

## Jacques and Gillette

by Judy Welna Member #114

My grandmother had no idea that she was descended from people who were publicly executed for murder. Neither did she know that her maiden name, Preston, had been changed from Cusson before her ancestors migrated from Quebec to Vermont.

Once I discovered this name change in 2012, I began extensive ancestor-hunting in Quebec, where records are well preserved and readily available at several online sites. Much research had already been published and well documented, making my initial work fast and exciting, like time travel at warp speed. In minutes I went back generations, following line after line into cities and towns in Quebec and France. Finally I was able to fill in the large pie-shaped section of the chart which had been blank since I began working on it in the 1970s.

When I came to my ninth great grandparents, Jacques Bertault and Marie Gillette Banne, I noted their death dates were the same. Thinking this was an error, I took a second look, and learned that they were both executed on 9 June 1672 at 4 o'clock in the afternoon in Quebec City. Executed for the murder of their son-in-law, Julien Latouche.

Suddenly I didn't care about their parents, or how quickly I could fill in the empty section of the tree. I saved my work, and left the genealogy sites for Google, which found their story. Gillette was born in 1636 in the Normandy region of France. She came to Quebec in 1649, one of 262 single girls who immigrated to New France between the years of 1634-1662. These young women, known as the *filles à marier*\* (marriageable girls), needed to be of marriageable age (12-45), and have signed a marriage contract before their departure. They were expected to marry a French pioneer already settled in New France.

Gillette was contracted to Marin Chauvin, whom she married shortly after her arrival. A daughter was born in 1650, and Marin died in 1651. Because Gillette had come to New France to help build the colony, she knew she would be expected to marry again. On July 27, 1653 she married Jacques Bertault at Trois-Rivieres.

They had six children, four of them girls, which meant Jacques would need to arrange marriages for each. He made an unfortunate match when he chose Julien Latouche, age 30, to marry his daughter Elisabeth, just 12, in 1671.

Julien and Elisabeth had a daughter the following year, a time during which Elisabeth endured the abuse of her alcoholic husband. He was lazy and domineering, and rarely able to put food upon their table, Elisabeth relying upon her parents for meals. Jacques spoke to his son-in-law about his behavior, but it didn't change.

In desperation, the three hatched a plan: Gillette knew of an herb which was said to kill hogs. She believed it could be mixed into a soup and given to Julien, killing him, and solving everyone's problem. The soup was prepared and served, but Julien was unaffected by the poison.

The following day Gillette found her son-in-law in the barn, and the two began arguing and insulting one another. Gillette grabbed a hoe and struck Julien, who turned on her, causing her to scream for help. Jacques came running into the barn, grabbed the hoe, and beat Julien with it until he was dead. Jacques, Gillette and Elisabeth dragged Julien's body to the river in an effort to hide the crime.

But someone had heard the victim's screams, and the crime scene told the story. Both Gillette Banne and Jacques Bertault were sentenced to death by the criminal court of Québec City for the murder of their son-in-law. Elisabeth was sentenced to watch the execution of her parents. The details of the hearings and the execution are available (by simple Google search), but are not for the faint of heart.\*\*

With regard to Jacques and Gillette, I know only about how they came to Quebec, that they married, that they had six children, and that they died by execution for murder. This is how they appear on our family tree. I think of their victim, Julien Latouche, and of his descendants' family trees, which will state that he died at the hands of my ancestors. I'm not happy about this, but we are forever connected in this way. I know more about them than my grandmother did, but this only leaves me wondering: surely they lived their lives for more than just to murder Latouche, for we cannot be defined by a single event. I want information which would round out Jacques and Gillette.

Behind each name on the tree are complex, tangled tales worth knowing. Stories that emerge during times we might get sidetracked in our research because we followed a hunch, dug a bit deeper, or asked that one odd question that revealed a side of an ancestor we might never have seen. What was it like to leave your homeland, knowing you would never see your family again? How did you say good-bye forever to a son or daughter who was barely beyond a teenager? What joys or sorrows marked their lives? What occupations or talents did they have? What made them laugh? What good things did they do, or (as in this case) what crimes might they have committed?

I want to gain a sense of these people whose DNA I carry. It makes me yearn to travel to small towns in France or Ireland or England, to walk where they did, as if I might absorb even more of them into my being. What precious things our stories are!

**NOTES:** \* Information regarding the *filles à marier* is readily available by way of simple online searches, which often end in someone's family tree. Although not always sourced, the facts seem to be distilled from Peter Gagné's work, *Before the King's Daughters: The Filles à Marier, 1634-1662*, (Pawtucket, RI: Quinton Publications, 2002).

\*\*I have not located primary sources for the descriptions of Julien Latouche, his murder, court proceedings, and the executions of Jacques and Gillette, yet they appear in numerous family trees online, accessible through simple Google search. There is an accounting of the story, including the crime and the ensuing trial, in Peter Gagné's book, mentioned above.