

Jim M. Swayze: Natchez Talk, 2014, DJS 75th Jubilee Reunion

Introduction

Today I'll be discussing the early history of the Swayze family in America. The research I will be presenting, really for the first time, straightens out many of the misconceptions we have in our published history.

In my research, I've been digging into family matters on Long Island, in New England, over in England, and lately in Normandy, France. There isn't time to present all my findings in detail today, but I will be presenting the gist of my findings.

Sometime during this next year or so, I'll write it all up, complete with citations, and publish it. Hopefully, in the next year or so I'll have the opportunity to make a complete presentation to our organization.

Scope of Research

Let me start by giving credits. Our early history comes almost verbatim from B. F. Swasey's 1910 book, *Genealogy of the Swasey Family*. Believe me when I say that without that book, we might not be sitting here today.

Frances Mills copied from it extensively for our Volume I book. She modified it some based on the incredible research done primarily by C. Eugene Swezey in England, and I want to credit him as well, along with Minnie Swezey Elmendorf who did some nice research.

Having lauded these folks, let me now say that our early history is a mess. Anyone who has studied this history closely should know what I mean. John I just disappears out of the story. No explanation, no disposition of his holdings; he simply stops being talked about. We have people living incredibly long lives, moving here and there and back again, moves that would have been practically impossible in those days. It is not until Judge Sam comes along in the 1700s that our family history begins to make good sense.

In doing my research, I first took each assertion made by B. F. Swasey or Eugene, and I then went hunting for its source to see it for myself.

That alone, performing this simple task, resulted in shredding much of their work. There are a ton of mistakes. I don't have time to catalog all today, but let me give a few examples:

- I'll start with B.F. Swasey's claim that we are a family of Quakers. He is the source of this Quaker myth, and it's one of those myths that once it gets started, it seems impossible to get it stamped out. We were not a family of Quakers because Quakerism didn't exist yet. Quakerism didn't begin in England until the late 1650s and it was after that before it reached America.

We were a family of Puritans, plain and simple, and like most Puritans we quickly migrated to Congregationalism and the Presbyterians.

- Eugene said we left Normandy in 1524 to escape religious persecution because we were Huguenots. Same thing. There were no Huguenots in 1524. Remember, this was just 5 years after Martin Luther had posted his "95 Theses" on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. The Reformation had begun, but it was still localized in central Europe and hadn't reached the coast.
- B.F. said we left England in 1629 to escape religious persecution which is absolutely wrong. There was little to no religious persecution in the West Country of England during this period and in fact religious pluralism was remarkably high, with well-respected Catholic and Jewish families living side by side with Protestants.

We came to America for the same reason pretty much everyone else came: you could own your own land here – it was even free. Now, religion was an important element of life back then, and I don't mean to suggest otherwise. It was probably the driving force in the Pilgrims coming on the Mayflower to Plymouth Rock, but for us Puritans coming out of the West Country of

England, we just continued on with the same old religion. You could say we were escaping high taxes and debt, and that's certainly true enough, but we came for the same reasons people have always, over the centuries, come to America: to seek fame and fortune.

Other examples:

- B.F. has us moving to Setauket, Long Island in 1650. There was no Setauket in 1650.
- He has us on a 1650 tax record in Southold. The record he refers to was dated 1656. He misread the date.
- He made a common mistake down in Southold. He came across an apprenticeship agreement signed by John Swasey in 1651 so he thought John Swasey must have been living on Long Island in 1651. What he saw in Southold was the *registration* of the agreement, not its signing. It was registered in 1656, 5 years later when John really had moved to Southold.

There are more mistakes like these, plus a number of erroneous assumptions based on really bad history. Why these things were never checked I can't answer.

Early America

Let me lay out the legend of our family as B. F. Swasey made it up:

A John I came to America sometime around 1629 along with his two sons, Joseph born around 1610 and Joseph's younger brother John, born around 1619.

This legend has been accepted everywhere, all the genealogical societies, the LDS, everywhere, and it springs from one source and one source only: B. F. Swasey's fertile imagination. It is a pure fabrication, and it never happened.

B. F. created the myth, out of whole cloth, to make the data he had collected fit the story he fabricated. By that I mean that he had a John living in Salem in 1651 while he also had a John living in Southold in 1651, so therefore there must be two Johns. That was his reasoning, how the myth got started, and then B. F. used his imagination to come up with this romantic story of a father coming to America along with his two sons. Sweet story – never happened.

One of the biggest mistakes B. F. Swasey made in founding his myth was to misread the signatures on the Freeman's Oath signed in 1632. He thought he saw Joseph Swasey's signature, and so this is the date, 1632, he used to establish the Swayze family in America. This is why he said we must have arrived around 1629, a few years earlier.

Whatever signature he thought he saw, Joseph Swasey never signed that document, not in 1632 or any other time. The earliest verifiable date we have for Joseph in America comes from his first child being christened in 1653. That's more than a 20-year gap which changes everything.

Rewriting Early History

Let me go back and reconstruct the events the way it should have been done in the first place. Assuming both John and Joseph were of normal age when they married and began having children, somewhere around 25 years old, that would put John's birthdate in the early 1620s and Joseph's around 1628. In other words, John is the oldest, not Joseph.

Having done that, then when you go back to Dorset, England, you find a Thomas Swasie living there with his family of 5 kids, Richard, Robert, Elizabeth, Agnes and Thomas, at just the right time, 1600. Robert grew up to marry Margery Horsford, and together they had a little boy named John in 1622. Richard grew up to marry Joan Alexander, and together they had a little boy named Joseph in 1627.

These two boys, these two 1st cousins, not brothers, may well be the two who came to America, from two different families, at two different times. John got here first, perhaps around 1638 or 39, followed by Joseph a decade later.

Once you begin to think of John and Joseph as 1st cousins and not brothers, things begin to fall into place. Joseph, for instance, died at the age of 72, not some incredible 100 years old. John I, who Frances thought lived to 103, never lived at all. And once the dates are corrected, you see there was no bouncing around, place to place. Things occurred in normal patterns.

It also explains something that has always bothered me and that is that John and Joseph never acted like brothers. They never had a single interface with one another.

Joseph was a mariner, a sea-faring man. His sons grew up to be mariners and ship builders; his daughters all married sea-faring men. And they all stayed close to the coast and the sea.

John and our family were all land-lubbers, farmers and tradesmen. I'll say here that I have reason to think John may have been a tailor, a clothes maker. But I haven't been able to verify that yet.

You might think about this: Never once, in the 400-year history of our families in America, never once have the two families of Joseph and John ever touched one another. Think about that.

Summing Up

I'm going to stop there because it's all the time I have for this part. With this reconstruction, we now have a consistent, coherent narrative of our family's early history in America, not some legendary myth. No need to make anything up to make the pieces fit. It's the simple story of people living normal lives, doing the things people normally do.

[Insert not included in the talk: I have been asked if we can verify the English families of John and Joseph and the answer is no, we cannot. The genealogy presented here is intended only to show a reasonable scenario of what may have happened. There simply are not sufficient extant records to be definitive, although I will add that there are additional indications that Joseph was indeed son of Richard and Joan Alexander.]

Surname Discussion

Now I want to devote my remaining time to our surname, Swayze.

Back in the West Country of England, back in 1544 we find 70-year old John Swesye of Weymouth, along with 48-year old William Swesey living in Bridport

with 6 kids, receiving their English denization following 20 years of residence in country. These two men, John and William, are our earliest known ancestors.

Here's what we know: In 1544, an official in Weymouth, England, wrote down the names of these two ancestors: John Swesye, spelled S-w-e-s-y-e, and his son William Swesey, which he spelled S-w-e-s-e-y, saying that they came from Normandy.

This is a historical moment. It marks the first time we see our family name in writing. These are our ancestors.

Today we would say that official "Anglicized the spelling" of our name. The same thing we used to do here on Ellis Island: an official asks the name, listens closely, and then writes it down the way he hears it pronounced.

We have a difficult time grasping this today, but back then spelling was simply not important. Remember that the first dictionaries were still 3 centuries away, dictionaries which "fixed" words and names, made them static. Before that, any spelling which allowed you to sound out the name was good enough.

Okay, where does our name, Swayze, come from? The answer is that we don't know and likely never will for sure. Historical records from 500 or more years ago are scant and hard to come by. The name came from Normandy, that we do know, but we don't know if it originated there. The name would have once been "John from Swayze," which was the name of a place, Swayze, where John once lived. We can make some intelligent guesses where that place might have been.

First of all, look at the name itself, "Swayze."

- It has two syllables. If a prospective name source doesn't have two syllables, it's probably not the source of our name.
- The first syllable begins with that Sw- sound.
- The second syllable begins with a "zee" or "cee" sound.
- And finally, the name ends with the "e-e-e" sound, "Sway-ze."

These are our 4 requirements in searching for our name source. Frances Mills suggested the French word, "Suisse." No official would hear the name, "John Suisse," and write it down as "John Swasie." It just wouldn't happen.

One candidate which does meet our requirements would be Swansea in Wales, which has the name, "Sweyse," in its town seal, spelled exactly the way the official in Weymouth spelled it. We tend to discount Swansea as a candidate because back in the 14 and 1500s there was no connection between Wales and Normandy, no logical reason for a family to have migrated from Swansea to the Norman coast.

A better possibility would be that it came from the village of Swavesey in Cambridgeshire, which in that crazy way the English have of pronouncing things is pronounced in England as "Sway-ce." This is where the large communion cup is which has "Swasey," S-w-a-s-e-y etched on its side, the cup Pat Larsen took a picture of for our Volume III. Back in the 16th century, Swavesey was an active trading port doing business with Normandy so there is good reason to have migrated to Normandy.

Perhaps the most likely candidate comes from France itself, where we find the place-name, "Soisy," S-o-i-s-y, pronounced "Swaa-ce." *Soisy* was known to be a surname in central France back in the 16th century. The word *Soisy* dates back to Roman times and means an "ally" of Rome. In France, there are still places with names like *Soisy-sous-Montmorency*, *Soisy-sur-Seine*, *Soisy-sur-École*. Any of these may well have been the source where our name originated.

Ending

Out of time. Hopefully, more clues will continue turning up, but to sum up, I've reconstructed our early family history based on a consistent, coherent narrative which begins with two very different young men coming to America, related, certainly, but not brothers, two men who went on to establish two totally separate families of Swayzes in America which have never touched.

Thank you all for your time and attention.