THE MYSTERIOUS FRENCHMAN:
ALEXANDER CALIZANCE MILLER IN AMERICA, 1797-1831

William E. Craig, Ph.D.

Alexander Calizance Miller’s origin was an intriguing mystery to his contemporaries at the beginning of the nineteenth century as it has been to his descendants ever since. It even delayed his marriage to Mary Brown, daughter of General Thomas Brown, the Bladen County Revolutionary hero, because “... her friends have hitherto opposed it on account of the mystery attached to him.”

More recently, his romantic story has been very briefly retold to give zest to the brochure The Story of Orton Plantation. Some at least of his great-great-grandchildren learned a nursery jingle concocted out of his foreign names, a mnemonic device calculated to enhance their image of their ancestor as “the mysterious Frenchman.”

There is no mystery about his person. He was a talented, well-educated, handsome man whom women found attractive and men were comfortable with. Nor is there any mystery about his life in America, which is not an unprecedented American success story: the penniless immigrant who makes a living as a teacher, marries well and lives the uneventful life of a plantation owner in the Old South. The mystery is about his origin. Of this we have only his own words told to his friends. His intimate friend Lieutenant Joseph Gardner Swift, later a general and chief engineer of the United States Army, wrote of the first time they met in 1804:

Mr. Miller was an accomplished gentleman—especially so in music and drawing. He interested us much in his history. He stated to us that he had escaped from France in the year 1797; was a cadet in the family of De La Marche; had been a mere boy in the corps of Conde at the battle of Dusseldorf; made his escape to America from Rotterdam by the aid of the master of the ship, Captain Miller, whose name he bore, and arrived in Philadelphia, where he earned his bread by teaching the piano and violin, and drawing. He is of remarkable personal beauty and elegance of manner.

Such an account of himself can be the literal truth or it can be the unverifiable invention of a confidence man. If the latter, this confidence man turned over a completely new leaf. From before 1804 to his death in 1831, Alexander Miller was on close terms with a series of intelligent associates, none of whom seem to have had any question of his integrity. Yet the question still lingers: Why did he never revert to the use of his own family names, even if only in perhaps abbreviated and Anglicized form more suitable to the new American democracy?

His French name was Alexandre Ferdinand Leopold Calizance de la Marque, according to the family tradition already mentioned. Or perhaps it was Louis Leopold Calezance de la Marc, according to the tradition quoted in the Orton brochure. In either case, if the census takers can be trusted, Alexander Miller was born between 1775 and 1780. The latter date is more consistent with his claim to have been “a mere boy” at the battle of Dusseldorf, which took place in 1795. The year 1797 is late for him to have escaped from France and come to Philadelphia by way of Rotterdam, because most of the French emigres had come long before then and many had already left:

In 1796 and thereafter most of the emigres had left the United States. From 1800 those only remained who were too poor to leave, ... or were those emigres “trop compromis” to live in France, or were ecclesiastics associated with parishes ... The emigres (to the United States) were groups of aristocrats, teachers, Santo Domingo landowners escaping the slave revolt, and adventurers.

Perhaps it was in Philadelphia that Alexander met John Bradley, who was to open his way to North Carolina. Bradley was a Wilmington merchant whose mother, Elizabeth Sharpless, had come from a prominent Quaker family associated with William Penn and had emigrated from Philadelphia to North Carolina.

Bradley had Philadelphia mercantile interests and a sister, Lucy, who had married Colonel Thomas Brown during the Revolution. Brown was a Bladen County planter whose leadership and tenacity had enabled him to emerge from the Revolution a general of militia and a wealthy man. By 1804 the Browns had two daughters, one of whom became the wife of future Governor John Owen, the other Mrs. Alexander C. Miller.

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PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

As we start a new year for the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, we should pause and give a word of thanks to Frank Conlon, our president for the past three years. In the armed services they give a medal for service above and beyond the call of duty. I believe it is called the Distinguished Service Award. If the LCFS had such an award, it would surely go to Frank because he has certainly fulfilled those qualifications.

Thanks Frank!

One of my first duties as your new president was to accept a $2000 gift from the Lower Cape Fear Garden Club. This money is to be used for the Incorporators’ Garden on which Heide Trask has worked so diligently. Please stop by and see the garden and you will agree that it is delightful.

The Candlelight Tour under the capable direction of Susie Withers, is making good progress and is scheduled for December 7 and 8. The Cape Fear Garden Club will hold its annual Christmas tea at the Latimer House. The ladies are decorating the house for this event and will leave the decorations up for the Candlelight Tour. This is most helpful and we appreciate it.

Betty Boney and Cissy Loughlin are planning the Wassail Bowl for December 6, so mark your calendar now for the Tour and the Wassail Bowl. Remember, these are our chief money making activities, so please support them.

Other committee chairmen are: Bulletin, Susan Gerdes; Clarendon Award, Walser Allen; Docent, Louise Pierson; Finance, Alton Wood; Hospitality, Rosalie Carr; Historic Wilmington Tour, Gail Pike; Latimer House and Servants’ Quarters, Tony DeSisto and Richard Courtright; Long Range Planning, Frank Conlon; Membership, Bill Stanfield; Program, Betty Boney; Publications, Alan Watson; Publicity, Mary Jo Oakley; Restoration, Shirley Maney; Sales, John Taylor; Wilmington Yesteryear, Linda Hendley.

The officers and directors are listed elsewhere, but I thought it might be helpful for you to know the names of the committee chairmen. They welcome your suggestions and assistance.

We are off and running and expect good things to happen this year.

Sincerely,

Jean Anne Sutton

Volunteers are needed to work in the Archives. If you can help, please call the office.
GIFTS TO THE SOCIETY

The Society gratefully acknowledges the following gifts:

GIFTS TO THE ARCHIVES

Miss Margaret T. Hall
People and Plants: N.C. Garden History Revisited by John Baxton Flowers III.

Mr. and Mrs. David Brinkley
Cash donation for records preservation.

Mr. James Alfred Miller, Jr.
We Have Taken A City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898 by H. Leon Prather, Jr. and "A Journal of a Tour in Texas with observations by the agents of the Wilmington Emigration Society." 1887, Joshua James, agent.

Dr. and Mrs. Charles Nance
Miscellaneous materials on First Presbyterian Church.

Mr. Harry G. Latimer III
Original contract between Zebulon Latimer and the Wood brothers for the construction of the Latimer House and original specifications for the house; loan of Latimer family genealogies, papers, and correspondence.

Dr. and Mrs. John Cashman
Seven books on N.C. and Wilmington history including Bald Head Island by David Stick and The Soong Dynasty by Sterling Seagrave and Raleigh News and Observer 400th of N.C. edition.

Family of Miss Elizabeth McCoy
Photographs, college yearbooks, and papers concerning Miss McCoy.

Dr. and Mrs. James Rush Beeler
Newspaper article on "Moorefields."

Mrs. Ruth Savage Walker
Two Wilmington City Directories and They Called Them Lightning: A Teacher’s Odyssey of the Negro South 1908-1919 by Lura Beam.

New Hanover/Pender Medical Society Auxiliary
Loan of all materials related to physician biographies and hospitals in the area.

Mrs. Audrey Frady Rivenbark
Genealogies compiled by the donor on Charles Bannerman, John Murray, Richard Player of New Hanover County, and the Armstongs of Eastern N.C.

Mrs. Robert W. Williams
Research material compiled by Isabel McEachern and Leora H. McEachern on Wilmington area in the period 1861-1865 and materials on the Worth family. 30 inches of cards and four feet of files.

Mrs. Lucille Blake
1850 Census of Brunswick County.

Mrs. Thetis Jones Moore and Mrs. Charlotte Jones Parker
Genealogical materials on the Bonitz family, materials relating to the late Mr. and Mrs. Charles F. Jones, Sr., and 32 individual items of local historic interest.

Mrs. Merle J. Chamberlain
Six color photographs of the Latimer House Garden.

Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth M. Sprunt
"The Story of Orton Plantation" by James Laurence Sprunt.

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It was John Bradley who introduced Alexander to Mrs. Benjamin Smith, wife of the general and governor, to Dr. Griffin, Lieutenant Joseph Swift, and others, no doubt including the Browns at Ashwood, which was the general’s seat in Bladen County. Alexander was painting portraits of the local gentry, and his friendship with Swift was ripening. When Swift married in 1805, Alexander Miller was one of his three attendants, and Swift’s second son was named Alexander.10

Joseph Swift was extremely well connected.11 Member of the first graduating class of West Point, chief of the United States Army Corps of Engineers, superintendent of West Point, he had friends in positions of influence from New York to Charleston—and in Warrenton, North Carolina.

While Alexander was still under the necessity of “earning his bread by teaching” music and art, as Swift had observed, he now had friends who could find him desirable positions. In Warrenton, friends of Swift operated the Mordecai School and Alexander taught there for several years. (On first coming to Warrenton he had taught for a short time at the smaller Falkener School.)12 The personal correspondence of headmistress Rachel Mordecai with her brother, Samuel Mordecai of Richmond, Virginia, gives interesting glimpses of the impression Alexander made on his contemporaries, and of the commercial viability of the skills he had brought with him from France; when discussing a possible replacement, Miss Mordecai wrote, “we could readily afford a salary of $1200 to a music Master for of scholars in that branch we are always certain, but we would have none but first rate . . . To get such another as Mr. M., I am not so unreasonable as to expect.” Then, describing the annual promotion exercises at the Mordecai School, she wrote, “. . . this morning all attended Mr. Miller’s Musical Exhibition and went away well pleased with all they heard and all they saw.”13

But Alexander’s Warrenton teaching days were now approaching an end: “. . . it is said that he is to be married to a Miss Brown who has been long attached to him—her friends have hitherto opposed it on account of the mystery attached to him, but her declining state of health has induced them to retract their first determination and she is left free to act for herself. Gen’l Brown is a man of easy fortune and of the first respectability—his daughter (I am told) not handsome, but a very elegant & sensible woman.”14

Between terms, 1810-1811, Alexander had stayed with General and Mrs. Benjamin Smith at Belvidere, a rice plantation across the Cape Fear River from Wilmington15 and within easy access of Mary Brown’s home at Ashwood, further up the Northwest Branch. Swift joined this group of his friends for a wedding at Christmas, 1810.

Swift returned for another wedding, Alexander and Mary’s, on 4 July 1811. The day of combined national and nuptial celebration “. . . was passed at the seat of General Brown at Ashwood, with a purpose to attend the marriage of my friends, Alexander C. Miller, and the general’s daughter, Miss Mary Brown. The general asked me of the origin, etc., of Mr. Miller; my reply was that all that I knew of him had been received of him, and to
judge from his uniform deportment it left me no reason to doubt that he had been highly educated, etc."16

Swift’s language possibly conveys the false impression that the general was unquestionably casual in giving his daughter’s hand, since it is reasonable to assume that the inquiry about “origin, etc.” had been made months earlier.

Miss Mordecai awaited the return of the Miller newlyweds with happy anticipation: “... he will be back next year and we shall have a double pleasure and advantage, in regaining him and gaining an amiable friend, and charming neighbour, for they will live very near us — and I often think how happily our evenings will be passed together.”17

This Edenic prospect was not to be, for by the end of the fall term Miss Mordecai had this to say of the bride, that she “... will never see Warrenton again — she is so decidedly adverse to living here, that he will only finish his house in order to dispose of it to more advantage. He wishes to remain, and thinks she will be unable to continue a whole year absent from him; but I am apprehensive he will find himself mistaken ... It is a pity she cannot prevail on herself to be contented, I fear she is laying the foundation for many hours of uneasiness.”18

Actually, Mary Miller had other things on her mind, because four months after Miss Mordecai wrote critically about her she bore her first son, Thomas Calizance Miller, on 4 April 1812.19 Two months later Congress declared war on England.

Alexander did return alone to the Mordecai School for the spring term of 1812 and then returned to Wilmington with Swift who was on his way to Charleston to settle coastal defenses with General Thomas Pinckney. By then Alexander’s father-in-law had become the general in charge of all the state militia of North Carolina, and Swift was his liaison with General Pinckney. By 1813 Swift’s protege had become Major Alexander C. Miller of the North Carolina militia, a title by which he was to be known to the end of his life, and was in permanent residence at Ashwood. Later in the year Major Miller was detailed to escort General Swift’s wife and family from North Carolina to New York City, a journey of twenty-one days made more hazardous than usual by the presence of British raiders along the coast.20

The Censuses of 1820 and 1830 show the French emigre firmly established on a Bladen County plantation, perhaps Ashwood, perhaps Oakland, a short distance down the census-taker’s track from his brother-in-law John Bright Brown and Governor John Owen. In 1820 there are four small sons and a daughter, and seventeen slaves; by 1830 the children are reduced to three sons and the slaves increased to twenty-one. The three sons who survived to adulthood had all been baptized at St. James’ Church, Wilmington, and Alexander and Mary Miller are enrolled as communicants there.21 Alexander is also active in Masonry, probably at St. John’s Lodge No. 1, Wilmington.22

On 2 May 1831 the French emigre died. His burial place is unknown. It is not recorded as having been in St. James’ churchyard.23 He and Mary may have been buried in Carver’s Creek Methodist Cemetery, a mile from Oakland, where the General and many other members of the Brown family are buried.

The Names of Alexander Calizance Miller

Why did Alexandre Ferdinand Leopold Calizance, “cadet in the family of De La Marque,”24 adopt the ship captain’s name (we can conjecture that only the family name of the captain is involved)? One family tradition says that is was for the purpose of “disguising his identity.”25 If so, from whom?

Franco-American relations have never been worse than in the decade of Alexander’s arrival in Philadelphia. The French Revolution, the murder of the king, the Terror and the aggressive foreign policy pursued by the Directory alarmed and angered many Americans and exacerbated the growing divisions between the infant American political parties. American ships were being seized by France and a French invasion was feared. One response was the so-called Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Attainment of citizenship would now require fourteen years of residence instead of five; the President could deport any alien even suspected of treasonable inclinations; if war were declared the President could deport any alien subject to an enemy country.

In actuality the Alien Acts were never enforced, and five years after Alexander arrived the Naturalization Act was repealed, but the storm of suspicion was at its height when he arrived. What more likely than that he should have sheltered under a name so neutrally American as Miller? Later, having established himself as a teacher and a friend of establishment figures under the assumed name, why not continue using it until it effectively become his own?

He always maintained the name Calizance, at least as the middle initial “C.” As he was “a cadet in the family of De La Marque,” his statement implies that his own personal family name was Calizance. “Cadet” has two meanings, and its military usage is secondary. Its fundamental meaning, in Swift’s day, was either:

1. A younger son or brother; or
2. A younger branch of a family or a member of a younger branch; or
3. The youngest son of a family.26

The effect of this ambiguity is to make it essential that any search for Alexander’s parents and earlier history should be conducted under both names.

Several searches in the Archives de Paris in the rue Colbert and in the Mazarin Library of Paris have uncovered many historical figures carrying the name of La Marque and La Marche, but none of Calizance in all its possible phonetic variants. The same has been true of searches in the telephone directories of numerous European cities, with one exception.

Calasanz is a family name of Catalanians, and there are several people of that name in the Barcelona directory, some of whom responded to letters sent to all. Sr. Francisco Calasanz Badías responded, sending a colored coat of arms27 and the advice that

Alejandro’s father could very well have been Spanish, and could very well have emigrated to France; he must have married someone French, because the last name, de la
Marque, is more French than Spanish... In Spain the sons take first of all the last name of the father and second the last name of the mother... The last name Calasanz is of Spanish origin. The lineage is old and noble, of Aragon origin. It had its primitive origin at the village of Calasanz belonging to the judicial district of Tamarite de Litera in the province of Huesca... St. Joseph of Calasanz... was the founder of religious schools with branches extending to numerous Spanish regions.

The only other clue to ancestral names which has been observed is that Alexander and Mary’s third son was baptized “August Alexander” which, as “August,” may have been the boy’s grandfather’s name. Perhaps Auguste Alexandre Calizance de la Marche was the name of Alexander C. Miller’s father.

* * *

Was self-protection a sufficient cause for this “... accomplished gentleman... of remarkable personal beauty and elegance of manner” to assume the name of a stranger and to retain it for the rest of his life, even after the national emergency which may have prompted his action had long since passed? Was he, after all, only a low-born Philadelphia adventurer who had some talents and who had contrived to acquire some education, whose name really was Alexander C. Miller, who went South to marry a plantation heiress, and succeeded! If so, he was a consummate dissembler, or else Bradford, Swift, Brown, and the others were more gullible than grown men have a right to be!

Perhaps there were family patriarchs or political partisans in post-revolutionary France who found it important to keep the young man anonymous and yet content across the Atlantic. More than one remittance man from England, being an inconvenient younger brother, made his way to our western states to establish his own dynasty under another name, nourished through his lifetime by the monthly visit to the bank which handled foreign exchange. Was some similar arrangement in the background of the mysterious Frenchman of Bladen County?

The Reverend Canon William E. Craig is a native of Philadelphia and was ordained to the ministry of the Episcopal Church in 1941. In 1949, he received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from the University of California, Berkeley. He is now a resident of Selma, Kansas and continues his distinguished career as Director Emeritus of the Saint Francis Boys’ Homes. Dr. Craig is married to Mary-Eliot Miller Craig, the great-great-granddaughter of Alexander Calizance Miller.

FOOTNOTES

1 Rachel Mordecai to Samuel Mordecai, 27 January 1811, Mordecai Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill, hereinafter cited as Mordecai Papers.
2 The Story of Orton Plantation. (James Laurence Sprunt, Wilmington, N.C.: privately printed, 1936, revised 1977), 11, states the family tradition that Alexander “was the son of a nobleman who was forced to flee his native land for America, after the execution of his father and mother” and that Alexander took Captain Miller’s name “... for the purpose of disguising his identity.”
3 Miller descendant Mary-Eliot (Miller) Craig has repeated to the author a singing monotone she and her siblings learned when they were very young: it heavily accents the first syllables of Alexander’s French name, so that each metrical foot (except the first name) is an exaggerated dactyl.
5 Perhaps the best proof of Swift’s complete confidence is that he detailed Miller to escort and guard Mrs. Swift and their small children on a “dangerous three weeks” journey from North Carolina to New York during the War of 1812.
6 Fourth Census of the United States, 1820: Bladen County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, 150, microfilm of National Archives manuscript copy, National Archives branch, San Francisco, California, lists one adult male, aged 26 to 45 in the household of A.C. Miller. Fifth Census of the United States, 1830: Bladen County, North Carolina, Population Schedule, 63, microfilm of National Archives manuscript copy, National Archives branch, San Francisco, California, lists one adult male, aged 50 to 60 in the household of Alex C. Miller.
7 Journal d’Emigration du prince de Conde, 1789-1795 (No editor; Paris: Societe des Bibliophiles francais, Georges Servant, 1924), 87.
10 Swift, Memoirs, 55, 59, 57-58. An oil portrait of General Brown in uniform hangs in the parlor of Oakland Plantation, the Brown/Neisler mansion house which is on the National Register of Historic Places, located on the half mile west of the intersection of SR 1732 and SR 1730, near Council, Bladen County. The present owners do not know when it was painted or by whom; unsigned, it may be the work of Alexander.
12 Wm. Falkner to Thomas Brownrigg, 3 August 1807, Brownrigg Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. A holographic receipt attached to this letter is signed with his name in the French spelling “Alexandre C. Miller.”
13 Rachel Mordecai to Samuel Mordecai, 27 January 1811, 28 June 1811, Mordecai Papers. Miss Mordecai further implied that Alexander had provided the piano used by his pupils. Perhaps it was the piano which is now in the Burgwin-Wright House, Wilmington, identified as having been the property of Lucy Brown: it was made in Philadelphia in 1810.
14 Rachel Mordecai to Samuel Mordecai, 27 January 1811, Mordecai Papers.
16 Swift, Memoirs, 94.
17 Rachel Mordecai to Samuel Mordecai, 26 June 1811, Mordecai Papers.
18 Rachel Mordecai to Samuel Mordecai, 8 December 1811, Mordecai Papers.
19 Official Register of St. James’ Parish, Wilmington, North Carolina, Baptisms, 390, hereinafter cited as St. James’ Register.
21 Baptisms, 390; Communicants List, 127, 129, St. James’ Register. Of the three sons who survived to adulthood, Thomas Callizance Miller was a prominent Wilmington attorney who owned (and lost)

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Orton and was an outspoken Union Democrat up to the eve of the Civil War. Joseph Swift Miller was a Wilmington physician, and August Alexander Miller was a Bladen County planter. Only the first produced male children. Late marriages and a family tendency to beget female children will have eliminated the Miller name by the next generation after the current one.

Miller descendant Mary-Eilot (Miller) Craig has shown the author a brass, five-pointed star with hook attached for its use as a neck pendant suspended by a ribbon, inscribed “ACM” with Masonic initials on one side and on the other an engraving of a three-masted ship in heavy seas and a motto “My trust is in God.”

Communicants List, 132, St. James’ Register.

See page 2. The spelling is “De la Marche” in Swift, Memoirs; “De la Marque” and “De la Marc” in the two family traditions which have been mentioned above.

See note 2 above.


Sr. Calasanz’s own description is “On a gold background, a green tree flanked by a black wing and a black dog jumping.”

Francisco Calasanz Badías, c/Rubén Darío 26, 1o 1a, Barcelona 30, España, to Mary-Eilot Craig, 7 May 1980, in the author’s possession.

Baptisms, 390, St. James’ Register. The oldest son was Joseph Swift Miller, named for Alexander’s best friend; the second son was Thomas Calizance Miller, named for his grandfather Thomas Brown; for the third son to have been named for his other grandfather would not have been inappropriate.