

History of the Estes Family

The Estes are one of the great pioneer families of the United States. Numbered in their thousands they are to be found in most parts of the country and a selection of their life histories would amply illustrate the history of America. They are to be found in the annals of the American Revolution, the expansion westwards and the Civil War and are representative of the whole social fabric from log cabin to Whitehouse! Though not among the great political families they produced a vice-presidential candidate in Senator Estes Kefauver and a son-in-law on the bench to President Harrison, and they produced their own brand of tycoon in Billie Sol Estes. They were trailblazers, slave-owners and freers, Quakers. Episcopalians, Presbyterians and Baptists. They drowned in frozen rivers and were captured by Indians as children. They fought on both sides in the Civil War and nursed their dying countrymen in that conflict.

Their traditional Biblical names shared place with those of George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson and their family name, which is hardly known elsewhere, has become very much an American surname.

While it is known that the ancestors of the American Estes came from Kent in England and while there is a strong belief that the family was ultimately of Italian origin, very little has been written about the English ancestors and the English branches of the family. Indeed, a great deal of speculation and incorrect information has been circulated over the last hundred years, both in America and England. This was largely due to the researches of an English genealogist employed by Charles Estes. The American families have been exposed to the belief that they descend from a family named Este, which, in turn, descended from the Marquis Francesco d'Este of Burgundy who settled in England after the death of his friend and patron Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. The story has some credibility in that Francesco, a trained diplomat, may well have been in the service of the Duchess, widow of Charles, who was an English princess and known to be sympathetic to the English pretender Lambert Simnel who claimed to be her nephew. Nevertheless it seems strange that no record of Francesco appears to survive in the English State Papers.

The English Estes, most branches of which had adopted the Eastes spelling by the mid-eighteenth century, perpetuated another variant of this story though they had Francesco's descendants remaining in Europe where some of them became Protestant-. and fled to England to escape persecution. In garbled form of this story was given false authority by another English professional genealogist in the mid-nineteenth century who stated that two brothers, sons of the Baron d'Este, a descendant of the Marquis d'Este, were

Huguenots and fled to England after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. As the families of the two brothers can be traced back much earlier in Kent the story only makes sense if those who fled to England did so in the mid-sixteenth century when hundreds of Walloon and Fleming refugees fled from the Spanish Netherlands (the former Duchy of Burgundy) to escape the Inquisition. It makes even greater sense when we recall that the Flemings and Walloons were commonly referred to as Huguenots in later times.

What we know of the English Estes is pieced together from a thorough examination of the parish registers and bishops transcripts available for Acrise, Ashford, Bucland, Canterbury, Deal, Dover, Elnam, Folkestone, Guston, Hythe, London, Lydden, Margate, Nonington, Northbourne, Ringwould, Ripple, Rotherhithe, St Margarets at Cliff, Sandwich, Sholden, Waldershare, Walmer, West Langdon, Wingham and Wooton. The greatest linking was only achieved in recent years by an experienced English researcher, Donald Bowler, but other researchers have contributed in fitting the genealogical jigsaw together.

The Estes of Kent were described as a "maritime" family and this may explain why the earliest appearances of the name are found scattered about the southern coast from Morwenstow in Cornwall (1558) to Harwich in Essex.' There was probably a link between the Estes of Harwich and Deal, both centres of Walloon refugee settlement, as the registers of St Leonard, Deal, list the burial on 31 August 1621 of Hugh 'Estie' of Harwich who was bound from Germinie [Netherlands] in a ship called the Sion of London [Zion, a typical Protestant name]. It is clear from the records of St Leonard that all variants of the name were used interchangeably, the earliest instances being as follows: Eastes (1581), Este (1601), Estis (1618) and Eastis (1726). John Estye, who became a freeman of Canterbury by purchase on 27 June 1562, was a shearman or maker of shears, an occupation closely associated with the Walloon textile industry. He was no doubt the same John Estey or Estye who was a clothworker mentioned in Canterbury records between 1571 and 1593. The first progenitor of the Deal family for whom we have reasonable records was Henry Este or Eagtes (b. about 1549 in Deal) who made his will as Henry Eastice, fisherman of Deal, on 13 April 1590. His widow Mary/Maria Rand Este (b. before 1575) was buried at St Leonards on 19 June 1601.