

VSLVA  
and  
THE BONDURANTS OF FRANCE

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JEAN-PIERRE BONDURANT  
1677-1734

history compiled by  
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Our VSLVA<sup>1</sup> family traces some of its lineage back to Huguenot refugees escaping religious persecution in France more than three hundred years ago--to the late 1600s, in a violently divided Europe torn by conflicting religious beliefs.

The 17th century in France was a time of dogmatic intolerance and political upheaval. Religious turmoil drove thousands to seek refuge in more tolerant societies. Protestants who chose to follow their conscience rather than submit to King Louis XIV's Catholic authority were forced into exile to escape persecution. Among them was our ancestor, Jean-Pierre Bondurant.

JEAN-PIERRE BONDURANT

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<sup>1</sup> Variety Shade Landowners of Virginia, a family corporation

Jean-Pierre Bondurant<sup>2</sup> was born on July 18, 1677,<sup>3</sup> to Gabrielle Barjon and Jean-Pierre Bondurant, in Génolhac, France,<sup>4</sup> a small town in the mountains of Languedoc in southern France.



Village of Génolhac today



Génolhac, France

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2 There is a suggestion that the name “Bondurant” came about from “Good man” Durant. “Bonhomme” means “good man” in French. This was combined with the name Durant, eventually shortened to Bondurant. According to this theory, the first Durant in Génolhac was actually from across the border in northwest Spain, in which case the earliest of the Bondurants were not actually French but Spanish/Latin in origin.

3 Warren, Mary Bondurant, The Bondurants of Génolhac, France, [Vol. 1], p. 24.

4 Warren, Bondurants, p. 79.



The Languedoc region is in southern France.



The village of Génolhac is nestled high in the hills of the Languedoc mountains, 50 miles north of Nîmes and the Pont du Gard, near Avignon.



The Pont du Gard, an ancient Roman aqueduct bridge built in the first century AD.

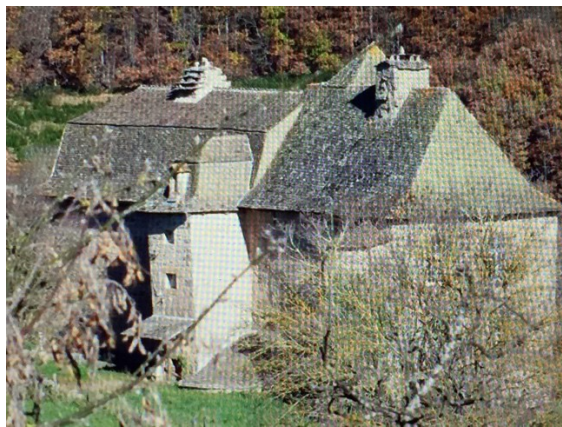
Languedoc is a region of natural beauty, ample sunshine, and clear, dry air. In the 17th century, farmers of the area led lives of strenuous work. Brief, temperate summers gave way to France's coldest winters. From October until April, the area lay beneath thick snow. For

centuries, shepherds in Génolhac had followed the old tradition of leading their herds of cattle to grazing meadows high in the mountains for the summer, then in winter back down to the valley's barns. Today, sheep graze below terraced walls.



Landscape near Génolhac today

Jean-Pierre's family had lived in the region for centuries. His grandfather, Dr. Pierre de Bondurant, was a physician and attorney in Génolhac, and his grandmother, Françoise de Joyeuse, was the heiress of the estate of Cougoussac nearby.<sup>5</sup> The castle of Cougoussac still stands in the countryside near Génolhac.



Castle of Cougoussac

By the late 1600s, the Bondurant family held extensive lands, including several vital mills along the river. Theirs was a family of professionals who for generations had served as leaders of their community. They were doctors, lawyers, landowners. Jean-Pierre's great-grandfather had even been the "Seigneur (Lord) de Cougoussac,"<sup>6</sup> managing his estate from the castle of Cougoussac pictured above.

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<sup>5</sup> Warren, *Bondurants*, p. 18-26.

<sup>6</sup> Warren, *Bondurants*, p.20





View of the river near Génolhac where the Bondurant mills operated. One of the Bondurant homes stood on a hill overlooking the river.

However, in a tragic twist of fate, the wealth they had acquired through generations of hard work and business acumen would make them a target for those envious of their power. By the time of Jean-Pierre's birth, his family would find itself at risk of persecution, exile, even death—threatened by the political manipulations of King Louis XIV.

Jean-Pierre was born into a Protestant Huguenot family during a time of religious upheaval and political tension in France. For centuries the officially Catholic state had regarded the Protestant faith as a threat to its authority. In 1572 the mass killings of the infamous St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre had ended the lives of 20,000 Huguenots, when the Catholic queen Marie de Medici conspired with Catholic nobles to lure Protestants to a royal wedding in Paris, only to entrap and massacre them.<sup>7</sup>

To quell this violence, in 1598 King Henri IV had finally granted Protestants the freedom to practice their religion without persecution. By the time Jean-Pierre was born, however, a new king was on the throne. Catholic King Louis XIV believed himself threatened by the Protestant Huguenots' strength and steadily began to repress them. Finally, in 1685, in a decree called the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the king declared the Huguenot religion outlawed. Its ministers were required to convert to Catholicism or leave France within 15 days. Believers had to renounce the Huguenot faith in front of a Catholic priest and become members of the Catholic church.

Full-scale persecution of Protestants ensued. Many families were torn apart. Parents who would not give up their faith were imprisoned, and their children were kidnapped or forcibly removed and sent to Catholic orphanages.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-71/saint-bartholomews-day-massacre.html>

<sup>8</sup> <https://amazingbibletimeline.com/blog/edict-nantes-revoked-1685/>



Painting: "Persecution of the French Huguenots  
After the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes by  
Louis XIV in 1685" by Maurice Leloir (1853-1940)

All rights and protections for the Huguenots were removed. Within weeks of the new edict, over 2,000 Protestant churches were burned, and entire villages were massacred and burned to the ground in a series of stunning atrocities.

American descendants of Huguenot refugees still tell stories of the persecution, stories handed down in their families through the generations. Soldiers were sent to the homes of Protestants to force them to attend Catholic mass. Bibles had to be hidden and studied in secret. Pastors and worshippers were captured, sent to the galleys, tortured, or killed.

The Huguenots were an essential component of France's economy, however, comprising a distinct socioeconomic class. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century most men and women in France were workers of the land. Yet few Huguenots were directly employed in agriculture. The great majority lived in towns; they were artisans--weavers, silversmiths, watchmakers, and professional people—doctors, clergy, merchants, soldiers, teachers.<sup>9</sup> To escape persecution, Huguenots began fleeing, and France lost a large number of skilled craftsmen. Some historians estimate more than 200,000 escaped to neighboring, more tolerant countries.<sup>10</sup>

The king's ruthless decree weakened the French economy by driving out a highly skilled and industrious segment of the nation. Fearing prolonged economic deterioration, the king closed the borders, banning emigration, and it became a serious offense to attempt to leave the country. Men who were caught were sent to the galleys and women to jail.<sup>11</sup>

9 Gwynn, Robin, "England's First Refugees," *History Today*, Vol. 35, Issue 5, May 1985.

10 Scoville, Warren C., "The Huguenots in the French Economy, 1650-1750," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 67, No. 3 (Aug., 1953), pp. 423-444.

11 <https://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/le-refuge-huguenot/>

Escape was a dangerous proposition. The exit channels were closely watched. The Musée Protestant's history website recounts, "The sea was easily crossed from the ports of Bordeaux and La Rochelle, where rowing boats came and fetched fugitives and took them to English, Dutch or Danish ships anchored offshore. The ships left with a few official passengers, but mostly with clandestine travelers, in terrible conditions down in the holds after they had paid the smugglers handsomely. The attempts often failed because of informers. Fugitives who escaped by land would head for a large city like Lyon, where it was easy to blend in and recruit a more or less dependable smuggler. From Lyon, they headed for French-speaking Swiss cantons like Geneva. They walked by night, hid during the day, and were dressed as beggars, peddlers or rosary vendors. They pretended to be sick, mute, or mad. Deaths from exhaustion, hunger or cold were not uncommon. It was a risky business; arrests were frequent and emigrants were sent to the galleys."<sup>12</sup>

The Bondurant family, like so many others, endured terrible suffering at this time. One of Jean-Pierre's uncles—a Génolhac physician, Pierre Bondurant—was arrested for his faith and imprisoned in a dungeon for two years. He was then sentenced to labor as a galley slave on Louis XIV's ships. This was a death sentence, imposed upon Protestants to set an example and promote fear.<sup>13</sup> The king had forty galleys, with 260 rowers on each ship. The rowers were tied to their bench twenty-four hours a day on the uncovered single deck of the galley, sitting at the end of a 40-foot-long oar. Teams rowed at a pace of twenty to twenty-five strokes a minute.<sup>14</sup> In 1694, four years after his arrest, Jean-Pierre's uncle died of the harsh treatment.<sup>15</sup>



Galley ship of King Louis XIV

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Warren, *Bondurants*, p. 20.

Another uncle was more fortunate. The Huguenot pastor of a small church, he led his congregation to safety in Protestant Switzerland.<sup>16</sup> Had he stayed in France, he would have faced death for his religion--very few pastors faced the galleys; instead, they were sentenced to immediate death.<sup>17</sup>

Jean-Pierre had been baptized in the Protestant Huguenot faith as an infant. But in 1684, when he was seven years old, his family was forced to renounce their faith. Fearing the king's imminent legislation against wealthy Huguenots, the Bondurants had Jean-Pierre, their oldest grandson, baptized as a Catholic, thus allowing him to escape persecution and preserving his right to inherit family property. From that time on, Jean-Pierre was nominally a Catholic and was educated by them.<sup>18</sup>

His parents likely continued to instruct Jean-Pierre in the tenets of their Protestant faith, however. As his life unfolded, it would become clear that under their protection, Jean-Pierre retained his belief in individual accountability to God, guided by his conscience without the intermediation of a priest who might be influenced by the king's authority.

Tragically, Jean-Pierre's parents died when he was seventeen. The orphaned boy was left in the guardianship of his father's cousin, André Bondurant, a "Master Apothecary" and mayor of Génolhac.

Jean-Pierre became André's apprentice, learning the practice of 17th-century medicine. It was a skill that would serve him well in the future, for he would eventually work as a doctor in the English colony of Virginia, battling disease and hardship as Protestant refugees built a new life there.

A caduceus carved into stone over the entrance to the Bondurant house in Génolhac served as an advertisement for the Bondurants' work as apothecaries and medical doctors. Here is a photo of the home taken when descendants visited in 1993:<sup>19</sup>

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16 Warren, Bondurants, pp. 25, 52.

17 <https://www.museeprotestant.org/en/notice/sentenced-to-the-galleys>

18 Warren, Bondurants, p. 22.

19 *ibid.*, p. 107.





Home of Jean-Pierre Bondurant  
in Génolhac, France

The home itself reveals something of life in Génolhac over the centuries leading up to Jean-Pierre's time. During the 1500s and 1600s, the apothecary shop had been an inn, for the town of Génolhac was an important trading stop on the Régordane Road, the main highway that led south from Paris to the Mediterranean.<sup>20</sup>



The Régordane Road, Languedoc, France

The Régordane was one of the principal trade routes in France from the earliest times, carrying goods, animals, and people between the Mediterranean coast and the lands to the north. Mule-carts and flocks of domestic animals made the slow, arduous journey up and down the road, which took the line of least resistance through the mountains, making use of a convenient

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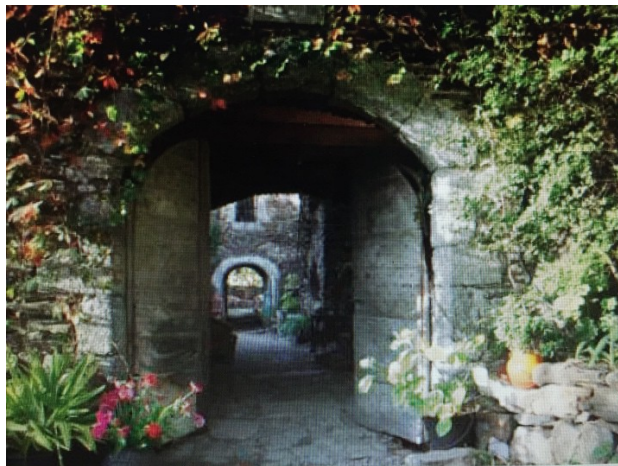
<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 108-117.

geological fault. In Roman times, the surface was improved with solid paving. Julius Caesar found it useful for marching his army to its final showdown with the Gauls. And when Christianity took hold in the medieval period, the Régordane became a popular pilgrimage route.<sup>21</sup>

The road was heavily traveled. Pack trains loaded with products from the French heartland passed along its route through Génolhac. In the centuries before Jean-Pierre's time, our Bondurant ancestors ran several inns along the road,<sup>22</sup> and the architecture of the Bondurant home in Génolhac reflects these earlier days.



The mountainous region near Génolhac



A covered passage at the home's entrance led from the town's main street to the inner courtyard. Teamsters' horses and wagons bringing goods from the fields of France to the seaports of the Mediterranean would have filled this square in the 1500s and early 1600s.

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21 <https://walkinginfrance.info/short-walks/the-regordane/>

22 <http://www.bondurantfamily.org/BFA/History/History.html#:~:text=Our%20earliest%20documented%20Bondurant%20ancestors,of%20Languedoc%20in%20Southern%20France.&text=The%20Bondurant%20Family%20lived%20in,on%20the%20Mediterranean%20Sea>, and Warren, *Bondurants of Génolhac*, p. 17-19.



The main street of Génolhac has hardly changed since that time.

For two years after the death of his parents, Jean-Pierre lived and worked with his uncle in this home, now an apothecary shop. But in 1696, as the persecution of the Huguenots increased, Jean-Pierre faced a turning point. At age nineteen he risked death, fleeing France to find refuge in Switzerland.<sup>23</sup>

For generations the Bondurant family had held extensive lands in southern France, including prosperous mills along the river and land surrounding his grandmother's castle of Cougoussac. Jean-Pierre, heir to these estates, had to sell all the family's property to finance his flight to Switzerland. There he joined his maternal uncle, Pastor Guillaume Barjon, who had escaped France earlier with his congregation and was now leader of the Huguenot refugee church in Geneva.<sup>24</sup>

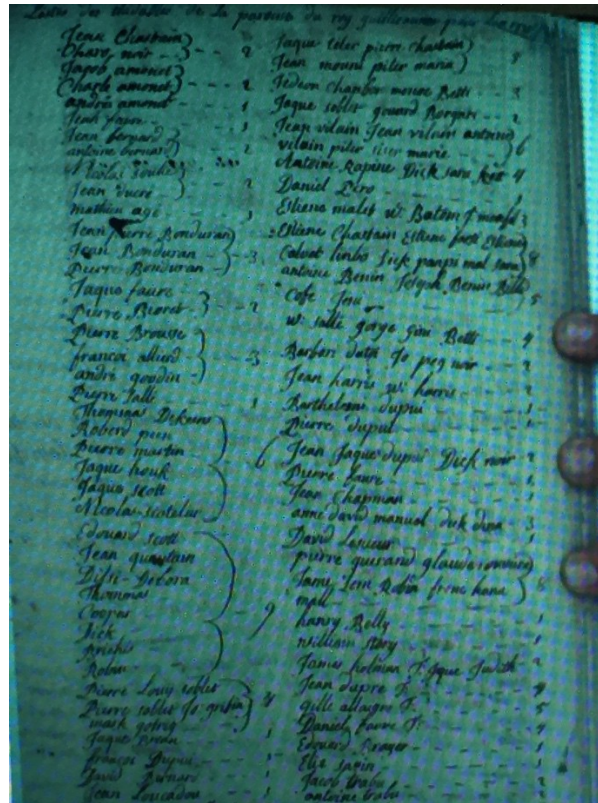
On October 3, 1697, Jean-Pierre recanted the Catholic faith and added his name to the list of his uncle's church members.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Warren, *Bondurants*, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 24, 25, 31.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 25.



List of members of French Huguenot church led by Jean-Pierre's uncle in Switzerland

Because Jean-Pierre had left France with money from the sale of his mills, he did not appear on the Swiss charity records, as did most refugee Huguenots. Perhaps being financially independent shielded him from scrutiny.<sup>26</sup>

17th century Europe was a continent violently divided between the Protestant and Catholic faiths, with great intolerance shown by both groups. France was Catholic, but Switzerland, Germany, and England were Protestant. After the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in France, the Huguenot persecution became violent and oppressive. Life in France became intolerable for those who were not Catholic.

In England, however, the Protestant King William and Queen Mary had ascended the throne. French Huguenots sought shelter and protection from the Protestant regents, crowding London as they escaped the mainland. The English regents then offered the persecuted French Huguenots an even greater hope--the privilege of settling in the English colony of Virginia.

This was not an entirely altruistic act. Thousands of French Protestants had sought safety in England, and their increasing numbers had placed a heavy strain on relief agencies in London. Plans of resettlement in the English colonies would alleviate the problem.

Furthermore, England had already established settlements along the coast of Virginia but needed protection further inland, at the frontier of adjacent Indian territories. The refugee villages would serve as a buffer of protection for the more prosperous coastal towns,<sup>27</sup> ensuring

26 Ibid., p. 26.

27 <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/religion/huguenots.html>



an unbroken chain of commerce from the coasts of Virginia to English ports. This would benefit the merchants of England.<sup>28</sup>



England provided four ships and provisions for some 700 to 800 refugees' journey.<sup>29</sup> Jean-Pierre joined the second group given passage. Records show that he was among the Huguenot refugees arriving at the mouth of the James River in Virginia on September 20, 1700, aboard the second ship, "Ye Peter and Anthony", which had sailed from England.<sup>30</sup> Jean Pierre was twenty-three.



Immigrants landing at the James River in the Virginia colony.

The immigrants were taken up the James River in small boats as far as the shoals (present-day Richmond). They then went overland to Manakin Town, an abandoned Monocan Indian village, where they joined other Huguenot settlers.<sup>31</sup>

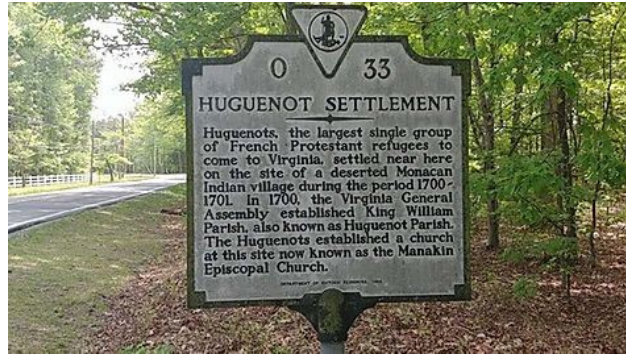
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28 <http://www.vanderfordfamily.com/html/manakin.htm>

29 *ibid.*

30 Warren, *Bondurants*, p. 26, 74.

31 Warren, *Bondurants*, p. 74.



A museum near the original settlement of Manakin Town commemorates the arrival of Huguenot refugees in Virginia.

Life for the settlers was not easy. Most of the refugees were merchants, unfamiliar with farming.<sup>32</sup> They had expected to settle near the Atlantic Ocean, where they could manufacture cloth and other trading goods. Instead, the immigrants were dispatched to frontier lands beyond the existing English settlements and were forced to earn a living as farmers.<sup>33</sup> “The majority of the French men had spent their lives in business, commerce, and industry, and knew nothing of farming under frontier conditions, leaving the group largely unfit mentally and physically for a winter in the Virginia frontier.”<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the climate was different from France. “It is unhealthy for Frenchmen,” wrote Durand de Dauphine, a Huguenot exile, “...the southern provinces of Virginia are...very unhealthy.”<sup>35</sup>

Jean-Pierre’s medical skills must have been in great demand. The National Humanities Center’s historic collection called “Documents of Manakin Town, 1700-1702” tells us that “... more than half lay sick, languishing under misery and want and a great number of ‘em was dead and...so many of ‘em ...were in a distressed condition and in great disorder...”<sup>36</sup>

The inadequate diet, close confinement, and crowded conditions of the long ocean voyage made the Huguenots ready victims of the fevers which afflicted so many during the sickly summer seasons in Virginia. Upon arrival, the settlers went to work cutting underbrush, patching the decaying Indian huts, building crude shacks as temporary shelters, laying off streets, clearing the old Monacan fields, and cutting a rough road through the twenty miles of forest to a mill on Fall Creek.<sup>37</sup>

Through the lingering warmth of Indian summer and the damp chill which signaled the approach of winter, the Huguenots fought a grim struggle for survival. The inadequate supplies and meager funds were approaching exhaustion as the year drew to a close, and the settlers were forced to sell their arms, clothes, and other goods in order to purchase food.<sup>38</sup>

32 <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/religion/huguenots.html>

33 *ibid.*

34 <http://www.vanderfordfamily.com/html/manakin.htm>

35 Durand de Dauphine, *A Huguenot Exile in Virginia, or Voyages of a Frenchman exiled for his Religion with a description of Virginia and Maryland*, (Gilbert Chinard, editor), The Press of the Pioneers, New York, 1934, p. 102.

36 <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/becomingamer/growth/text4/frenchvirginia.pdf>

37 *ibid.*

38 *ibid.*

The exiled refugees had to cope with emotional as well as physical challenges. Between Manakin Town and the nearest English village lay some “twenty-five miles of virgin and virtually trackless forests, a green and silent wall of loneliness which would separate the French from their closest neighbors. Although the danger from Indians was probably slight, for no tribe lived in the immediate neighborhood, the fear of possible plunder and murder died slowly. The council ordered military officers to ‘visit the French Settlement...once every week to charge them not to leave their habitation nor to straggle into the woods any distance from their settlements.’”<sup>39</sup>

Jean Pierre stayed with this group until 1701 and then, as did many of the settlers, he left the village and moved into the surrounding countryside to live on his own farm in Henrico County, Virginia.<sup>40</sup>

By 1702 the worst of the refugees’ crisis was over. A Swiss traveler who visited the town recorded, “Gardens are filled with fruit...The country is full of game and fish. The Indians often visit there, bringing game, rum and other smaller things. There is a good opportunity to trade with skins. The Indians often bring pottery and when desired fill it with corn...The cows are pasturing round about the house during the whole year...They yield enough butter, cheese and milk...It is a quiet land devoted to our religion, and he who wants to enjoy honest exercise finds opportunities enough for it...It is, therefore, possible to make an honest life, quietly and contentedly.”<sup>41</sup>

This traveler certainly painted a glowing picture of the settlement. Any Swiss farmer accustomed to contending with winter snows, driving his dairy herd up and down steep hillsides, would have been impressed with the thought of merely “pasturing his cows round about the house during the whole year.” Perhaps the visitor was writing to Protestant refugees in the Old World, assuring them of hope for the future if they headed for the colonies.

In 1704 the Huguenot men petitioned to become citizens of the colony. In 1705 they were granted citizenship in an act passed by the Governor and House of Burgesses.<sup>42</sup> Jean Pierre Bondurant, age 27, was among them.

Now a citizen of the English colony, Jean Pierre began to establish more permanent roots. In 1706, the year following his citizenship, he obtained 200 acres of land across the Appomattox River from Petersburg. He seems to have prospered not only as a doctor for the colony but also as a landowner—a mere five years later, in 1711, he was able to purchase “400 acres on the south side of the James River from the King of England.”<sup>43</sup> By 1729, 18 years later, his sons Peter and John were listed on the “tithable” records of the county for this land purchase, which seems to indicate that Jean-Pierre was living elsewhere and that his sons had come ahead to work the new land.<sup>44</sup> And, based on the residency of the people Jean-Pierre sued for non-payment, we do know that during these years he practiced medicine along the James River from Petersburg towards Williamsburg.<sup>45</sup>

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39 <http://www.virginiaplaces.org/religion/huguenots.html>

40 Warren, Bondurants, p. 74

41 *ibid.*

42 *ibid.*, p. 74.

43 *ibid.*

44 Warren, Bondurants, p. 75.

45 *ibid.*, p. 74.

It is not known whether Jean-Pierre was married more than once and, if so, which children belong to each wife. A wife, Ann, the mother of his son Peter, is mentioned in his will. Many researchers had thought that his wife was Ann Faure, but this appears incorrect. She may have been Ann Tanner. In the 1760s, the will of Mrs. Mary Tanner of Albemarle Co., Virginia left \$1 to her daughter Ann Bondurant. Whether this Mary Tanner was Jean-Pierre's widow has not been proven. We do know that his five children were John, Peter, Joseph, Ann, and Frances.<sup>46</sup>

Jean-Pierre practiced medicine and remained active in his community throughout his life; we read that he was elected to the Vestry of King William Parish Church shortly before his death.<sup>47</sup>



Restored King William Parish Church

Jean-Pierre attended church in Manakin Town in the church shown above, now restored and known as the Manakin Episcopal Church. Nearby, the Huguenot Society of Manakin preserves the history of the founders of the town.<sup>48</sup>

One of Jean-Pierre's sons, Dr. Joseph Bondurant, followed in his father's footsteps, becoming a medical doctor, and Joseph Bondurant's son William would go on to marry Judith Moseley, one of the wealthiest women in the colony of Virginia and heiress to the land that would become Variety Shade.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.huguenotmanakin.org/>

<sup>49</sup> In 1747, King George II of England granted land in Virginia to Englishman William Perkins, whose heir would be Judith Moseley, his niece. The charter for the king's land grant detailed a 20,000-acre plot of rolling hills in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. Pittman, James, Tinsley Harrison, M.D.: Teacher of Medicine, (New South Book, 2014) p. 39



Jean-Pierre died at the age of 58 in 1734/35. One hundred ninety-two years later his descendant Alexander Bondurant wrote: “My paternal ancestors were French Huguenots, who fled from France during the religious persecution of that sect, in the reign of Louis fourteenth. Being of chivalrous race, believing in ‘sensing God according to the dictates of their own conscience’, they abandoned their homes & property and took refuge in the new settled Country, Virginia, in North-America, taking up land and making their home on the beautiful banks of James River at Manakintown, a few miles above the present City of Richmond.”<sup>50</sup>



Descendants of Jean-Pierre erected a memorial plaque at his gravesite.

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50 Bondurant, Alexander, “History and Reminiscences of my life”, Chapter 1, Alexander Bondurant Collection in the Archives of Auburn University.

