

## The fraudulent Coligny-Rapalje descent

by John Blythe Dobson

The early history of the Rapalje family of New Netherland has been distorted to an extraordinary degree. It is marred with absurd etymologies, such as the derivation of the name from Rapallo in Italy<sup>1</sup>; with preposterous folklorizations, such as the story of Governor Minuit presenting Catalyntje Trico with a cow in compensation for having stolen a dumpling from her kitchen<sup>2</sup>; and with dubious artifacts, such as an unlikely coat of arms.<sup>3</sup> Less innocent in nature is an atrocious invention published in Jerome B. Holgate's *American Genealogy*. This work derives the Rapalje family from an alleged

Gaspard Colet de Rapalje ... born in France, at Châtillon, sur Loire, in 1505.... He married the daughter of Victor Antonie Janssen, a sign and house painter of Antwerp, by whom he had three children, Gaspard Coligne de Rapalje, Abram Colet de Rapalje, and a daughter named Breckje. Breckje married her cousin, Victor Honorius Janssen, in 1569, by whom she had one son, Abram Janssen, who is said to have been an historical painter of considerable eminence. Abram Janssen married, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 1594, a daughter of Hans Lodewyck, of Amsterdam, by whom he had three sons, William Janssen de Rapalje, Joris Janssen de Rapalje, and Antonie van Salers [sic].<sup>4</sup>

This account, drastically condensed in the extracts above, is so ridiculous that it would hardly seem worth mentioning, had it not deceived hosts of subsequent writers.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, knowledgeable genealogists have been

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<sup>1</sup> This statement appears in the privately-published work of a living writer, whom we should prefer not to embarrass.

<sup>2</sup> Nathaniel S. Prime, *A History of Long Island* (New York, 1845), p. 360.

<sup>3</sup> Although we have not traced explicit evidence early than *America Heraldica*, ed. E. de V. Vermont (New York, 1886), 176, that the arms of *azure, three bar or* were claimed by American Rapaljes, they must already have been in use in the U.S. at an earlier date, in order for them to have received the *imprimatur* of inclusion in J.B. Rietstap, *Armorial Général*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Gouda, 1884), 2:524. They also appear in Margherita Arlina Hamm, *Famous Families of New York* (New York, 1902), 2:61, where however the tinctures are not represented literally, and in Wilfred Jordan, *Colonial and Revolutionary Families of Pennsylvania* (New York), 1942, facing p. 198.

<sup>4</sup> *American Genealogy, being a history of some of the early settlers of North America and their descendants* (Albany, dated "1848" in the imprint but containing later dates in the text), pp. 16-21. Frank L. Wagnen, in *The Ancestry of Garret Conrad Van Wagnen* (Buffalo, 1946), 65, incorrectly attributes the statement that "Joris Jansen Rapalje, the progenitor of the family in America, was one of three sons of Abraham Janssen (a Flemish painter)" to an earlier work, Prime's *History of Long Island* (1845), previously cited, 357-62. In fact, Prime's work makes no mention whatsoever of the father of Joris Jansen Rapalje.

<sup>5</sup> For example *America Heraldica*, above-cited, 176; Charles Kingsbury Miller, *Historic Families of America: William Almy of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, 1630, Joris Janssen de Rapalje of Fort Orange (Albany), New Amsterdam and Brooklyn, 1623* (Chicago, 1897), pp. 92-100, 130-32; Peter Ross, *A History of Long Island, from its earliest settlement to the present time* (New York, 1902), 18; William Pelletreau, *A History of Long Island*, 2 vols. (1903), 17-23, 96-98, 228-29 (not personally seen); Raymon Meyers Tingley, *Some Ancestral Lines; being a record of some of the ancestors of Guilford Solon Tingley and his wife Martha Pamela Meyers* (Rutland, Vermont, 1935), at pp. 296-301; James E. Gibson, (continued...)

rebutting, or at least rejecting, it almost from the moment of its first appearance. In 1852 James Riker declared that it “contains very serious mistakes,” and specifically repudiated the assertion “that Joris de Rapalie and Antony Jansen van Salee, of Gravesend, were brothers.”<sup>6</sup> In 1908 Frank Allaben remarked that its author did not appear “to be familiar with the significance of old Dutch names,” and characterized its statements as “loose and credulous.”<sup>7</sup> In 1959 George E. McCracken briefly dismissed it as “fantastic.”<sup>8</sup> These authors perhaps assumed that having demonstrated the onomastic vagaries, the risible social pretensions, and the jejune grasp of European history in Holgate’s narrative, their work was done. And so it should have been, for it is the burden of those who would advance a theory to defend it. Yet there is no end to the folly which thrives only because it cannot be positively disproved. It is thus a rare satisfaction to the student of these matters when such frivolity can be clearly traced to a source, and revealed not just as a falsehood, but as an intentional fabrication. We hope to convince the reader that such a conclusion is possible in the present case.

To this end, we introduce what is possibly the most damning evidence against this pedigree which could possibly exist, to wit, a statement made by the *father* of this so-called “Gaspard Colet de Rapalje.” Despite the coy alternation between the surnames Colet and Coligne in the passage quoted above, every reader of the description of “Gaspard” by Holgate seems to have assumed — as was surely its author’s intention — that this man was in some way connected with the great house of Coligny; and there can be little doubt that our author, or possibly some venal informant, harvested the material from an account of Gaspard de Coligny, the younger, who was in fact born in 1554 (not 1505) at Châtillon.<sup>9</sup> But the boy’s father records him as dying in his 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> year! Here is the complete extract:

Le XXVIII de Septembre, M.D.LIV. fut né un Vendredy Gaspar de Coligny mon fils à Chastillon, à six heures du soir. Il mourut en la ville d’Orléans l’an M.D.LXVIII. aux seconds troubles de ce Royaume: Et avait esté accordé avec Mademoiselle de Soubise. (The 28<sup>th</sup> of September, 1554, was born on a Friday Gaspar de Coligny my son, at Châtillon, at six in the evening. He died at the

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<sup>5</sup>(...continued)

“Some Ancestors of the Rappleye [*sic*] Family,” *Utah Genealogical Magazine*, 28 (1937): 9-13; John Albert Bogart, *The Bogart family: Tunis Gysbert Bogaert and his descendants* (Scranton, Pennsylvania, 1959), p. 91. Miller, as pointed out by Allaben (see below), created additional chronological difficulties by assigning Joris Rapalje a wildly incorrect birthdate of 1572 (he was really born in 1604). Henry Wyckoff, in *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 43 (1912): 303, while seemingly accepting the basic premise of the pedigree, objected to the notion of the surname Rapalje descending through a female line; but given Dutch naming practices, there is in fact nothing impossible in such an occurrence.

<sup>6</sup> James Riker, Jr., *The Annals of Newtown* (New York, 1852), 266-67 *n*.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Allaben, *The Ancestry of Leander Howard Crall* (New York, 1908), 269-72, 276.

<sup>8</sup> George E. McCracken, “Catalyntje Trico Rapalje,” *The American Genealogist* 35 (1959): 193-202, at p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> The date given by Holgate is so nearly 50 years too early that, if it was not intentionally shifted as a distraction, it may perhaps have resulted from misreading a date written in Roman numerals, a change from M.D.LIV (1554) to M.D.V (1505) being possible with the dropping of two adjacent characters. Holgate surely cannot have intended his account to begin with the boy’s father, the elder Gaspard de Coligny, born in 1519, whose family was much too well known for the insinuation of a different wife and children to pass undetected.

village of Orléans, in the year 1568, during the second troubles of this Kingdom, having been promised [in matrimony] to Mademoiselle de Soubise.)<sup>10</sup>

Although this record may still have been unpublished when Holgate's account of the Rapalje family was published, it seems very likely that the author of the account had seen it, and falling upon the name of a youth whose life had ended at adolescence, foisted upon him an adult career and family which could not be refuted by the emergence of contrary facts. The invented dates in Holgate's account indicate that it is not merely some gross misconception, but a deliberate and audacious concoction, replete with fake source material. But possibly Holgate was the dupe of some unscrupulous contact in Europe — as were others of his countrymen during that century — and was himself guilty only of an astonishing lack of acumen.<sup>11</sup>

It should be obvious from the foregoing remarks that any reference to descent from the Colignys must be expunged from the history of the Rapaljes. The claim is a disgusting blemish in the literature of New Netherlands genealogy. Yet not only has it been repeated *ad nauseum*, but it may well have inspired the bizarre assertion in the 1909 Fernald genealogy that “Dr. Jean Furnius Fernel, our ancestor . . . married Annietta de Coligny, daughter of Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France and firm Huguenot, who . . . made an otherwise unrecorded voyage to America.”<sup>12</sup> As no daughter “Annieta” is mentioned in the Admiral's own record of his family, she is of course as mythical as the Rapalje's ancestor “Gaspard.” Apart from the difference that the writer of the Fernald genealogy was “undeniably insane,”<sup>13</sup> this product of the early twentieth century has its stylistic roots firmly planted in the nineteenth; and with its waffling as to the surname Furnius/Fernel, it could hardly be a closer parallel with the fraudulent Coligny-Rapalje descent.

It was perhaps predictable that the murdered Admiral, a consummate example of the aristocratic underdog, should hold a peculiar and enduring fascination for depraved or deranged pedigree-makers. But capable genealogists, who do not wish their discipline to be the laughing-stock of historians, keep their wishful thinking in check, and have enough respect for the great figures of history not to appropriate them in so unseemly a manner.

Before leaving this sorry matter, it may be asked why anyone would go to the trouble of inventing such a story as the Coligny-Rapalje descent, while leaving in plain sight the clues for its unmasking, such as the mention of the place-name Châtillon. Ironically, the ambiguity as to the surname Colet/Coligne, which to its author may

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<sup>10</sup> “La famille de Coligny,” *Bulletin de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français*, 1 (1853): 274-76. Armida Sharpin, *Rapalje Rasters: A Genealogy* (Valparaiso, Indiana: privately published, 1994), pp. 3-5, gives a summary of this record in English, without indicating the original source, and with a slightly different date of death for the son Gaspard, whom she does not attempt to equate with the Gaspard whom Holgate claims was born in 1505.

<sup>11</sup> No less an authority than James Riker was occasionally the victim of bad advice, and an interesting account of the attempted extortion of an American researcher by an unnamed “former Archivist at The Hague” is given in A. Van Doren Honeyman, *Joannes Nevius . . . and His Descendants* (Plainfield, N.J., 1900), pp. 40-41. We would not however wish to be understood as suggesting that such experiences were typical; and the situation certainly improved with the increased professionalization of archival science toward the end of the century.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Augustus Fernald, *Universal International Genealogy and of the Ancient Fernald Families* (1909), as summarized by Walter Goodwin Davis, *The Ancestry of Joseph Waterhouse* (Portland, Maine, 1949), pp. 35-37, reprinted in *Massachusetts and Maine Families in the Ancestry of Walter Goodwin Davis*, ed. Gary Boyd Roberts, 3 vols. (Baltimore, 1996), 1:535-37, where attention is drawn to the passage in the editor's introduction, at p. xviii.

<sup>13</sup> In the words of Davis, with which we heartily concur.

have seemed a safeguard against detection, is for the critic one of the surest signs of its suspicious character. While perhaps a problem for the psychiatrist rather than the historian, one might suggest that this mixture of arrogance and ambivalence is a typical characteristic of the forger's psyche, containing a flamboyant aspect (which thrills at the risk of exposure) at war with a surreptitious aspect (which seeks to obfuscate the crime).<sup>14</sup>

In this regard, we cannot help but be struck by the parallels with a case we had occasion to study a number of years ago; namely that of the infamous *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* forgeries perpetrated during the 1880s, many of which contain deliberate and flagrant hints of their spuriousness. The forger extracted entire articles from a well-known French biographical dictionary, which were adapted into English, and, with few changes except to the life-dates of the subjects, submitted as the products of original research to an unsuspecting editor, who published them in volume after volume over a period of several years. Not only did these inventions retain distinctive details of the original subjects' careers, but they appeared under such rare surnames as Houdetot, Iselin, Inchofer (printed as Imhofer), and Ingenhousz (printed as Ingenhous), with the minor departures from the spellings in the authentic source-material being suggestive of simple misprints rather than of calculated attempts at furthering the deception. Inevitably, the frauds were noticed within a generation of their appearance, and by 1936 a convincing identification of the forger had been made in print, conceivably while he still alive. Yet the forger, who was never prosecuted, had the last laugh, as by then his productions had already been copied into other reference works, as they would continue to be into the 1960s.<sup>15</sup>

Much of the literature on genealogical fraud seems to suffer from two somewhat restrictive assumptions: first, that these frauds are typically contrived for some definite and rational purpose, such as to bolster a claim to an estate; and secondly, that they are apt to be constructed in the most plausible and inconspicuous manner commensurate with such a purpose. Such assumptions underestimate both the multifarious vanities by which a forger (or a wealthy client) may be motivated, and the degree of ostentatiousness which may be present in the result. Readers of genealogical writings must be unusually wary of being seduced by exotica. We must resist the temptation of believing that something is too improbable to have been invented.

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<sup>14</sup> This combination of traits has been noted in another type of literary fraud artist by Thomas Mallon, *Stolen Words: Forays into the Origins and Ravages of Plagiarism* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> John Blythe Dobson, "The spurious articles in *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography* — some new discoveries and considerations," *Biography* (Honolulu), 16 (1993): 388-408, esp. pp. 395-98. The frauds were first exposed in 1909.