle in Canada, a decision strongly supported by the Jesuits.⁴⁸ Although the serious persecution of the Huguenots did not start until the reign of Louis XIV, even in Richelieu's age it was better for a career at court to be a Catholic than a Protestant. With the revocation of the act of tolerance in 1685 this became mandatory. However, even before that time, as early as 1679, many Huguenots found it advantageous or necessary to hide their true beliefs.⁴⁹ Although some Huguenots did move to the colony and practiced their faith in secret, most of these hidden Huguenots eventually had to abjure to survive, to avoid burial in unsanctified ground, to marry, or to have children baptized and recognized as legitimate.⁵⁰ Eventually, these hidden Huguenots lost their children or grandchildren to the Catholic faith.

We will probably never know to what extent the Le Neufs were still attached to their Protestant beliefs when they arrived in Canada. At the minimum, they must have gone through the motions of being Catholics as no contemporaries mention any heresy on their part. They must have attended mass regularly during their lives to avoid gossip. It may in fact be that by the time they

⁴⁷Paul Joanne, *Dictionnaire géographique et administratif de la France et de ses colonies*, 7 vols. (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie, 1890–1905), vol. 5, p. 3636. This La Poterie is in the commune of Vassy, about 3.5 miles west of Condé-sur-Noireau. Although there are several locations called Hérisson in France, none of them are near Caen or in Calvados, *Ibid.*, vol. 3, pp. 1874–1875. The definitive location of Hérisson, as well as la Poterie, has yet to be proven.

⁴⁸Cornelius J. Jaenen, "The Persistence of the Protestant Presence in New France, 1541–1760," *Proceedings of the Second Meeting of the Western Society for French History*, 21–23 November 1974, pp. 29–40, p.32.

⁴⁹Lamet discusses various strategies Huguenots used in reaction to persecution in Caen. Among their options were abjuration and exile. They often returned to their religious beliefs once the persecution ended. Lamet, "Caen," chap. 8, pp. 383–440.

⁵⁰Jaenen, "Persistence," p. 36.

settled in New France they had willingly returned to the Catholic faith. Certainly, they appeared as Godparents at Catholic baptisms. Curiously though, the burials for La Poterie and Du Hérisson, as well as their mother, have never been found. Is it just because these acts were not recorded and preserved, or was it a final defiance of the Church they had to follow in life but not in death? Certainly, the burials of less eminent settlers are recorded for the same period.

The evidence that the Le Neufs were once Huguenots in France is clear. That they remained so in New France is circumstantial at best since there are no contemporary accounts accusing them of Protestant leanings. The Le Neufs objected to many Catholic policies and privileges in the colony. For instance, they were heavily involved in the ecclesiastically condemned brandy trade with the Indians. They seemed to have taken a relish in engaging the Church in controversy. They also had a penchant for squabbling over land with the Jesuits. They definitely exhibited an anti-Church bias. Douville stated that: “The relations of the Le Neufs with religious authority never seemed to have been the most cordial.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, we must be careful not to misinterpret their anti-Church behavior as a result of their supposed religious views. The Le Neufs need not necessarily be Huguenots to disagree with Church policy. After all, there were many good Catholics using brandy in the fur trade who also ran into these same difficulties with the Church. Furthermore, the Le Neufs’ dislike of the Jesuits was not uncommon among Catholics. Even in their native Caen both the Huguenots and the Catholics banded together in 1608 to object to the introduction of the Jesuit order in the city.⁵²

Unavoidably, the family inevitably drifted into the Catholic fold. A niece became a nun at the Hôtel-Dieu and the Le Neuf children and grandchildren appear to be completely Catholic.⁵³ The Le Neufs in order to maintain their position and excel in New France had to acquiesce to the Church. Slowly through the generations they became Catholic if they were not already at the time of their arrival.

In the sixteenth century the French fought a civil war over religion. Like any civil war, families divided on issues and segments drifted back and forth on the changing fortunes of the war. The Le Neufs were caught in the bind between what they wanted to believe and what they found necessary to believe.

La Poterie could not submit genealogical proofs of his noble lineage without the records showing that his family had once been Huguenots. He decided to take the safer course and have two kinsmen whose religious beliefs were not in doubt—considering that one was a priest—to testify that he was a member of the family. Thus he avoided the whole religious issue. He also kept the derogation of his branch of the family from noble to bourgeois status hidden as well.

⁵¹Douville, “Dictature,” p. 77.

⁵²Lamet, “Caen,” pp. 467–470.

⁵³La Poterie’s sister, Marie, back in France was closer to the Catholicism. She was married in the church and her children were baptized in it. However, her husband’s family, the Poutrels, may also have been Huguenots in the sixteenth century.

The Embarrassment of Derogation

In France and New France to be a member of the noble class was important for social and economic reasons. It meant a certain level of social status and freedom from a whole array of taxes. Therefore, to pretend you were a noble was to be a tax fraud. The Court of Aids, responsible for judging disputes relating to tax collection, investigated these cases for the royal government. This court made every effort to catch these pretend nobles. They regularly carried on special investigations into nobility claims of the local gentry. During these investigations nobles were required to submit proof of their own nobility and that of their ancestors for several generations. In addition, they had to demonstrate that they were maintaining a noble life style and were not engaged in bourgeois trade or peasant labor.

Derogation meant that a person of noble ancestry was no longer living as a noble. The cause for the loss of noble status and privileges depended on the laws of each French province. In general, it was lost if a noble engaged in unapproved forms of business. According to the historian Roland Mousnier, not all forms of business were forbidden to nobles. Wholesale trade and shipping were allowed as were mining or anything else that developed a noble's own land.⁵⁴ Wholesale trade was especially allowed in the customary laws of Bretagne and Normandie. However, simple retail trade would endanger a person's noble status.⁵⁵ If a person became involved in retail trade, became a simple bourgeois, then he would lose his noble status and be liable to pay taxes.

It is unclear if a degraded noble could easily regain his noble status. Mousnier, claims that *noblesse de race* never lost their noble status even if they engaged in a degrading trade, nor did their children.⁵⁶ For the lower levels of the nobility, rehabilitation was possible but problematic. If their father had misguidedly engaged in trade, then the children could obtain a letter of rehabilitation from the King. The courts would reinvestigate their nobility claims to make sure they were rehabilitated. For the recently ennobled, the rehabilitation was probably not as easy since they had only just left the ranks of the bourgeoisie one or two generations ago. Although gaining a letter of rehabilitation was a possibility, avoiding the taint of bourgeois life style would be far easier. To be derogated was not

⁵⁴Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy, 1598–1789*, trans. Brian Pearce, 2 vols. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979–1984), vol. 1, pp. 133–134.

⁵⁵In New France, nobles could engage more readily in business, especially the fur trade, without derogation. It was considered respectable along with maritime-related activities. Francis Parkman, *Old Régime*, vol. 1, pp. 1285–1286.

⁵⁶Mousnier, *Institutions of France*, vol. 1, pp. 131–132. In France the nobility was divided hierarchically into several types. From top to bottom the ranking was roughly the royal blood princes, the ancient families of the race (peers), the nobles of the sword (military nobles), and the nobles of the robe (judicial and administrative nobles). Many in this last category were recently ennobled. Also, titles of nobility such as duc, marquis, comte, and baron were not held by all nobles. Most nobles were known simply as *chevaliers* (knights) or just as *écuyers* (squires). Lastly, it was possible to hold a seignury and still be a commoner (a *roturier*). The “de” particle does not impart nobility just possession of land. For more information about the hierarchy of nobles see Charles E. Lart, “French Noblesse,” *The Genealogist's Magazine* 7:5 (March 1936): 229–242.

only an embarrassment, it was a liability in a status oriented hierarchical society such as France during the *ancien régime*.

The Court of Aids periodically conducted *recherche de la noblesse* to catch fraudulent and derogated nobles. Those caught were subject to fines and taxes. In fact, the royal government often used these investigations to raise funds through the extortion of recently ennobled to pay for recognition.⁵⁷ The recently ennobled always held on tentatively to their status until several generations confirmed it by living as nobles. The most ambitious investigations were during the reign of Louis XIV to raise money for his ceaseless wars.⁵⁸ These investigations also had an impact on New France where the nobles were asked to register their proofs of noble ancestry with the Sovereign Council of the colony.⁵⁹

Several times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries various members of the Le Neuf family were investigated and had to prove their noble status. Several members of the French Le Neuf family were maintained as nobles. That is, they were able to provide adequate proof to investigator of the Court of Aids that they, and their ancestors, were nobles. La Poterie registered his proofs of nobility on 24 September 1675 in Québec for the consideration of the Sovereign Council. He submitted for his proofs of nobility data that his kinsman collected in response to an investigation. This relative was Jacques Le Neuf, esquire, councilor and procurator of His Majesty in the royal jurisdiction of Havre de Grace. This French Jacques Le Neuf was accused of usurpation on 15 March 1658. The State Council of the King recognized him as a noble on 4 December 1659. Although the proofs that the French Jacques Le Neuf submits clearly shows his descent from Richard Le Neuf, nowhere is it shown how La Poterie is related to him.⁶⁰

In addition to this evidence, La Poterie also had two kinsman swear that he was part of the family. These relatives were Pierre Le Neuf, priest, sieur de Courtonne, and his brother, François Le Neuf, esquire, sieur de Montenay. They were from the parish of St-Julien in Caen. They made a statement that La Poterie was of the same family on 5 May 1673 before the royal tabellions Ollivier and Bougon. Again, the lineage of these French brothers goes back to Richard Le Neuf and is well documented, but there is no indication of their exact relationship to La Poterie.⁶¹

⁵⁷Charles E. Lart, "The Noblesse of Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 3:3 (September 1922): 222–232. Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*, trans. Anne Carter (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 89. The king's officials extorted from nobles and commoners alike by having them register arms and pay a fee for an *Armorial général* from 1696 to 1701, see Mousnier, *Institutions of France*, vol. 1, pp. 119–120.

⁵⁸For a partial list of investigations see Mousnier, *Institutions of France*, vol. 1, p. 136. All of Normandie was done in 1655. Researches into titles of nobility were ordered for the whole kingdom on 20 June 1664.

⁵⁹Roy, *Lettres de Noblesse*, passim. He published the registrations of the prominent Canadian families.

⁶⁰Jean Daigle, "Michel Le Neuf de la Vallière, Seigneur de Beaubassin et Gouverneur d'Acadie (1678–1684)" (M.A. thesis, Université de Montréal, 1970), p. 14. Daigle claims without proof that the French Jacques Le Neuf was the uncle of La Poterie. The available limited evidence makes it more likely that they were distant cousins in the same generation.

⁶¹An unclear passage in Godbout indicates that La Poterie and Du Hérisson were accused on 24 September 1666 in France of usurping nobility status and sentenced to pay 2,000 livres (Godbout, *Trifluviemie*, p. 19). Douville repeats this as fact (Douville, "Dictature," p. 85). However, they have confused the data. This investigation was not directed against the Canadian Le Neufs at all. Rather, it was aimed at François and Pierre Le Neuf who would later testify on the behalf of their Canadian kinsman. These brothers had their nobility maintained by an order of the King's Council 1 October

Mousnier lists suitable evidence that could be used to prove nobility.⁶² Someone other than the interested party had to generate the evidence. For example, it could be a marriage contract made by a notary or tabellion. Also, the person under investigation had to prove a certain number of generations back were referred to as nobles. In Normandie during the 1580's, the rule was to trace back noble ancestry to at least a great-grandfather who was referred to as a noble in public documents. Most other provinces only required proof of three generations. The declaration of 22 June 1664 required that proof be given of nobility back to 1560.⁶³ Alternatively, the person under investigation was allowed to have witnesses confirm that his father and grandfather were nobles, that he lived like a noble, and that he did not degrade himself through engaging in business or by paying any taxes. However, four witnesses were usually required.

When La Poterie submitted his proofs of nobility in 1675 he decided to go with the approach of having witnesses claim that he was part of a noble family. He had his kinsmen, who in 1667 had been recently maintained in their nobility, swear to this effect. Furthermore, he uses the records of another kinsman's maintenance of 1659 to bolster the prestige of the Canadian Le Neuf family claim. This documentation was barely adequate to prove nobility in the seventeenth century. Certainly, it is not genealogically sound in the twentieth century. In fact, I speculate that the Sovereign Council accepted it only because Le Poterie submitted it voluntarily. It was never under the critical gaze of an investigating official. La Poterie did the minimum to prove his nobility without revealing his Huguenot background or the derogation of his noble status.

Beyond the suspicions surrounding La Poterie's weak proofs of nobility there are also clues about his derogated background in France. Every document I have seen so far from France mentions the Canadian Le Neufs and their ancestors as bourgeois. For example, a document dated 15 December 1595 at Thury-Harcourt refers to “. . . honorables hommes maistres Mathieu et Michel Leneuf, frères, bourgeois de Caen . . .”⁶⁴ The phrase *bourgeois de Caen* must be handled with care. Both Lart and Mousnier note that a phrase such as *Mathieu Le Neuf, bourgeois de Caen* could refer to a nobleman who resides in a city as a freeman with important civil responsibilities. This was different from the simple phrase *Mathieu Le Neuf, bourgeois, de Caen* who would have been a merchant.⁶⁵ However, this was not a strictly observed distinction. This was especially true in the case of Caen where there were tax benefits for merchants if they could prove that they were a

1667. Guy Chamillart, *Recherche de la Noblesse en la Généralité de Caen* (Caen: Henry Delesques, 1887; reprint ed., Paris: Sedopols, 1981), p. 802.

⁶²Mousnier, *Institutions of France*, vol. 1, pp. 135–136.

⁶³*Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 12 & 136–137.

⁶⁴Mortgage between the Le Neuf brothers and Jehan Lepetit, sieur des Nots, bourgeois de Thury, Tabellionnage of Ferey and Berthault, Thury-Harcourt, 15 December 1595, Departmental Archives of Calvados, Caen. Photocopy and transcription in letter from Alain Heude to Robert A. Lonsway, 19 June 1986. Photocopies in my possession.

⁶⁵Lart, “French Noblesse,” p. 232. According to Lart, *bourgeois de* was a complement for nobles. Also see Mousnier, *Institutions of France*, vol. 1, pp. 124 & 236.

bourgeois de Caen.⁶⁶ It is noteworthy that Michel and Mathieu were addressed as *maistres*, or masters. This is a term usually reserved for men of letters and distinguished craftsmen.⁶⁷

Comparison of La Poterie's titles over time shows how he manufactured his social status. In a document dated 2 December 1629 at Thury–Harcourt he is referred to as “M^e Jacques Le Neuf S^r de la Poterie bourgeois de Caen.”⁶⁸ On 5 May 1673 at Québec he is noted as “Jacques Leneuf, Écuyer, sieur de la Potterie, demeurant au bourg des Trois–Rivières.”⁶⁹ Notice that he is no longer referred to as master but as esquire and that he is not a bourgeois of Trois–Rivières but a dweller of that town.

So far it is unclear in the evidence how long ago this branch of the Le Neuf family had degraded into the bourgeoisie. Further research must be done to discover what trade the family engaged in and how long they were involved in it. Nevertheless, I imagine, based on the lack of information in the d'Hozier files about them, that it was perhaps as early as the fourteenth century.⁷⁰ Despite an ancient pedigree, none of the Le Neufs—until the eighteenth century with the creation of Le Neuf, Comte de Sourdeval—were great nobles.⁷¹ The French Le Neuf contemporaries of the Canadian Le Neufs are always referred to as écuyer. This was the lowest common title between all nobility in France. In this precarious position on the bottom of the nobility, I doubt if any member

⁶⁶Lamet, “Caen,” p. 5.

⁶⁷*Maître* or *Maistre* was often abbreviated as M^{re} or M^e. *Monsieur* was usually applied to nobles. In France, *Sieur* or S^r was used often in legal documents to refer to merchants and craftsmen. *Sieur* was used much like Mister in England, as a show of respect. However, nobles and commoners also used it to indicate possession of a seignury, for example, sieur de Bécancour. Mousnier, *Institutions of France*, vol. 1, p. 9.

⁶⁸Jeanne Marie Cazin to John P. DuLong, 25 January 1990, contains transcribed examples of La Poterie's signature, extracted from document 8E 3605, Departmental Archives of Calvados, Caen.

⁶⁹Roy, *Lettres de Noblesse*, vol. 1, p. 65.

⁷⁰For several generations members of the d'Hozier family were the “généalogiste de la maison du roi et juge général des arms.” As the King's genealogists, they collected and preserved genealogical information relating to noble titles and arms. This collection has survived as the *Cabinet des titres* at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. There are several extensive files relating to the Le Neuf family in this collection: Ms. Fr. 32307, pp. 1088–1089; Ms. Fr. 32333, pp. 226–227 and 260–261; Ms. Fr. 28582, vol. 2098, dossier 47848; Ms. Fr. 30031, vol. 486, liasse 12749; Ms. Fr. 30693, vol. 464, ff. 51–302; Ms. Fr. 31477, vol. 252, liasse 5700; and Ms. Fr. 32247, vol. 20, Part 2, p. 626. There are also some documents abstracted from the Cabinet des titres in the Archives nationales du Québec at the Université de Laval, cote: P–1000–64–1254. I have photocopies of all of these documents in my possession. I am in the process of analyzing them now. Unfortunately, at this time, no mention has been found that details the exact relationship between the Canadian branch of the family with the French branch. However, I am only a third of the way through the documents. [Comment: All these Cabinet des titres documents relating to the Le Neufs have now been thoroughly analyzed by René Jetté, Roland–Yves Gagné, and myself. Nothing directly relating to the Canadian Le Neufs are found in any of these documents.]

⁷¹Louis–Bernardin Le Neuf was made the Comte de Sourdeval in May 1764. Waroquier, *Tableau généalogique*, vol. 3, p. 319. During the French Revolution he was guillotined on 10 May 1794 [he was executed on the 10th, but condemned to death on the 9th]. His son Alexandre–Louis–Nicolas–Hippolyte Le Neuf was the second and last Comte de Sourdeval. He disappears from history around 1830. The Le Neuf legacy as great nobles was brief. Conzague de Vesvrotte, Le Neuf de Sourdeval Query, *Bulletin des Sociétés Françaises de Généalogie, d'Héraldique et de Sigillographie* 5:2 (March–April 1973): 44, no. 547. J. Morel, *Biéville–sur–Orne: Histoire d'une petite Commune du Calvados* (Caen: Louis Jouan, Éditeur, 1911), pp. 405–406.

of the family would eagerly welcome the complement *bourgeois de Caen*. Particularly, if you are trying to prove your noble status and not merely that the local towns people admired you.

Like their Huguenot background, their bourgeois titles and accompanying life styles would have been an impediment to the progress of the Le Neufs in New France. Knowledge of these facts would have endangered their status. Therefore, it was convenient for La Poterie to have distant noble and Catholic cousins attest to his family ties rather than reveal any potentially harmful family secrets.

Directions for Further Research

Despite the possibility of alternative explanations, I believe the best theory is that La Poterie submitted genealogically weak proof to avoid revealing family secrets. Exposing these secrets would have meant public embarrassment. It would also have posed obstacles to the further social progress of the Le Neufs in Canada. The evidence uncovered so far does not contradict their ties to the French Le Neufs who trace back to Richard Le Neuf in the fifteenth century. In fact, knowing the family secrets of the Le Neufs makes clear the reason behind the lack of adequate documentation. Furthermore, one must not forget that La Poterie submitted his proofs voluntarily. The authorities had not requested him to do so. Perhaps he hoped to avoid a more serious investigation by this preemptive strategy.

Although the new information uncovered so far fails to tie the Canadian Le Neufs into the prestigious lineage of their French kinsman, this data does point to the possibility of success in the future. I am undertaking several immediate steps to further this research, including: (1) contacting other researchers interested in the Le Neuf family to see if we can fund joint research back in France; (2) working with a genealogist in Salt Lake City to search through the rest of the Huguenot parish registry for more clues; and (3) I have ordered and received photocopies of all documents about the Le Neuf family from the d’Hozier collection and am now in the process of going through them looking for leads.⁷²

Beyond these steps the key is to have more research done in the Departmental Archives of Calvados. Because of destruction of parish records, the lack of microfilm copies, non-existing indexes of surviving notarial and tabellionage records, and the inability to find a professional genealogist willing to take on the task—not to mention a shortage of funds—I have only been able to

⁷²[Comment: I have removed a call to form a research team from this footnote. It is unnecessary because research on the Le Neufs was successfully conducted and published by a team of researchers, see: René Jetté, Roland–Yves Gagné, John Patrick DuLong, and Paul Leportier, “Les Le Neuf: état des connaissances,” *Mémoires de la Société généalogique canadienne–française* 51:3 (Autumn 2000): 209–227. For an important update on the Le Neuf family, see René Jetté, “Du neuf sur les Le Neuf,” *Mémoires de la Société généalogique canadienne–française* 53:2 (Summer 2002): 143–144. Furthermore, Gagné has done detailed research in the original records in Normandie and has published his results in the *Mémoires de la Société généalogique canadienne–française* starting with the autumn 2012 issue.]

have a limited amount of success. However, thanks to Cazin, a crucial document has been uncovered which points to the possibility of more evidence back in France.

Further research might be able to take the Canadian branch of the Le Neuf family back to the Middle Ages and tie it to Richard Le Neuf. This research might lead back to other related maternal lines of bourgeois, noble, or perhaps even royal ancestry.

A whole family approach must be used. This will require a careful search through the notarial and tabellionage records in France for clues about not only the Le Neufs but also the Poutrels, Godefroys, Marchants, St-Germains, and Le Gardeurs. Information about anyone of these families might point to important clues about the Le Neufs. We must work from known to unknown, the classic genealogical approach which takes in the whole family context—relatives, work, migration, etc. This will take several years to do and must rely on researchers in Caen and Paris. The preliminary reconnaissance presented in this paper has found that even a devastating war has not destroyed all the valuable records. We can use these surviving records to solve the problem of the noble lineage of the Canadian Le Neufs.

Although the Canadian Le Neufs were less than honest about their background as derogated Huguenot nobles, there is still enough evidence to indicate that they were indeed part of the noble Le Neuf family. The Le Neufs were caught between two worlds. They were Huguenots living in a Catholic frontier settlement and derogated nobles pretending to be gentlemen but dependent on their bourgeois skills for survival. This newly revealed background calls for historians to carefully reinterpret their behavior in light of this information. They must still investigate the degree to which the Le Neuf family had sunk into the bourgeoisie and the extent they remained loyal to Protestantism while in Canada. This leaves historians with some interesting work to be done. Further research should let us know more about the hidden past of this intriguing family of Norman adventurers.