

1. EARLY RECORDS

No one really knows, so far as we have been able to determine, the origin of the Sentell family name. A quick review of maps, records, and reference materials suggests that our ancestors came to North America from western Europe -- after perhaps a couple of generations or so as refugees in England.

Speculation on Origins

Family historian Nicholas Sentelle writes that our name originated in Devonshire in the West Country of England. Anglo-Saxon in its derivation, the name was at first Sent-to-Hill or Sent-to-Tell.¹ The family may have lived at Totnes, between Plymouth and Exeter, where William Sentell christened a daughter Elysabeth on 30 April 1576, and a son Ellys on 12 December 1583.² The family could have witnessed the passing of the great Spanish Armada off nearby Prawle Point in 1588. On 13 April 1618 William Sentell and Joane Myllar posted their banns at Totnes, and their son William was christened there on 6 May 1619. This second William may be the father of Samuel Sentell, christened 7 March 1646 at St. Mary Major in Exeter. Samuel is the closest match of record to Samuel Sental described as "an oald Man" in 1726 and who first appears in Virginia records in 1712.³ A few miles north in Bovey Tracy, a Senthill family appears in the church records between 1571 and 1738.

Sentell may be a variant of a group of Germanic names (Sandrat, Sander, Sandig, Santel, and Sendel) which seem to derive from the Old Norse word **sannr**, meaning war, strife, or conflict. Or the name may be a corruption of the Old French **sendal**, for a type of fine silk cloth. Many French Protestant refugees in England and the Low Countries were weavers of cloth by trade, and perhaps the surname lends substance to a family tradition of Huguenot antecedents.

The name may have a geographical origin, coming from any one of several places in France and Italy such as Centellium and Centello in the 11th and 12th centuries, or Sanctillium in the 14th century. Such villages or estates

¹R. Nicholas Sentelle, Box # 68, Etowah, NC 28729. Unpublished papers.

²Martha Thomas Smith, 3435 Timberlake Road, Kennesaw, Georgia 30144. Correspondence 8 February and 26 September 1994. Information provided from searches of Latter Day Saints church records and census schedules on computer. See LDS Batch and Sheet C051751, Library Call Number 917545. Ellys (or Ellis) christened daughter Jane on 2 November 1604 and Elizabeth on 7 January 1611. A few miles away at Bovey Tracey, Johis Senthill christened daughter Elizabetha on 14 June 1580 and Wilmi Senthill christened daughter Helena on 20 December 1582. See B&S C050362, LCN916817.

³The "oald Man" would have been eighty years old in 1726; his son would have been born in 1711 or before -- when the father was sixty-five.

probably had been named in turn for a former Roman landowner by name of Sentillius or Centillius.⁴

Reitstap's **Armorial General** lists two crests under the surname Centelles, one Spanish and one Sicilian.

We have seen references to a family of Louisiana settlers (Iberville Parish) descended from one Jean Baptiste Sentilles (born 29 March 1769, died 24 November 1843) from Villecomtel in the Hautes Pyrenees, the grandson of Jean Sentilles (born 1700), a farmer of Pereuilh.⁵ Across the mountains in Spain there is a small village about thirty miles north of Barcelona on the Rio Besos with the suggestive name of Centellas.

Our known ancestors first appear in Virginia on the heels of a large Huguenot migration to the colony. Many of those refugees came from the south of France and northern Italy. And so our name may come from a place in the Italian Piedmont by name of Centallo, a little village on the Grana tributary of the Po, about six miles north of the town of Cuneo.

Contemporary Usage

The contemporary spelling and pronunciation of the name with emphasis on the ultimate syllable are fairly recent innovations. "For years we were called 'Sentle' with the sounding of 'Gentle,'" Nicholas Sentelle wrote to a distant cousin in 1936. "Knowing this to be incorrect," he explained, "educators telling us that it was Sentelle, we carry the final 'e' that the accent may be on the last syllable. . . . Some have accused us of being uppish or highminded, but this is far from the case."⁶

There seems to be no consensus on usage, however, even in western North Carolina today where the elegant form of our surname has enjoyed its greatest notoriety. If the ultimate E prompts some people to place the accent on the second syllable, it also leads others less familiar with the name to sound it in three syllables. Considering the personal inconvenience and the fact that most of

⁴ Susan D. Sentell, College Arms Apt. 16-11, Carrollton, GA 30017. Letter dated 4 March 1976.

⁵ Nathaniel Wesley Sentell, 101 Chambers Street, Corinth, Mississippi 38834. Letter dated 21 January 1986. Included two photocopied sheets from "cajun cousin Ruth Bergeron"; probably Ruth (Mrs. George) Bergeron, daughter of James Henry Sentell, son of George Washington Jr., son of GW Sr., son of John, son of Samuel (1759-1844).

⁶ R. Nicholas Sentelle, Penrose, North Carolina. Letter to John Mercer Sentell, Dixie, Louisiana, dated 4 August 1936.

the outside world has absolutely no interest in the question one way or another, we have often thought that except for a lifelong matter of habit the final E might be best consigned to the final repository of most good intentions.

In his paper on the family history, written perhaps for a gathering of the clan,⁷ Rev. F. M. Huggins took the extra E as a matter of course, but noted that this form and the accent on the second syllable had come about only "in recent years."

"But we should not be confused or embarrassed by the spelling and the pronunciation of the name," he assures us. "Names have constantly undergone change."

The ultimate E was not in vogue before the mid-1930s. Rev. Alva Sentell (1846-1934), an inveterate writer and without question the most prominent of the North Carolina family in his time, seems to have used it little if at all.⁸

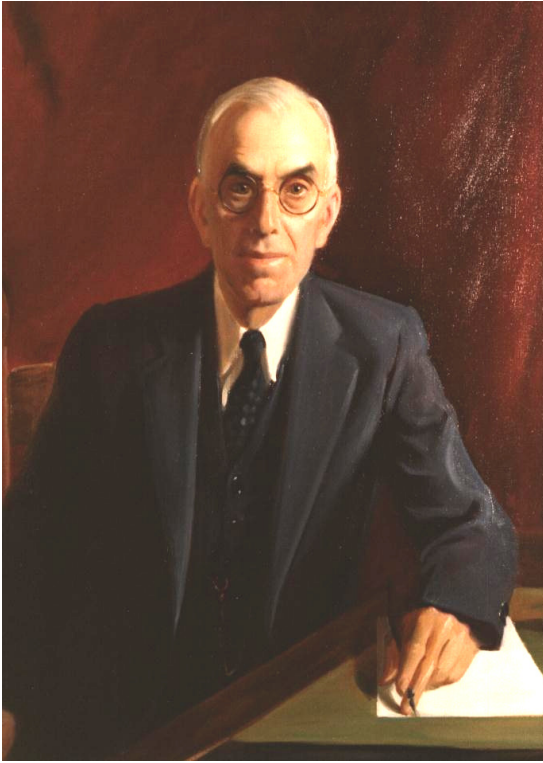
Origin of the ultimate E. The evidence is fairly conclusive that credit for the ultimate E in our recent generations must go to Dr. Mark Sentelle (1874-1949) who would have been among the "educators" cited by Nicholas Sentelle. Mark was well-read and widely-traveled. A Phi Beta Kappa scholar, he was a graduate of Yale, and he studied at Princeton, Columbia, and the University of Chicago.

Apparently this man of learning assumed the extra E to give the name a French character -- in keeping with the alleged Huguenot roots.

The first appearance of the final E known to us was in 1898 when Eb Sentelle, Mark's brother, so signed his name as Register of Deeds in Greene County, Tennessee, during the years when Mark was teaching at nearby King College in Bristol. Mark's father sat on the Greene County Quarterly Court from 1870 to 1905. Beginning in 1903, and not before that year, the name was spelled in the **Minute Books** with the third E.

⁷ Probably at Crab Creek Baptist Church, Henderson County, North Carolina, Sunday, 25 July 1937. Nicholas Sentelle was the moderator at this meeting.

⁸ The first historian of the North Carolina family, Alva posted a personal diary daily for fifty years (1883-1933). He was a minister for thirty years and for ten years Secretary of the Western North Carolina Baptist Convention. The first School Superintendent of Haywood County, he filled that post for thirty-two years (1881-93, 1901-21). See W. Clark Medford, **R. A. Sentelle** (1958), *passim*.



Dr. Mark E. Sentelle seems to have added the final **E** to the family name.

By further coincidence, Mark was serving his memorable tenure as Dean of Students at Davidson College (1920-1941) when the French form of our name was adopted in western North Carolina.

We note that in 1924 Mark's father signed his name without the final E, and the surname is given as Sentell on his 1936 death certificate signed by son Eb Sentelle and son-in-law Dr. Joe Lea. Perhaps Dr. Mark was not on hand on these occasions to prompt others on the "proper" spelling.

Variations of the name. The historical variations in the form of the surname are nowhere better illustrated than in a family cemetery on the headwaters of Big Willow Creek in North Carolina where three gravestones have been erected for patriarch William Sentell (1756-1835) and his wife Elizabeth (1760/61-1847). On each of

these stones, the spelling of the name differs with the other two.

A government marker reads William **Senter** -- probably because he had been so listed in certain company payroll records during the Revolution.⁹ A second stone, placed by the family for Elizabeth, is so weathered that its rough, hand-chiseled characters are all but illegible. We have it on good authority,

⁹ Capt. Wm. Brinkley's Co., 1st N. C., commanded by Col. Sam'l Jarvis. North Carolina Daughters of the American Revolution, **Roster of Soldiers from North Carolina in the American Revolution** (Durham: The Seeman Press, 1932), p. 623; Cites **State Records of North Carolina**, Vol. XVII (Clark's **Miscellaneous State Records**), p. 1060.

however, that the name was here inscribed as **Sentle**, the form which appears on contemporary stones in another graveyard near the old home place on nearby Jeter Mountain.¹⁰ Yet a third marker between these erected by great-grandson Alva shows the name as **Sentell**, the form generally favored by most branches of the family today.¹¹

In his paper on the family, Rev. F. M. Huggins says that there were persons in England with the Sentell surname as early as 1545,¹² and also in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick at an early date.

Gideon Sentelle, according to Huggins, believed his grandfather William was an immigrant along with two brothers named Samuel and Nathan who came from France or England and landed in Charleston, South Carolina.



William/Elizabeth Sentell graves at Big Willow with three markers. Government marker on left reads William **Senter**. Center marker reads William and Elizabeth **Sentell**. Third marker on right reads Elizabeth **Sentle**.

The Huguenots

Other versions hold that the immigrant ancestors fled during the Huguenot persecutions to England or Scotland and then came to America. Owing to this

¹⁰ Frank L. FitzSimons, **From the Banks of the Oklawaha** (Golden Glow Publishing Company, 1976), p. 38. The government marker for his son, a few feet away, reads Richard **Sentle**.

¹¹ A check of telephone directory listings in July 1999 shows 82 entries under **Sentelle** (14.5%), 411 under **Sentell** (72.6%), 62 under **Sentel** (11.0%) and 11 under **Centell** (1.9%).

¹² John Sentell, son of Peter Sentell, was christened 3 November 1553 at Barnstaple, Devonshire. See LDS Batch & Sheet P005741, Call Number 942.35/B1 V26W. Martha Thomas Smith, letter of 26 September 1994.

persistent Huguenot tradition which has come down to us, we begin our search for our ancestors with the records of religious refugees.

There were two major emigrations of Huguenots from France to England and other havens of safety from persecution, the first immediately following the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 24 August 1572, and the second more than a century later after Revocation of the toleration Edict of Nantes on 22 October 1685. Names of likely ancestors appear in England and America at times which suggest their association with both events.

Huguenots in England. The influx of French Protestants following the Massacre of St. Bartholomew's Day came generally from northwestern France, from Brittany, Normandy, and Picardy.

In a list of foreign Protestants and aliens in London in 1618 there appear in Bishopsgate Ward a silkweaver by name of John Setall [*sic*] and his wife Anne. John was born in Canterbury, the seat of a Huguenot congregation dating from the time of the Massacre. Anne was born in Flanders, a city to which many refugees had fled after this persecution.¹³

The records of the Huguenot Church in Southampton show that a Jehanne Sental witnessed a baptism there on 27 February 1620. Six years later, on 28 November 1625, the passing of Jehanne Sental, widow of [veufe de] Adrian Bordel, is noted in a record of deaths in the congregation.¹⁴

The Waldenses. Following the Revocation in 1685, there was a new wave of refugees which included many Waldenses from the Piedmont valleys hidden among the Cottian Alps.¹⁵ The attitude of the Waldenses was for the most part passive, and they rarely offered any organized resistance to persecution.

Hence they have no such heroic story to tell of battles and sieges and victories. Their heroism was displayed in patience, steadfastness, and long-suffering, rather than in resisting force by force; and they were

¹³ William Durrant Cooper, Editor, **Lists of Foreign Protestants, and Aliens, Resident in England 1618-1688** (Westminster: John Bowyer Nichols and Sons, 1862), p. 67. The occupation, silkweaver, listed in this old record is especially interesting in view of our earlier speculation that the surname might derive from an Old French word, *sendal*, for a fine silk cloth.

¹⁴ Humphrey Marrett Godfray, Editor, **The Publications of the Huguenot Society of London**, Vol 4 (Lymington: The Society, 1890), pp. 59, 113. A memorial in Salisbury Cathedral to Edward W., Ellen C., Chas. E., Gertrude M., and Blanche M. Sentell, among others, memorializes the deaths of these Americans in a railway accident 1 July 1906. Miss Suzanne Edward, Librarian and Keeper of the Muniments, Salisbury Cathedral SP1 2EN. Letter dated September 15, 1983.

¹⁵ Charles W. Baird, **History of the Huguenot Emigration to America**, Vol. I (Baltimore: Regional Publishing, 1966), p. 183. The Cottian Alps lie across the Italian-French border.

usually ready to endure death in its most frightful forms rather than prove false to their faith.¹⁶

Several thousand of them took refuge in Switzerland when the troops of Louis XIV drove them from their valleys in Piedmont. The number of exiles was increased by new arrivals in 1698, and the Swiss cantons, unable to support them, took steps to remove them to other Protestant countries. The appeal for aid met a liberal response in England where a refugee pastor was sent to the continent to arrange for emigration to Virginia. Printed proposals and maps were circulated in several of the cities of Switzerland, Germany, and Holland.¹⁷

The Huguenots in Virginia. Nearly 800 of these Huguenot refugees arrived in the Virginia colony aboard four ships in 1700 and 1701. Many of these were settled at Manakin Town on the James River to form a buffer between the English and the Indians, but others were scattered throughout the colony. Most of the refugees, even those in the Manakin settlement, were largely assimilated into the general population within a generation.¹⁸

This group holds a special interest for us because of the persistent tradition of Huguenot antecedents in the family and because the earliest records positively associated with our direct ancestors appear a few years after the establishment of Manakin Town in Virginia.

The family name does not appear on any of the extant rosters of the Manakin settlers, however. If our people, as we suspect, were in fact among these refugees, they were probably aboard a ship, unnamed in the records, which arrived 20 October 1700 at James City. No passenger list for this group is known to exist, but a resolution passed by the governing Council gives some insight into the circumstances of the company which probably included our earliest American ancestors.

Whereas severall French Refugees have lately (viz^t) on or about the 20th Instant arrived at James City in this Colony w[i]th Design to go up to Mannikin Town in the upper part of James River whither several French are already Gone to make Settlement -- His Excellency and the honorable Council taking the same into their serious Consideration are unanimously of Opinion that Considering the Poverty and disab[i]lity of the said Refugees[,] their Ignorance in the Customs and affairs of this Colony[,]

¹⁶ Samuel Smiles, **The Huguenots in France After the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes** (New York: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1893), p. 421.

¹⁷ Baird, *op. cit.*, II, p. 178.

¹⁸ Francis Earle Lutz, **The Prince George - Hopewell Story** (Richmond: The William Byrd Press, Inc., 1957), pp. 51-52.

their wants and Necessities being destitute of all Means of Support and Susteinance at present[,] it will be most for their advantage and Interest to disperse them selves, and do accordingly order Licence and permitt the afores[ai]^d French Refugees to disperse them selves into severall parts of this Country, that they may thereby the better provide for the future Support of them selves and Families untill the Next fall at which time further Care may be taken therein -- ¹⁹

The story of our arrival in Virginia, perhaps one of the finest passages in the family experience, may be lost beyond recall. But, as we shall note, there is a compelling consistency among certain contemporary records and events in Virginia, the circumstances of our known ancestors in the colony, and the traditions which have come down to us.

Earliest Records in America

Virginia headrights. To stimulate immigration and settlement in Virginia, a prospective planter upon arrival was issued a warrant by the colonial secretary for fifty acres of wild, ungranted land for himself and for each person brought over at his own expense.

These headrights, as they were known, could be traded and exchanged in the manner of a primitive currency. Masters of ships collected headrights on their crew members on every voyage. Cost of passage might be assumed initially by a ship captain, and the headright subsequently sold to someone wanting to increase his land holdings.

The person listed as a headright may have arrived in the colony long before the holder entered claim for land thereby due. Nor was the headright necessarily an immigrant. Even prominent persons in the colony through a voyage or repeated voyages to England appear on their return as headrights of friends or relatives who paid their passage in order to gain more land holdings.

Among headrights are found persons of all social classes, nobility and gentry, yeomanry, indentured servants (some of good family and connections), and Negroes.²⁰

¹⁹ H. R. McIlwaine, Editor, **Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia**, Vol. II (Richmond: The Virginia State Library, 1927), pp. 112-113; H. R. McIlwaine, "The Huguenot Settlement at Manakin Towne," **The Huguenot**, No. 6 (1933), pp. 73-74.

²⁰ Nell Marion Nugent, **Cavaliers and Pioneers, Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants, 1623-1666** (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 1963), pp. xxiv-xxv; Samuel Eliot Morison, **The Oxford History of the American People**, Vol. I (New York: New American Library, 1972), p. 131.

The earliest known record of a person of our family name in North America is that of Valentine Sentell in Virginia who appears among twenty-four headrights certified by the Northampton County Court on 30 October 1643. Owing to the nature of the headright system, we know little more about Valentine than his name and that he made at least one passage to Virginia sometime before this date.²¹

Att A County Court houlden at Northampton the 30th of October Anno Dm 1643. Present/

Wyatt Yardley Esq^e: Commander re

**Mr: Obedience Robins
Capt William Stone
Mr. John Neale --**

**Mr. Richard Douglas
Mr. Edmund Scarbrough**

* * * * *

A certiff: granted unto Mrs: Anne Littleton in right of her father Henry Southy Esq^e

Henry Southy Esq^e:

Eliz his wife

Henry Southy his child

Thomas)

Mary) Southy

Elizabeth)

John Davenport

Tho: Browns

Margarett Sharlley

Roger Delke

Tho: Shoare

Valentine Sentell

Izaak Woolley

Will Bricklayer

Alice Davnport

Ellino: Paynter

Sarah Sharlley

Dynah Glower²²

Robt. Swamp

Roger Marshall

Anne Aimes

Richard Williams

John Rose

We have found no other reference to Valentine in the colonial records. If he remained in Virginia, he probably moved toward the unclaimed lands near the falls of the rivers or below the James. And there he probably lost his life in the Holy Thursday massacre of 18 April 1644. Some 500 whites out of a total population of only 8,000 were killed on that date by hostile Indians, and the brunt of this holocaust fell on the frontier plantations.

²¹ Rev. Huggins cites a record of William Sentelle who located on Eastermost River, Mockjack Bay (probably Mobjack Bay between present Gloucester and Mathews Counties), in 1652. We have found a William Senter among ten headrights listed on a land grant to Thomas Preston on 2 August 1652. The 500 acres for Preston were located "on the west Side of the Eastermost river in Mockjack bay." The confusion arose, we believe, because the name Senter was copied incorrectly into an index as **Sentell**. Huggins' informant at the State Library failed to check the original documents. **Virginia Land Office Patent Book No. 3, 1652-1655** (Archives Division, Virginia State Library), p. 204.

²² **Northampton County** (Virginia) **Orders, Wills, No. 2, 1640-1645** (Archives Division, Virginia State Library), p. 168B; Thomas B. Robertson, "Land Certificates for Northampton County," **The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography**, 28 (2): 142-151, April, 1920. The script of the court clerk is extremely difficult to read. Our version is "deciphered" directly from the original and it varies at several points with the published transcription cited above and a manuscript transcription in the Archives Division.

Whether by Indians or a number of other causes, mortality was high in Virginia in that day, and Valentine's disappearance from the official records comes as no surprise.

Records in the northeast. Rev. Huggins also "had access to the research of Miss Mable D. Colvin, professional genealogist and a member of the family, of Southwest Harbor, Maine. . . . It is thought by Miss Mable Colvin . . . whose mother was a Sentelle, that there is a connection between the Northern and Southern branch of the family heading up in common ancestors in England."²³

Records of the Old North Church in Boston show admissions for Joanna Sental (1 November 1719), and Mary Sental (6 September 1741). There are baptisms recorded for William (28 September 1712), John (31 March 1717), another William (13 December 1719), and Joseph Sental (2 June 1723).²⁴ There was a Samuel Sental in Boston between 1645 and 1662 identified as a brickburner, and Mary Sendall, daughter of Samuell and Johanna Sendall, died in that city in 1654.²⁵

There is a strong temptation in all this to speculate on probable and possible connections. We suspect that the Sental family in Boston may have been among the Loyalists who removed to Nova Scotia at the time of the Revolution. Perhaps William Sental who was baptized there in 1719 is the same William Sentell who died in Windsor in 1790.

Then again, there was also a heavy southern migration from New England underway in the early 1700s at the time our family first appeared in colonial Virginia. And we may indeed be relations of the Boston Sental family as Rev. Huggins suggested in his family history.

²³ This would be Mable DuPont Colvin (born Brooklyn, New York, 31 October 1877), daughter of Mary Elizabeth Sentell (born Waterloo, New York, 12 June 1842), daughter of Charles Sentell (baptized Halifax, Nova Scotia, 4 April 1807), son of Edward Sentell (born Windsor, Nova Scotia, 18 May 1771), son of William Sentell (died Windsor, Nova Scotia, 1790). Lewis Edward Neff, **Mayflower Index** (General Society of Mayflower Descendants, 1960), passim; Miss Mable DuPont Colvin, Application for Membership (General No. 12574, State No. 368), Rhode Island Society of Mayflower Descendants. Family papers were placed with the New York Historical Society Collections in 1969. See **Union Catalogue** (MS 70-697) for a description.

²⁴ Chandler Robbins, **A History of the Second Church or Old North in Boston** (Boston: John Wilson and Son, 1852), p. 276.

²⁵ **New England Historical and Genealogical Register**, iii, 191; ix, 251, 347; x, 83, 218; xii, 49, 54; xxxi, 107, 175.