Religious freedom is generally considered to be a founding principle of the English colonies in North America and the establishment of the United States. However, most of the historical establishment overlooks the fact that not all of the early religious refugees to the colonies were Puritan Pilgrims or English Catholics in Maryland. In fact, there were small, yet culturally significant migrations of French Calvinist Protestants, otherwise known as Huguenots who settled along the Atlantic coast. They sailed to the English colonies following the law passed by the French King Louis XIV in 1685, which stated that it was illegal to practice any other religion in France other than that of the Catholic Church.

Many of the Huguenot refugees who left France after 1685 did not immediately move to North America. A large majority moved to Protestant Germanic states, the Netherlands and England. Many of the pre-1685 Huguenot migrations to the North American colonies did instead originate from France though, before they were supposed to be forcibly converted to Catholicism. These Huguenots were often wealthier individuals who could afford the price of the trip, and who chose to leave France before their religious tolerance was revoked. The rest of the Huguenots arrived via England in the decades after 1685 in secret, as it was illegal for them to leave France.

The Huguenots who eventually settled at Manakin Town in 1700 organized their trip while living in England. They were to be given a plot of land to settle on by the king himself, William III. They established themselves on the colonial frontier of Virginia, and would endure great hardships their first few years on the continent. There is a historical debate over whether or not these Huguenots who arrived in America after 1685 actually retained their French cultural identity, having chosen to adapt to the customs of their English neighbors. Many historians have claimed that many of these later settlements were more characteristically English in their establishment, and not worth further investigation. The entailing spatial argument will attempt to illustrate the French nature of the settlement and integration of the Manakin Huguenots.

Bibliography:

The Migration to Manakin Town

By Daniel Ludington

Huguenot Migrations to North America at the end of the 17th Century

Fig. 1 Right: The migrations that took place prior to 1685 were very different in nature compared to those after. The colonists who moved before tended to be from the wealthy middle class, while those who stayed in France had much of their wealth detailed by the king. Thus, the established settlements at Boston, New York and Charleston are considered by historians to be both the most economically successful, and the most characteristically Huguenot.
Upon their arrival in Virginia in 1700, many of the Huguenots were greatly weakened by their three-month voyage across the Atlantic. Having been ordered to settle the Huguenot refugees along the Atlantic coast near what is today Norfolk, the governor of the colony, Francis Nicholson decided to go against the orders of the king. He arranged for the French move inland to Manakin, an abandoned Monacan native village. William Byrd II, one of the wealthiest men in the colony, owned the land that the French settled on and had pressured Nicholson to move the French to the Virginia frontier along the James River.

The original desire of the English proprietors was to use the highly trained French artisans and craftsmen to establish a trading village on the James River. A plan for a town center was drawn up, with the intent of having the colonists live there plying their trades, and using the river to communicate with the English settlements further east. Both the English proprietors and the French refugees decided to establish the settlement in this manner. Their hope was to practice traditional French forms of agricultural production: establishing vineyards and silk production.

Unfortunately, during the first decade many of the refugees did not fare well, as both the vineyards and silk production failed. Over half of the original 500 settlers perished or moved to more suitable locations. The French colonists at Manakin Town decided they needed to reconfigure their settlement, in order to be more successful. They abandoned viticulture and sericulture, and turned to growing crops that grew well in Virginia, especially tobacco. Beginning in 1710, most of the remaining French reorganized themselves to become farmers, in a way that was closely related to the French long-lot system that was used in all other French New World Colonies.

The Intended Settlement and Early Troubles

(A) Above: A proposed plan for the settlement at Manakin Town. This French-style town square intended to have the church, school and homes of the settlers. Each barrier symbolizes a wall of a building.

(B) Left: An example of the French long-lot system. This system of land division was used extensively throughout French possessions in the New World, and can still be seen in aerial photos from the St. Lawrence valley in Quebec, and the Mississippi valley settlements extending from Louisiana to Missouri. After the failure of the town settlement at Manakin, the French refugees turned to a land distribution system they were familiar with.

The 5,000 acres west of Lower Manakin Creek was settled first, and the other half was given out twenty years later. Byrd intended for there to be 75 plots of 133 acres out of the entire 10,000, but what actually 87 plots were given out, only to 66 families. Although the distribution of this land was uneven, it was still laid out in a way characteristic of French settlements. The long-lot design of the Manakin settlement allowed for the same commercial access to the river as the failed town plan, but that each family had land to farm. Most of the floodplain along the banks of the James River is fertile and easy to farm. This long-lot system of planning enabled the Huguenots at Manakin to prosper economically, but French inheritance practices meant that the land was evenly distributed further splitting the plots into unusable possessions. This was due to the way that the French had been organizing their farm lots for centuries. After the first generation passed their possessions on to the successive generations, there was not enough land to be farmed. Some moved west into the Appalachian Mountains, while others consolidated their holdings into plantations.
The design of the French long-lot system was intended to keep the settlers within close proximity of each other, and with enough land to be agriculturally productive. The existence of a major land route at the extreme end of the plots furthest away from the river enabled a second mode of transportation to the east. The main road that the Manakin Huguenots used is still in existence today, aptly named the Huguenot Trail.

In the decades after the establishment of the long-lot system, and a reconfiguration occurred where the French transitioned from merchants and artisans to farmers. It was over the course of the next forty years that the French nature of their settlement gradually gave way to the more English style of plantations and colonial architecture. This trend can be attributed to the fact that the Manakin Huguenots came into greater social and economic contact with their English neighbors, both those moving west into the Virginia frontier, and those who they traded with further east.

Compared to the narrow, long-lot system that the French refugees established, the colonial plantation system was organized very differently. Where the French long-lot system was intended to ensure that the settlers were close enough for daily interaction, the plantation system was designed around the concepts of relative isolation and the centrality of the main house. What developed at Manakin over these four decades was a gradual shift from the French-styled long-lot system, to one that more closely resembled the Virginia plantation system, with centralized plantation houses and larger land holdings.

Referring to the land-grant map (Fig. 5), the lots that were assigned in the 1730’s and 1740’s were far larger than the original grant 20 years earlier. These lots were wider, less uniform and not all backed up to the James River. Prior to the second 5000-acre land grant in the 1730’s, the only plot that did not have waterfront property was the large plot south of Upper Manakin Creek, which belonged to the proprietor, William Byrd II, who was not in need of direct access to the river. These larger grants were given as part of the second 5000 acres were already being laid out in a more traditional plantation layout, as was requested by the Manakin Huguenots.

It is entirely possible to understand how the richer farmers at Manakin consolidated their landholdings. The more wealthy refugees were initially given more land, while the thinner plots may have divided the land more equally. The larger plots near the creek to the east were given to the more prominent members of the community, in addition to west fact they held multiple long-lots. Although the Huguenot refugees had established their landowning system in a French manner, they did not remain that way for long as land was consolidated to maximize profits.
After being sold to an English proprietor who had married into the French families, the estate at Keswick was transformed from a modest single house (see Fig. 7), to a small-scale plantation (see Fig. 6). The manner in which the Keswick estate was laid out conforms to traditional organizations of many contemporary plantations, as opposed to the older, more centralized French model of the long-lots. The original house built by the French landowner (around 1735) was already built far back from the road, which is the first departure from the long-lot system, as it was not of the river either. Still being directly in view of the road gave the original brick house a safe location, separating it from the rest of the commerce passing through the road. It was positioned in way that was neither uniquely French nor English.

The first brick home built at this estate conformed to traditional French architecture, with an open floor plan, a stairway up the middle of the house, and dual front doors. The conventions of this home still closely resemble colonial architecture, but still have a distinct French feeling to them. Over time, the estate became began to resemble its English neighbors.

Even though the original brick house at Keswick was the central building, a larger estate house built in the 1750’s later superseded it. The new house, built by the English/French family was modeled after the plantation house directly across the James River, at Tuckahoe. Tuckahoe is considered to a standard plantation house built on the Virginia frontier during the early 18th century and is famous for being the boyhood home of Thomas Jefferson. The layout of Keswick has changed little after the mid 18th century, and largely conforms to the standard conventions of a plantation, albeit the plot it existed on was far smaller than most contemporary plantations. The plantation house functioned as the new center of commerce, as opposed to the central town or houses along the river as the French had originally envisioned.

Examining the course of the establishment of the Manakin colony by the French Huguenot refugees, it is possible to understand how their French background influenced the formative years of the colony, and how they adapted their ways to the environment and their desire to adapt to colonial Virginian society.