

# Life and Letters of Jean de Marsillac

*Concluded from page 22*

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AS stated at the conclusion of the previous portion of these notes on John de Marsillac's life and work, the last visit to England took place late in 1792. According to a letter written in 1815 (to be given later *in extenso*) he was "rappelé a Paris par le ministre et nommé premier medecin des hopitaux de France"; hence we must think of him occupied for a time in medical work, perhaps to the exclusion of visits to the South.

For the next period of the life of John de Marsillac we must pass across the Atlantic and find him among Friends in and near Philadelphia. The exact date when he quitted Europe is not known, but he left for the New World amid the kindly feelings of many Friends. Rebecca Jones wrote of him in Twelfth Month, 1785, that "though he has been a warrior he appears to be a solid, sincere-hearted, thinking man." English Friends were "pleased with his company and society"—"whom we love in the Truth" (vol. xv. p. 51), 1785, and early next year James Phillips wrote of him as "a sensible and very agreeable man . . . while here seemed to have nothing in view but the object of his mission (*ibid.* p. 52). Friends were prepared to lend him money (*ibid.* p. 89). The Minister of the Interior wrote from Paris in December, 1792 :

Jean Marcillac français et médecin dont la vie a été consacré à l'étude et aux voyages propres à donner à un homme avide d'être utile à ses semblables les connaissances analogues à ses vues (*ibid.* vol. vii. p. 155).

Richard Cockin reported that the Y.M. of 1789 "readily agreed" to admit him to the sittings (*Diaries*) and John Grubb reported on the same Y.M.: "He appeared to be a sensible agreeable man, but spoke very bad English" (*British Friend*, 1904, p. 251, reading 1789 for 1798). Richard Shackleton, in 1786, wrote :

I had a letter lately from William Matthews from London. He seems to think well of the person who came over to London, from the people who seem to be under some degree of conviction in France (*Memoirs*, 1849, p. 183).

In the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1786, appeared this:

A Count of Marsillac, who is one of the heads of the Society has been in London to pay his friends a visit and is returned highly pleased with his reception.

A writer in *The Friend* (Phila.), for 3mo. 13, 1830, suggested:

The excesses of the Revolution soon drove him from his native country, and he turned his steps towards that land the tidings from which had first awakened serious reflections in his mind.

The first glimpse we have obtained of his presence in the Eastern States is provided by Elizabeth Drinker, who, in her *Journal*, stated briefly, under date September 16, 1795: "John de Marsillac here at tea." Shortly afterwards we find him at the Y.M. in Philadelphia.

When John de Marsillac, the Frenchman, was admitted to attend the Yearly Meeting in Philadelphia in 1795, Samuel Emlen several times acted as interpreter, in his public communications (*Memoirs of Samuel Emlen*, in Comly's *Miscellany*, 1839, vol. xii. p. 190).

John Smith, of Burlington, N.J., wrote to his wife (original letter in possession of A. M. Gummere):

Philad<sup>a</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> mo. 30<sup>th</sup>, 1795.

I spent part of last evening with J. Marsillac who attends the several sittings of our meeting, he says, with great comfort and satisfaction.

The date of Marsillac's application for membership and reception into the Society has for long been uncertain. In *Quaker Biographies*, Phila. 1909, vol. iii. p. 182, we are told:

In 1798 [should be an earlier date] John de Marsalac came to this country. He soon began to attend Friends' meetings, became plain in dress, and asked to be received into membership.

By the kindness of William T. Elkington, custodian of records of Philadelphia Y.M. (Arch Street), we can now supply official information:

At a Preparative Meeting held the 24<sup>th</sup> of the 12<sup>th</sup> month, 1795: John Marsillac hath requested to be admitted into Membership with us, and a favorable account being given respecting him, his said request is agreed to be communicated to our next Monthly Meeting. James Pemberton, James Cresson. William Wilson, Arthur Howell and Owen Biddle are desired to visit him.

29th of First Month, 1796.

From an account given concerning John de Marsillac it appears that many years since he became convinced of our peacable principles and was brought into a degree of suffering for his adherence thereto, that he is united with a number of his Countrymen residing in Languedoc where they hold Meetings for Divine Worship after our manner, and that about ten years since at the desire of his Brethren in France he made a visit to Friends in London from whom an Epistle from them to his Brethren in France was produced and read mentioning this Friend and their satisfaction in having his Company. Many Friends in this country being acquainted with those and other Circumstances concerning him, readily encouraged his attending our last Yearly Meeting as a person convinced of our principle and in Christian fellowship. Whereupon this meeting taking the subject into solid consideration unites in Judgment that it will be right to comply with his request, and that he should be acknowledged as a member. The Committee who visited him are desired to inform him of this conclusion.

The following is a reference to Marsillac in connection with the Y.M. of 1796: "Jacob Lindley,<sup>24</sup> Samuel Smith,<sup>25</sup> and John de Marsillac appeared zealous in behalf of this cause," of a mulatto woman who requested membership (Comly, *Misc.* x. 273). An undated letter, in the possession of Amelia Mott Gummere, of Haverford, Pa., written by Susan Emlen (wife of Samuel Emlen, jr., and daughter of William Dillwyn), to her aunt, Gulielma Smith, at Greenhill, Burlington, N.J., stated:

Robert said that one thing which occasioned the increase of business was a proposal of J. de Marsillac that some steps be taken towards civilizing the Indians, teaching them the useful arts, and supplying them with tools, &c., which Friends had taken up and considered.

While in the States, Marsillac appears to have risen to some prominence in his profession. He is mentioned in various letters about 1796.

Ann Cox, wife of John Cox, of Oxmead, Burlington, N.J. to Susan Emlen, from Oxmead, 3mo. 6. 1796:

If our friend J. Marsillac inclines to leave the city [Philadelphia], which I heard was the case, I think there's a good opportunity for a physician in Burlington, as Doct<sup>r</sup> Mc Ilvaine is mostly laid by with the gout.

<sup>24</sup> For Jacob Lindley (1744-1814), see vol. xiii. 66; etc.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Smith (1737-1817) of Philadelphia was a prominent Friend and Minister. He visited Europe 1800-1801. He appears frequently in the *Memorials of Rebecca Jones* and the writings of other Friends of the same period. Memoirs in Comly's *Misc.*, vol. ix.

The same to the same, 11mo. 6. 1796 :

As to submitting the recipe to J. Marsillac I don't know what to say. If thee thinks the pills were of use and could tell him so, It might do : but these great Folks have such an enmity to every thing that looks like *quacking* that I think it would only, perhaps, create a smile.

The same to the same, undated :

As to bleeding I am very doubtful of the propriety of it in thy case, and wish before thee concludes upon it, thee would consult J. Marsillac or some other Person of experience.

From Philadelphia, 14 xi. 1796, Marsillac wrote to James Phillips (original, in French, in **D.**). He acknowledged a letter received *per* David Bacon<sup>26</sup> and regretted his own long silence. There are numerous references to his much-beloved English Friends, and he encouraged the idea of a visit to America by some of them. The letter was delivered for transit "a notre jeune ami Fotherghill dont la compagnie nous a été tres agréable dans cette ville."

In the will of Robert Grubb, dated xii. 1796 (copy in **D.**), is the following paragraph :

I desire that my accounts in America with John Marsillak also with . . . be looked upon and considered as settled.

In the spring of 1797, David Sands was at Nismes in the South of France and paid a visit to "the mother of John de Marselac, who is now in America" (*Journal*, 1848, p. 147).

Here is a curious allusion :

A Frenchman—Marsillac—who, nearly 100 years ago, regardless of his silk stockings, plunged into the swamps for their floral treasures (Mrs. Marian L. Owen—"Catalogue of Nantucket Plants." From Lithgow's *History of Nantucket*, p. 245.)

Marsillac signed the wedding certificate of Samuel Rickey and Mary Cresson, at Philadelphia, 5 xi. 1795 (certificate in possession of A. M. Gummere).

A further reference to Marsillac in the *Journal* of Elizabeth Drinker gives an account of a serious accident which befel him.

<sup>26</sup> David Bacon was an Elder of Philadelphia Y.M. He is described by Rebecca Jones as "an upright pillar—sound and steady." He accompanied Nicholas Waln to Europe in 1795, and acted as *compagnon de voyage* to various other Ministers. Robert Sutcliff, British traveller, wrote of him, 8 mo. 16, 1804 : "He was a man highly esteemed in the circle of his acquaintance ; and, being of a sweet disposition, had great place among young friends, when his advice was wanted." (*Travels*, 1811.)

1797.

May 4.—We were informed by neighbor Waln of a most melancholy accident that occurred about six o'clock this evening. John de Marsillac and Molly Gray, widow, sister to John Elliott, were coming into town in a Chaise, by some accident one of the shafts broke and frightened the horse, who set to running. M. Gray jumped out and struck her head against a post, near Callowhill street, with such force as to occasion the blood to flow in great quantity. She was taken up and carried into a house near the place where the accident happened, and died immediately. Poor John was put to bed there; his cry was, Take care of Molly. 'Tis said he is deranged—whether by any hurt he has received, or by the fright, we have not heard.

May 5. John de Marsillac continues lightheaded and flighty.

May 6. J. de Marsillac to be taken this forenoon on a bed in a carriage to his lodgings at John Elliott's.

Nothing to which the readers of these fragmentary records have so far been introduced can, we think, give the impression of the character of John de Marsillac other than that of an upright, well-meaning man and we wish we could have confirmed this by later statements. But we have to account for a sad lapse and a denial of the faith he once preached and exemplified.

It has been said (*Quaker Biographies*, Phila., 1909, vol. iii., p. 182) in an account of Arthur Howell,<sup>27</sup> a Philadelphia Friend:

On the Monthly Meeting day that John de Marsalac was received as a member Arthur Howell said to a nephew [Isaac Howell]: "I have been to Monthly Meeting today & have heard John De Marsalac received, and now, Israel, mark my word; he will turn out a rascal."

Much has been built upon this saying of Arthur Howell, but we do not think it implies that Marsillac was then aught but sincere, only that Arthur Howell had some insight into his future. Those who incline to the belief that he was "in the service of Napoleon, sent to America to spy out things of interest to the French" can have but little opinion of the ability of English and American Friends of this period to read character.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Howell (1748-1816) has been named "the Quaker Seer," so often was he able accurately to read the future. Stories told of him in this connection would fill a volume. He was a leather merchant of Philadelphia.

It will be noticed that Arthur Howell was one of the Friends appointed to visit J. de Marsillac on his application for membership in 1795. He also signed his certificate of removal back to France in 1798.

Nevertheless, the view taken in *Quaker Biographies* has been largely held. A writer in *The Friend* (Phila.), of 7mo. I. 1905, stated :

It was supposed by many that he was an emissary of Napoleon and that he used the plain dress and affiliated with Friends, to ward off suspicion while he was attaining the information he was sent for.

On the other hand it has been asserted that his conviction was real, and that a sudden change in his views took place on his leaving America.

A writer in *The Friend* (Phila.), of 3mo. 13, 1830, urged this :

Although he departed from the faith which he had once professed, there is no reason to suspect the sincerity of his first conviction or to suppose that his purpose in visiting America was other than honest. He obtained leave to return home after the fury of the political storm had nearly spent itself and he threw off at the same time the garb and the profession of a Friend.

We hazard the suggestion that the accident above referred to had much to do with his mental condition and that for some months prior to his departure his mind had become partially unbalanced. This receives some support from the fact that we have not discovered any reference to him from May, 1797—the date of the accident—till shortly before he sailed.

It is true that the certificate given him on his return to France does not hint at any mental trouble, but we think that such, though it may have been only spasmodic, would, in some measure, explain his subsequent action.

Here is the official certificate of removal :

At a Meeting of Ministers and Elders held on the 27th of 4th Month, 1798 :

Our beloved Friend John Marsillac informed the meeting that he had a prospect of returning to his family in France and requesting our Certificate to the Monthly Meeting of Friends at Congenies in the South of that nation. The following Friends are desired to confer with him thereon, and if way opens prepare an Essay. Viz. : James Pemberton, James Cresson, David Bacon, Samuel Clark and Jonathan Willis.

To the Monthly Meeting at Congenies in Languedoc, and our Friends and Brethren elsewhere in France.

Dear Friends :

Our esteemed Friend, John Marsillac who has resided in this city near three years past, apprehending it proper to return to his Family and relatives in his native Country, has requested our Consideration of his

proposal, and advice thereon, which after due deliberation we concur with, and acquaint you that his conduct and conversation among us having been circumspect entitles him to the love and regard of his Brethren here, and his public exhortations in our religious Meetings as a Minister have, we believe, proceeded from an honest concern to discharge his duty, and to promote the religious improvement and benefit of others.

Finding also that his temporal affairs are reputedly accommodated here—we recommend him to your Christian esteem, and commit him to Divine protection, with desires for his continued stability and advancement in the knowledge of the Truth and his preservation.

We salute you with brotherly affection, and are

Your Friends and Brethren

Signed in and on behalf of the Monthly Meeting of Friends of Philadelphia, held by adjournment the 3rd of the Fifth Month, 1798.

John Pemberton	Benjamin Horner	Thomas Rogers
David Bacon	Benjamin James	Jn'o Lynn
Nicolas Waln	Reay King	John Cresson
James Cresson	Isaac Paxson	Joseph Parrish
John Parrish	Hezekiah Williams	John A. Cresson
Aquilla Jones	Benjamin Johnson	Eden Haydock
Richard Jones	Jonathan Willis	James Rowland
Samuel Clark	Joseph B. Smith	Thomas Moore
Arthur Howell	Joseph Budd	John Maulson
John Elliott	Joseph Dilworth	John Elliott, junr.
Thomas Harrison	Samuel Sansom	Joseph Wright
Jacob Shoemaker	Ellis Yarnall	Gabriel Parris
Charles Stow	Elijah Waring	Arthur Donaldson
		Benj'n Kite

Elizabeth Drinker recorded :

1798. June 1. John de Marsillac came to bid us farewell. He expects to sail for France in a day or two.

The story generally told (see *The Friend* (Phila.), 1905, p. 406, repeated in *Quaker Biographies*, iii.) is that as soon as the ship passed the Breakwater, Marsillac threw off his plain coat, and taking up a fiddle began to play, singing : "I'm done with the Quakers, I'm done with the Quakers," but when the tellers of the story have been asked for authority they have been unable to produce any.

By a fortunate discovery of that excellent Quaker historian, Amelia Mott Gummere, we are put into possession, for the first time, of *facts*.

In a book of letters of Rebecca Jones and Leonard Snowdon, owned by J. Snowdon Rhoads, of Germantown, is a letter from L. Snowdon to R. Jones, while she was

at Edgeley, with Katharine Howell, during the yellow fever epidemic.

Phila., 1st day evening, 10 mo. 21, 1798.

. . . Stephen Grellet has just been in here. He is much afflicted with the report prevailing respecting his countryman, J. M. Expect thou hast heard of it. Stephen believes it is a great deal of it True. It is cause of Sorrow. I hope the man was not a Deceiver: others have fallen—it is best to leave it—but as I have said so much, if thou hast not heard what the reports are, it may be as well to inform thee. The information comes from the Captain of the Ship he went over in and from some others aboard, that soon after he got to sea, he laid aside the *Friend*, & joined the rest of the Company in fiddling (in which he is said to excell) & dancing &c. & when he landed he got Fashionable Clothing, his hair que'd and Powdered, &c.

This is what is said and appears to be generally believed by those who have taken some pains to make enquiries. I should not have wrote thus much, but know it will not get into improper hands.<sup>28</sup> Poor Stephen is bowed down under it—is about writing to France;—to J. M. himself first,—then to some others if it should prove true.

It remains for us to present what data we have collected respecting the remainder of the life of De Marsillac, and this letter from him, dated from Paris, is our main source of information. It will be noticed that he uses the expression “*your* Society” and writes of the tender feelings he retains towards his friends in England “despite the excessive rigor of the judgement of American Friends at the time of my return to France.”

Paris le 17 Sept<sup>bre</sup> 1815 9<sup>me</sup> mois.

Tres Estimable et Respectable Ami

James Phillips

Puisque la Divine Providence dans sa miséricordieuse Bonté nous permet encore une fois de tourner nos Regards affectueux sur la belle Angleterre, Permets moi cher et ancien ami de te demander de tes Nouvelles, de celles de ta famille mais encore particulièrement de celles de nos dignes et respectables amis John Elliott in Bartholomew close= Georges Dillwyn=Adey Bellamy= Joseph Bevan Chimist et tant d'autres Membres de votre Estimable Societé qui jadis m'honoroient de leur amitié et qui peut etre aujourd'hui m'ont entierement Oublié; je te prie instamment de les assurer que les tems, la distance, les revolutions &c &c n'ont pas diminué la haute Estime et le tendre attachement que je leur avois consacré malgré la rigueur excessive du jugement des amis d'amerique a l'Epoque de mon retour en france—*Dieu* seul me jugera devant vous l'Erreur ne peut le Séduire les moindres replis du cœur lui sont connus.

<sup>28</sup> Has it ?



J'ai fait du bien j'ai fait du mal mais jamais avec intention de mal faire, et j'ai presque toujours cherché a reparer mes torts : nul homme n'est sans deffaut.

J'ai souvent écrit pensé et parlé de votre société avec tout le Respect qu'on doit a la pureté de vos Principes et a la sublime morale que vous Professer ; aujourd'hui que je suis retiré du monde que vingts et cinq ans ont amorti et calmé les intrigues et dissipé les Envieux qui ont cherché a me nuire ; je ne sens aucun pesant fardeau sur mon ame dont je croye avoir a rendre compte ; et j'Espere descendre au tombeau dans l'avenir avec la douce résignation d'un mortel qui va rendre compte de sa conduite a son Créateur :

Je n'ose te l'assurer positivement, mais mon cher James je conserve la douce Esperance avant de mourir d'offrir a nos dignes et vertueux amis de Londres les preuves de ce que j'avance.

Estimable Ami Je te prie de me rendre un petit service qui ne te coutera que quelques paroles et quelques minuttes d'écriture.

Voici ce que c'est.

Lors de mon dernier voyage en Angleterre qui eut lieu je crois vers le dixieme mois de l'an 1792, rappelé a Paris par le ministre et nommé premier medecin des hopitaux de France, je déposai a Londres in Poultry street une caisse contenant des instrumens et des papiers de famille que je voulois mettre a l'abri du feu et de la guerre qui ravageoit ma patrie ; je logeois alors ches un de vos freres, excellent et digne homme (j'ai oublié son nom qui je crois est françois d'origine ; il etoit alors voeuf marchand de Diamans ou Gold=Jeweller=il demeuroit en Poultry, il etoit alors 1792 disposé a se marier avec une jeune et excellente Personne qui prenoit un très grand soin de sa petite famille el qui par ses conversations Chrétiennes et édifiantes annoncoit un cœur entièrement dévoué au ministere Evangelique.

Je te supplie mon cher James de lui demander (a cet ami) si ma caisse cy dessus est encore ches luy ; elle ne contient que quelques Instrumens et des Papiers tres utiles a ma famille ; voulant les mettre a l'abri des horreurs d'une aussi terrible revolution ; je crus (en 1792) avec raison ne pouvoir la confier et déposer avec seureté et confiance que dans la maison d'un des membres de ta respectable Societe et depuis lors la guerre ou les voyages mont Empeché de toi Ecrire :

Aujourd'hui il nous Seroit important de Savoir positivement si elle est encore ches lui ; fais moi l'amitié de m'en instruire le plus promptement possible et peut etre alors je viendrai la retirer moi meme.

Adresse moi ta Reponse a Marsillac Lecointe ex Médecin en chef aux hospitaux francais Rue des Mauvaises Paroles No. 12 a Paris

MARSILLAC LECOINTE

Med<sup>n</sup> en Chef

Fare thee well dear & amiable James Remember me to the Friends, my Spirite is with you through the Watches of the Night.

It is clear that Marsillac must have found his mental balance once more (supposing that he lost it during the few last months of his American sojourn), as he appears

to have occupied important posts in his native land. The writer in *The Friend*, of 3mo. 13, 1830, before quoted, tells us that

he devoted himself in Paris to the practice of his profession and obtained under Napoleon a situation in one of the French hospitals, which it is believed he still occupies.

Enquiries in Paris having proved unavailing, we must here leave the subject and await any further light from any quarter which would enable us more fully to reconstruct the life of an interesting personage.

Thanks are tendered to Amelia Mott Gummere, Allen C. Thomas, William T. Elkinton, and others, who have given valuable help in the preparation of these notes.

NORMAN PENNEY

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## Meeting Records

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### AT DEVONSHIRE HOUSE, LONDON

Swarthmore Monthly Meeting	..	..	1668-1674
Do.	do.	..	1691-1715
Do.	do.	..	1715-1762
Do.	do.	..	1762-1789
Do.	Women	..	1671-1700
Do.	do.	..	1700-1717
Do.	do.	..	1731-1771
Do.	do.	..	1771-1798
Do.	Preparative Meeting	..	172 <sup>2</sup> / <sub>3</sub> -1756
Do.	Women	..	1712-1747
Hawkshead (Colthouse) Preparative Meeting			1699-1730
Do.	do.	..	1730-1787
Do.	Women	..	1707-1759
Height Preparative Meeting	..	..	1725-1746
Do.	do.	..	1746-1772
Do.	do.	..	1773-1797