

ST. CLAIR, THE HEADLESS HERMIT

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Long ago in Rochester, Kent Co., England there lived a family with a son named Clair who was born in 845 AD. **He was not our ancestor. He had no children.** But historical events resulted in his name becoming the St. Clair/Sinclair family name.

Legend says Clair came from a noble family. This means they were probably wealthy Christian Anglo-Saxons perhaps even somehow related to King Alfred the Great. Clair lived near the closing of the golden age of monastic activities when monasteries dominated the lives and thoughts of people. Consequently, great wealth and knowledge accumulated there which eventually attracted the attention of the Norsemen.

With their swift ships and navigational skills, the Vikings were able to swoop down even in the middle of the night then be gone before a count of their ships and real strength could be calculated. They were not dramatically more cruel than the other bandit of that day but only they had ever dared to attack monasteries. They had no fear of God thus they seemed to be instruments of God punishing people for their sins. Certainly there must have been a rush to revival and much soul searching going on to find the cause of God's displeasure. Indeed, aside from occasional Viking attacks, this became a time of relative peace under King Alfred who reigned 871-899.

Clair's father betrothed him to an English woman, but he was interested only in serving God. Still she persisted trying every way to seduce him with her feminine charms. Consequently in 867 at the age of 22, he fled to France landing at Cherbourg, Neustria (later Normandy). This was just about 11 years before the Viking Guthrum, accompanied by our ancestor, Hrolf (**Rollo**)Rognvaldson from Møre, Norway made an unexpected mid-winter attack on Wessex.

Clair may have spent some time as a monk in England or France because statues of him show him dressed as a monk. But Clair felt the need to be alone. (*was he still trying to hide from the English woman?*) Because his fame as a healer attracted crowds of people who came seeking a cure, he moved his hut from place to place within the forest. Pupils also came and built their huts next to his so they could be closer to this holy man. These lines written by an unknown poet, give us a glimpse into his life:

"Far in the wild, unknown to public view,
From youth to age a reverend hermit grew;
The moss his bed, the cave his humble cell,
His food the fruits, his drink the crystal well.
Remote from man, with God he pass'd his days,
Prayer all his business--all his pleasure praise."

(author unknown--taken from History of Sinclair family by L. Morrison)

Then on Nov. 4, 884, near his little hut by the Epte River, they found Clair beheaded as he knelt by a stone to pray. The blood flowed so copiously from his neck that a new spring appeared out of the ground to wash away all signs of the deed. It was learned then that his murderers had been sent by the spurned English heiress whose love had turned to hatred. This was such a horrendous crime, that at least 8 other places commemorated his death with the St. Clair name. A stone chapel was built over the site of his hut. As people built homes around this shrine, the community became known as St. Clair-sur-Epte.

Eventually a statue of St. Clair with his neck protruding above his garments was erected to the left of the rock where he was decapitated. Now the statue has been moved to safety inside the nearby church. Within his hands, he holds his ghastly head, its upturned face towards heaven. On the right of the rock is the statue of his pupil, St. Cyrin. Nearby is the holy well (spring) whose waters gave relief to pilgrims' eye problem. His bones now repose in a gold casket to the right of the church altar. His skull is on the left in a smaller casket. The bones and skull are visible through a window in the caskets. Above the altar is the stained glass window showing the baptism of Rollo (in Rouen) and meeting of Rollo and Charles III. Every year now in St. Clair-sur-Epte on July 16th, St. Clair's bones are carried through the streets as a 15th century Latin hymn is chanted to implore the grace of St. Clair to cure blindness and weather favorable to the crops.

There were other St. Clairs in France after whom places were named. In the 1st century we find a St. Clair who died at Requiny near Vannes on October 10, and is buried either at Requiny or St. Aubin, hence the Feast Day of all St. Clairs is on that day. The 3rd Century produced St. Clair, Bishop of Nantes. We find St. Clair the patron saint of Saille (Loire-Atlantique), the Cathedral at Nantes, Limerzel (Morbihan) and Lannedern (Finistere). Chaplancies honor him at Saint Donan (Cotes-du-Nord) and Plonevez-du-Faver (Finistere). Sarzeau (Morbihan) has a fountain bearing his name as does a ruined Castle near Deval. There were six towns, named after one of these St. Clairs in Eure, Calavados, Toure, Chanbery, Savoy, Rome, and a Sinclair-sur- Jalaure and St. Clair-sur-L'Elle, and also a mountain in southern France,. This presents the possibility that independent St. Clair families sprung up in these other places who are quite unrelated to the descendants of the Viking Rollo. St. Clair or Sinclair also became a title from which people took their surname which rarely makes this group related to Rollo's descendants.

Partly because of the 911 treaty with Charles the Simple at St. Clair-sur- Epte, Rollo the Viking began to be associated with this name. But since this place was on the left bank of the Seine it was part of the Isle-de-France, King Charles' territory. The second association with St. Clair came following Rollo's 912 baptism when the Saint became the favorite of the Normans who spread his veneration throughout the duchy. Rollo became the first Count (later Duke) of Normandy and married the daughter of King Charles. He and succeeding Counts settled near Caen. The Dukes of Normandy in order to control the indigenous people, placed their relatives on strategically important lands with the title of Count. These Counts had several territories, residences, and titles which makes it difficult for us today to follow their movements.

One line in particular, Richard I's son Mauger/Malgar, Count of Mortain and Corbuel held lands at St. Lo and became associated with St. Clair-sur-Elle. To these later St. Clair/Sinclair of Scotland, this was the true origin of their name, the St. Clairs-sur-L'Elle. The Latin form of their name was Sancto Claro. This means Sainted or Holy, the Clarity or Shining or Light. Thus, we see our Sancto Claro family **SHINING** down through the pages of history.

World Book Encyclopedia * A History of the Vikings by Gwyn Jones* Lives of the Popes by Richard P. McBrien * Historical Atlas of the Vikings by John Haywood * The History of the Sinclair Family in Europe and America by Leonard A. Morrison * The Sword and the Grail by Andrew Sinclair , B.L, Dictionnaire Saints-Bretons by B.L. Fontana-Paris 1979, Genealogical History of the St. Clair family by L.A. de St. Clair, translation © Tim Wallace-Murphy, *Niven Sinclair