

SI350 and the Memorial Church of the Huguenots

In 2011, Staten Island celebrated its first and continuous European settlement in 1661. This celebration, SI350, included various cultural, social, educational, political, religious and economic institutions. SI350 was a collaborative endeavor spearheaded by professors at CUNY College of Staten Island, Wagner College, Saint John's University, and New Jersey's Union County Community College. It included participation by our Island's elementary and secondary students in everything from their classroom curriculum to various projects and contests. Twelve history trails, one for each month in 2011, were established with a total of 350 sites. Exciting events followed a thematic calendar.

This anniversary celebration educated the public on the important role their hometown has played and continues to play for the region, the nation, and the world at large.¹ This imparted an important sense of belonging, a crucial component to the well-being and continued creativity of all our Staten Islanders and our tri-state neighbors as well.

Our church, the Memorial Church of the Huguenots, seeks to continue this celebration of Staten Island and its important history. We, here at the Reformed Church of Huguenot Park, will be celebrating our own 163rd anniversary as a congregation. Our church, including its founding members, has a unique and courageous story to impart. In 1661, our ancestors, the French Huguenots, were among the 19 settlers

¹ <http://www.si350.org/350th-welcom>

granted “permission to found a community upon Staten Island” by Peter Stuyvesant, the Director General of New Netherlands.² Moreover, their courageous story goes back beyond those 350 years. We are delighted that our story fits right in with our hometown’s anniversary.

Have I not commanded you?

Be strong and courageous.

Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged,

For the Lord your God will be with you

wherever you go.

Joshua 1: 9 NIV³

History of the French Huguenots

The Huguenots were members of the Protestant Reformed Church of France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although subject to severe religious persecution in their native France, a great number of the Huguenots held their belief system intact. Many chose to flee persecution by migrating to more tolerant European countries such as Holland, England, Switzerland, and Germany. Some went to South

² Henry G. Steinmeyer, Staten Island 1524-1989, Rev. Ed., Richmondtown, S.I., N.Y.: The Staten Island Historical Society, 1987, p. 20 and <http://www.si350.org/>

³ NIV Study Bible-New International Version, Zondervan Corporation, 1985.

Africa.⁴ Eventually, many of the Huguenots crossed the Atlantic, helping to colonize the Eastern seaboard of America. Here on Staten Island, New York, these Frenchmen were among the first group to establish an ongoing permanent settlement in 1661.⁵ Huguenot presence and influence were important to the birthing and development of the United States. This presence still thrives on Staten Island today through the congregants of The Reformed Church of Huguenot Park, (RCHP). RCHP strives to be Christ-centered, Biblically based, faith oriented, grace filled, and seeks to do all for the glory of God.⁶

The name Huguenot was given to French Protestants who were influenced by Martin Luther's preaching in the early Sixteenth century, and who later established a Reformed Church following the teachings of John Calvin. In essence, these French Reformers rejected the excesses and doctrines of the established Western church and the French monarchy.

A few theories have emerged regarding the derivative of the name Huguenot. The name could be a reference to Besencon Hugues, a religious and political leader who lead the “Confederate Party” in Geneva, Switzerland.⁷ It could also be a derivation of combining the Flemish and German words

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huguenot>

⁵ Steinmeyer, p. 20.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_solos

⁷ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huguenot>

for house Bible students, “Huis Genooten.”⁸ Some say the name Huguenot must have originated from the French language. Keeping that in mind, the name may be derived from Hugues Capet, a highly regarded French king from the pre-reformation era. Finally, the name could be related to the fact that the ‘reformed’ held their gatherings at night, “both for political purposes, and for prayer and singing the psalms.”⁹ Thus, the name came from derogatorily comparing the Huguenots to a street-strolling underworld spirit, “le Roy Huguet.”¹⁰

By the mid-1530’s, the Reformed Church was established in France. The church grew rapidly and by the middle of the Sixteenth Century, there were about 2,000 congregations with perhaps 1.5 million believers. As the French Protestant church grew, so did its conflict with the Roman Catholic Church and the French Monarchy. In 1536, a General Edict declared the Huguenots heretics and urged their extermination.¹¹ The French religious and civil establishments continuously tried to eliminate, rather than tolerate, the Protestants. This resulted in more than a century of bitter persecution and fighting.

French Huguenots were not the only Christian group subject to oppression. The Waldensians, a pre-reformation group,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The National Huguenot Society

<http://huguenot.netnation.com/general/huguenot.htm> p. 1.

originating in France during the Middle Ages, who endured persecution and hardships for several centuries, preceded them.¹² In 1170, their leader, Valdes, commissioned two clerics to translate portions of the New Testament into the common vernacular spoken in Lyon, France.¹³ After their excommunication from the Catholic Church, the Waldensians were forced to live clandestinely.¹⁴ In 1545, French King Francis I sent an army to punish the Waldensians for their dissident religious activities ending in the Massacre of Merendal.¹⁵ The Waldensians eventually settled in the Alps due to continued persecution.¹⁶ However, in France, the mere availability of Scripture in one of the regional languages proved integral for others, such as the Huguenots, to continue questioning the practices of the local religious leaders and seek back-to-the-Bible reforms.

In Sixteenth Century Germany, the Reformation gained momentum when Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk, rose to protest ecclesiastical abuses. Outraged by the sale of indulgences by Johann Tetzel, a Dominican preacher, Luther

¹² The Waldensians who remained in Italy did not attain full rights as citizens until well into the Twentieth century. Ronald F. Mallan, Waldensian History: A Brief Sketch <http://homepages.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~waldense/history.htm> p. 13.

¹³ Ibid, p. 3

¹⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waldensians> pp 3-4.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁶ <http://www.scrollpublishing.com/store/Waldensians.html> pp. 3-4

nailed his Ninety-Five Theses on the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg in 1517.¹⁷ Luther asserted "true repentance is an inward matter and puts a man into direct touch with the forgiving Father."¹⁸ Luther's writings and actions furthered the Protestant Reformation in Europe and gave birth to the Lutheran Church. The basic teachings in the Lutheran church fostered the development of the inner man with emphasis on faith, grace, Scripture reading, and a personal relationship with God.¹⁹

Martin Luther inspired the French Huguenot Protestants. However, the Huguenots then generally followed the teachings of yet another Reformer, John Calvin, a French theologian who had also studied law.²⁰ He preached in Geneva, Switzerland, from 1537 to 1564. Calvin conceived of a simpler form of church organization than the Catholic hierarchy. For Calvin, the local congregation "called" its own ministers via the elders and deacons who then together formed the "Consistory."²¹

¹⁷http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Tetzel

¹⁸John B Noss, *Man's Religions*, The Macmillan Company, 1969, p. 485.

¹⁹ Rose S. Proscia, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Protestant Christian Resistance in Nazi Germany 1933-1945" (unpublished paper written Dec. 2003)

²⁰http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/John_Calvin.htm

²¹ Noss, p. 488.

The French Protestants adopted this form of church authority.²²
A concise summary of this church structure is as follows:

A group of believers, a minister, a 'consistory' of elders and deacons, regular preaching, and the sacraments duly administered, made a church properly constituted....The elders and deacons were chosen by the members of the congregation; and the minister by the elders and deacons.²³

According to John B. Noss in *Man's Religions*, "This was Christian democracy. Kings and bishops naturally opposed it."²⁴

As early as the 1530's, the first religious refugees began leaving France. The ones who remained endured a series of eight French Wars of Religion including the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572 ordered by decree of King Charles IX.²⁵ Many years later, in 1598, King Henry IV, a former Protestant himself, issued the Edict of Nantes relieving Huguenot persecution and allowing them freedom to worship.²⁶ However, their civil and religious difficulties were not over.

²² T. M. Lindsay, *A History of the Reformation*, Scribner's Sons, 1919, II, p. 165.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Noss, p. 488 (footnote).

²⁵ French Wars of Religion (1562-1598) were comprised of civil infighting and military operations, primarily between French Catholics and Protestants. Stewart C, Easton, *The Western Heritage*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1966, p. 356, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huguenot> p. 5. and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Wars_of_Religion p. 1.

²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/wallon_church

Later, Louis XIII regarded the Protestants as a threat to his monarchy and worked to eliminate all Huguenot communities in France. Protestant freedoms were restricted and in 1622, the Crown began another series of Huguenot Wars ending in 1627 with the siege and fall of La Rochelle with an uneasy peace.²⁷ By 1685, King Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes and threatened to kill anyone who didn't agree with his beliefs. The Huguenots fled from France, taking with them their commercial and industrial abilities.²⁸

It was not until November 28, 1787, that Louis XVI and the French Council adopted the Edict of Toleration guaranteeing religious freedom to all in France, with persuasion from the Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette in his dealings with the American Huguenots saw firsthand their value to any society and wanted them protected in France. During the entire period between the early parts of the Sixteenth Century to 1787, thousands of Huguenots left their homes in France for other countries due to the recurring waves of persecution. More than 40,000 Huguenots settled in England alone after 1685. They were skilled, ambitious, energetic, and thrifty. These immigrants from France are credited with instilling “new vigor into the English nation.”²⁹ As Esther Forbes, wrote in *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In*:

²⁷ LaRochelle, a large French city, became a Huguenot stronghold, under its own governance, following the Edict of Nantes.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_La_Rochelle

²⁸ Easton, p. 356.

²⁹ Edward McNall Burns, *Western Civilizations: Their History and Their Culture* (3rd Ed.), W.W. Norton & Company Inc, New York, 1949, p. 546.

France had opened her own veins and spilt her best blood when she drained herself of her Huguenots, and everywhere, in every country that would receive them, this amazing strain acted as a yeast.³⁰

Just as France suffered notable losses through the emigration of these intelligent, capable people, so the American colonies gained. These colonists became farmers, laborers, ministers, soldiers, sailors, and people who engaged in government. The Huguenots supplied the colonies with excellent physicians and expert artisans and craftsmen.

Huguenot settlers immigrated to the American colonies directly from France and indirectly from the Protestant countries of Europe... They readily adapted to the New World. Their descendants increased rapidly and spread quickly. Although the Huguenots settled along almost the entire eastern coast of North America, they showed a preference for what are now the states of Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and South Carolina.

Staten Island was ‘discovered’ by the Europeans when Giovanni da Verrazzano, a Florentine explorer in the employ of Francis I of France, anchored his ship, the Dolphin, in April 1524 near “The Watering Place” (Tompkinsville).³¹ Almost a century later, Englishman, Henry Hudson, sailing the Half Moon for Holland in 1609, bestowed on the Island the name

³⁰ Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1942.

³¹ Richard Dickenson, Ed., Holden’s Staten Island: The History of Richmond County, p. 11; Steinmeyer, p. 11; and Vernon B. Hampton, Staten Island’s Claim to Fame-The Garden Spot of New York Harbor, Richmond Borough Publishing and Printing Co., p. 17.

“Staaten Eylandt,” after the States-General of Holland, the governing body that commissioned his voyage.³²

Thereafter, the Dutch West India Company, formed in 1621 by Dutch merchants and chartered by the government of The Netherlands, began organizing trips to colonize Dutch territories in America.³³ In 1624, 30 families of Protestant Walloons and French Huguenots set sail on the “Nieu Nederland under contract with the Dutch West India Company.”³⁴ Several of the families disembarked on Staten Island, while others went on to New Netherlands (Manhattan), and still others to Fort Orange (Albany).³⁵ According to *Holden’s Staten Island*, “in exchange for transportation, necessary equipment and supplies, settlers were bound to stay in America at least six years, to sell all their furs to the company for export, and not to manufacture anything which was not for their own use.”³⁶

Several years later, the Dutch attempted some settlements on Staten Island, which proved unsuccessful. A 1639 Dutch

³² Henry Hudson’s attempted landing on the island caused a skirmish with the Native American inhabitants resulting in the first European casualty in this region. Hampton, p. 17 and Cornelius G. Kolff, *A Short History of Staten Island*, 2nd Ed, (publisher unknown), 1926.

³³ World Book and Hampton, p. 17.

³⁴ Walloons are French-speaking people who live in present day Belgium, principally in Wallonia, forming a distinctive community. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wallon_Church and Hampton, p. 18.

³⁵ Hampton, p. 18.

³⁶ Dickenson, p 12.

settlement at the Watering Place encountered numerous skirmishes with the Native Americans. The Natives would conduct surprise nocturnal raids burning settlement homes, “killing or stealing their cattle, and murdering the men, women and children.”³⁷ In 1639, Peter de Vries established another village at the Watering Place only to have his farms devastated and his blockhouse and buildings destroyed. Another Dutchman, Cornelius Melyn, obtained a land grant on the Island in 1642. Here again, Indian warfare demolished his settlement. Houses were torched and crops destroyed.³⁸

Between 1650 and 1655, French Huguenots once again landed on Staten Island. Their presence at the site of present day Miller Field on the East Shore of the Island has been documented.³⁹ Furthermore, early historical material for Staten Island also refers to a 1658-attempted settlement in Stony Brook (now known as part of New Dorp), which included a Waldensian Church.⁴⁰ However, later local historians cast

³⁷ Kolff.

³⁸ Kolff.

³⁹ Rose S. Proscia, Miller Field: A Field for All Times (Unpublished paper, Revised Feb. 2011) quoting from Dickenson, p. 355.

⁴⁰ The footnotes in Morris’ book refer to earlier S.I. historians who discuss a S.I. Waldensian settlement, including Historian Van Pelt. Ira K. Morris, Morris’s Memorial History of Staten Island, The Winthrop Press, N.Y., 1898. p. 40. Also, Dorothy Valentine Smith’s history of Staten Island, gives a specific list of the early local historians who all refer to this “tradition of the Waldenses” on S.I. Staten Island-Gateway to New York, Chilton Book Co., 1970, p. 22.

doubt that any Waldensians were part of that settlement, referring to the story as the “Waldensian Myth.”⁴¹

A few years later, in 1661, the Huguenots became some of the first settlers of Old Town in present day South Beach. Peter Stuyvesant gave them land grants, along with Dutch and Belgian families.⁴² The area included flat fields suitable for planting grain, a creek with access to the lower bay, and sufficient pasturage for cattle.⁴³ A French speaking Protestant (Walloon), Pierre Billiou, from southern Netherlands (today’s Belgium), was the first sheriff.⁴⁴ The Huguenots were part of this successful settlement as well as being among the Island’s first religious refugees.⁴⁵

Here in America, the Huguenots were able to exercise their freedom to worship God according to their own belief system. In the Old Town settlement, Rev. Samuel Drisius of New

⁴¹ Charles W. Leng and William T. Davis, *Staten Island and It’s People: A History 1609-1929*, Vol. 1, 1930, pp. 108-9 and Margaret Lundrigan, *Staten Island: Isle of the Bay*, Arcadia Publishing, 2004, pp 16-17.

⁴² Kenneth M. Gold and Lori R. Weintrob, Editors, *Discovering Staten Island: A 350th Anniversary Commemorative History*, The History Press, 2011.

⁴³ Steinmeyer, p. 20.

⁴⁴ The Billiou-Stillwell-Perine House, now owned and maintained by the Staten Island Historical Society is reputed to be the oldest structure on Staten Island dating back to circa 1662. Steinmeyer, p. 71; Gold, p. 160; and Margaret Lundrigan and Tova Navarra, *Images of America: Staten Island*, Arcadia, 1997, p. 110.

⁴⁵ Gold, p. 66.

Amsterdam conducted worship service in English, French, as well as in Dutch. However, due to his advanced age and the difficulties encountered crossing “the great water or bay,” he was only able to make the journey every two months.⁴⁶ When he came, he preached and administered the Lord’s Supper.⁴⁷

Other French settlements sprang up in Staten Island. Daniel Perrin arrived in New York Harbor from Elizabethtown, New Jersey on July 29, 1665. He settled on the South Shore of Staten Island where he was eventually granted 80 acres. Since he was known as “The Huguenot,” the neighborhood near where he settled eventually became his namesake.⁴⁸ In 1675, Frenchman Jacques Guyon settled in Crescent Beach (Great Kills). Other French and Dutch families joined the settlement where “oyster, clam and crab harvesting were plentiful.”⁴⁹ At the same time, Coccoles Town (Richmondtown) was evolving into a typical small colonial village. It was here in 1700 that Samuel Grosset, a French Huguenot, “carried on his trade as a

⁴⁶ Steinmeyer, p. 20.

⁴⁷ Steinmeyer believes the group in Old Town also included “Waldenses, survivors of the massacre in Piedmont in 1655, and who had escaped to Holland, subsequently coming to America.” Ibid.

⁴⁸ Other Huguenots had also settled in the same geographic area in the late 1600’s. In 1849, the area by the Reformed Church of Huguenot Park was known as “Bloomingview.” Program from the Reformed Church of Huguenot Park’s 160th Anniversary and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Perrin

⁴⁹ Gold, pp. 128-129.

tanner, by the adjacent creek..”⁵⁰ About one mile south of Coccles Town, in Greenridge, a Huguenot family ran their “Cortelyou Farm.”⁵¹ Family commission may have executed an 1843 painting of that farm by prominent Hudson River painter and Staten Island native, Jasper Cropsey, as his mother, Elizabeth, was a Cortelyou.⁵²

Documentation exists for a Fresh Kills French Church and cemetery, dating to 1690 or earlier.⁵³ *Holden’s Staten Island* also refers to a Huguenot settlement at Kleine Kill (Fresh Kills).⁵⁴ It is believed that for about 35 years the faithful French Huguenot settlers met in houses, barns, in open fields, or in the Voorlezer House, built around 1695.⁵⁵ By 1693, Staten Island already had a resident minister, Reverend David de Bonrepos, who “preached to a congregation of 36 French, 40 English, and 44 Dutch settlers.”⁵⁶ This group received a deed to land in Greenridge, not far from Coccles Town, where they built a French Huguenot Church sometime between 1683

⁵⁰ Grosset’s house, commonly referred to as the Treasure House, is now part of Richmondtown Restoration at its original location. Dickenson, pp. 28-29.

⁵¹Michael Fressola, Staten Island Advance, August 1, 1993. A street in honor of the Cortelyou’s runs from Arthur Kill Rd. to Wilson Avenue, commencing in Greenridge and possibly at the location of their farm.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Documented on the right wall of the sanctuary, Reformed Church of Huguenot Park.

⁵⁴ Dickenson, p. 34.

⁵⁵ Valentine, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 22.

and 1698.⁵⁷ The Huguenots shared this building with the Dutch Reform and Anglican groups who lacked houses of worship of their own.⁵⁸ Here in their new wilderness environment, the Huguenots were exemplifying their ideals of kindness and tolerance as they willingly shared their sacred accommodations with other settlers.⁵⁹

In the mid to late Eighteenth Century, the American Huguenots displayed their courage and fortitude as the 13 Colonies prepared to seek independence from English rule. On April 18, 1775, Paul Revere, a descendant from Huguenot refugees and a master silversmith, bravely rode the midnight ride to warn the colonists in Lexington, Massachusetts that the British were coming.⁶⁰ Captain Jack Jouett, another Huguenot, made the 40 mile Virginia ride on June 4, 1781, from Cuckoo Tavern to Monticello and then to Charlottesville to warn Thomas Jefferson and the Virginia legislators that British officer Tarleton was coming with 180 British Dragoons and 70 mounted infantrymen.⁶¹ Another Huguenot descendent, Henry Laurens, signed the Declaration of Independence for South

⁵⁷ The Voorlezer House remains on its original site in Historic Richmondtown and is known as the oldest remaining schoolhouse in U.S. Ibid, p. 35 and Gold, p. 193.

⁵⁸ Gold, pp. 192-3.

⁵⁹ Program from 160th Anniversary, Preface.

⁶⁰ The World Book Encyclopedia, 1964 and <http://huguenotsocietyofamerica.org/?page=Huguenot-History>

⁶¹ Jouett, a Militia Captain, is considered the "Paul Revere of the South."
http://www.jouetthouse.org/index.php?option=com_cc

Carolina.⁶² Frances Marion, a South Carolinian grandchild of French Huguenots and a military officer in the American Revolutionary War, took on the name “Swamp Fox” for his military tactics and persistent resistance to the British.⁶³ George Washington, also a grandson of a Huguenot on his maternal side, won lasting place in American history as the “Father of His Country.”⁶⁴ He commanded the Continental Army, presided over the convention that wrote the U.S. Constitution, and was the first man elected President of the United States.⁶⁵

Thus, the Huguenots were among those brave Fathers of our country who incorporated their ideas of human dignity and worth with the ideals of individuality and personal freedom to formulate the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution of the United States. They were among those who set up the U.S. governmental structure with a system of checks and balances so as to prevent the type of autocracy that oppressed their forefathers in Europe. Furthermore, they were among those who “sanely established governments upon a sound basis with church and state separate.”⁶⁶

⁶² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huguenot> p. 10.

⁶³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_Marion

⁶⁴ World Book.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Hampton, p. 19

History of the Reformed Church of Huguenot Park

In September 1849, a group of nine people, residing in the west quarter of Staten Island, made a request to the Classis of New York to organize as a church. The Reformed Protestant Dutch Church of Westfield was approved. The church was given land by the Hon. Benjamin P. Prall, a direct descendant of Pierre Billiou.⁶⁷ The congregation built and then worshipped in the little “Brown Church” from approximately 1849 through 1918.⁶⁸ In October of 1852, the church Consistory decided to purchase the land next to the church from Benjamin Prall to be used as a cemetery. Consistory minutes reveal that the church donated a burial plot “wherever he selects” to Mr. Prall, one the first Church Elders.⁶⁹ On April 1, 1918, the church was destroyed by fire. It appeared that sparks from a train engine landed on the roof of the Brown Church and started the fire. The adjoining manse, built in 1892, was not affected. The only remains salvaged from the “Church of the Huguenots” were a big bronze bell that fell from the belfry and the pulpit.⁷⁰ The Hall family who lived across the street offered their living room for church services and Sunday school. In time, a portable church, from a Reformed Church in America kit, was erected on the foundation of the burned church. This sheltered

⁶⁷ Dickenson, p. 60

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Program from 160th Anniversary, p 1.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 5.

the congregation from the rain and snow, but the wind whistled through it and around the corners.

In 1922, the congregation went into contract with the Northern Baptist Board of Architecture to serve as a consulting architect for the new church. The actual designer was noted architect, Ernest Flagg.⁷¹ Tentative plans were drawn and in March 1923 a contract was ratified with Dongan Stone and Lumbar Company to build the new church in a style reminiscent of the “vernacular Norman architecture of England and northwestern France.”⁷²

Reverend Frost, himself a Huguenot, led the efforts to build the current church. He inspired many descendants of the original Huguenots to contribute to the building fund. Reverend Frost’s dream was to build a national memorial to the Huguenot settlers in the United States including the building of a museum and a park.

He enlisted the Huguenot Society of America for financial support. The society hoped to make the Huguenot Park the chief center of Huguenot culture and interest in America. These plans did not fully come to fruition; but the Huguenot Memorial Church, built with serpentine stone, quarried from the Dongan Hills land of Architect Flagg, was dedicated on March 18, 1924. The Church was dedicated as the National Monument of the Huguenot-Walloon-New Netherlands 300th

⁷¹ Gold, p. 165.

⁷² Dickenson, p. 417.

Anniversary of Religious Freedom.⁷³ In keeping with the history of the Huguenots, it was appropriate for them to celebrate religious freedom, above all else.

The building sanctuary recounts the Huguenot story from Europe to America. The Reformed Church of America, (RCA), authorized the placing of the Reformed Church Coat of Arms in the large rose window at the rear of the church. This is a memorial to Prince William, the Silent of Orange, a man noted for his religious tolerance. A stained glass portrait window is a tribute to George Washington. The "Stone Pillars of the Pioneers" contain engravings with the names of early Huguenot leaders and their descendents, including John Jay, who served both as Governor of New York and Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. The Huguenot Society of America in New York donated the communion table as a memorial gift from the society. The arches over the entrance doors are dedicated to early Huguenot families on Staten Island.

It is believed that the word RESISTEZ that is inscribed on the front wall of the sanctuary had been inscribed in the cell of Huguenot Marie Durand, a young teenager imprisoned in the Tour de Constance because of her Protestant Huguenot faith. In 1730, it was illegal to be a Huguenot in France. The Durand family maintained their faith secretly by daily readings of the Bible. Their father organized secret assemblies in the "Désert" where Protestant services were held from time to time. During one of these services, Marie's mother was arrested and charged with denouncing a neighbor. Mrs. Durand later died in

⁷³ This was the 300th anniversary of the 1524 landing of the Huguenots and Walloons who were under contract with the Dutch West India Co. Hampton recounts that the 1924 anniversary was virtually worldwide with a Tercentenary Commission including President Calvin Coolidge, President Millerant of France, King Albert of Belgium, and Queen Wilhelmina of Holland. p. 18 and Gold, p. 165.

prison. Marie, also imprisoned, refused to denounce her faith, which was the condition for release. Her refusal encouraged other Huguenots to resist their persecution and remain faithful to the truths of the Reformation. Her faith had strengthened through suffering. Suffering was not new to Marie as she endured pain when her brother died a saintly death two years after his own imprisonment. Marie courageously accepted her situation. She kept up the spirits of her fellow prisoners and gave them great comfort. Her encouragement helped others fight the temptation to abjure their faith even though doing so would allow them freedom. In short, she exemplified the very spirit of resistance to the pressures of the Catholic hierarchy who wanted the prisoners to give up their Protestant faith. Marie's release came 38 years after her imprisonment.

French Protestants used a Huguenot Cross as symbol of recognition. They also wore the Huguenot Cross as a sign of their evangelical faith. In the beginning of the 20th century, this ancient custom was revived, not only in France; but also in other countries of Europe. Today it is a symbol of Protestant faith and a beautiful means of identification for Protestants all over the world.

The Huguenots chose to be identified by the Maltese Cross rather than the Roman Cross.⁷⁴ The Maltese Cross has four arms of equal length, but each arm becomes progressively broader as it leaves the center. The outer edge of each arm is indented in the shape of a V. Thus, there are two points at the end of each arm, eight in all, representing the Beatitudes.⁷⁵ Between the arms of the cross are four lilies, the symbol of purity. The four open spaces between the arms of the cross

⁷⁴ According to Morris, the Waldensians also had the cross of Malta over the door of their church in Stony Brook as well as in every house. p. 43.

⁷⁵ Matthew 5:3-10.

form four hearts, the symbol of loyalty. The appendage is a small dove, the symbol of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶ Wearing this cross not only identifies the Huguenots as a people of faith, but also reminds them of their forefathers' days of suffering and persecution. Moreover, it unites them as a cohesive church family.

Today, people of Huguenot origin are found in all parts of our country. The French Huguenots were able to hold onto their identity and their belief system despite persecution and hardships. In fact, they took their beliefs and difficult experiences to a higher level.⁷⁷ They helped create an American society where religious differences would be tolerated, basic human rights protected by written law, and the processes of governance would be democratic.⁷⁸ Thus, we have much to celebrate at Huguenot Park and on Staten Island. Our church forefathers on Staten Island were instrumental in creating the United States of America.

⁷⁶ Historic Huguenot Street is a National Historic Landmark District and is incorporated as the Huguenot Historical Society, New Paltz, N.Y.

Copyright© 2008 Huguenot Historical Society.

⁷⁷ Genesis 50: 20 You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. NIV Study Bible.

⁷⁸ Romans 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. NIV Study Bible.

Respectfully Submitted,
Phyllis DeLisio, Deacon
Rose Stella Proscia, Member
Reformed Church of Huguenot Park