

PRESENTATION TO THE HUGUENOT SOCIETY OF NORTH CAROLINA

Elias Neau (c.1662-1722)

Also known as Elie Naud: Huguenot, Refugee, Ship Captain, Prisoner, Poet, Merchant, Catechist, Teacher

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Much of what we know about Elias Neau's early life and adulthood comes from his autobiography, An account of the sufferings of the French Protestants, slaves on board the French kings galleys published in London in 1699 (Neau 1699), and by a later edition published in London in 1749, A short account of the life and sufferings of Elias Neau: upon the gallies [galleys], and in the dungeons of Marseilles; for the constant profession of the Protestant religion. (Morin 1749) This second edition was published twenty-seven years after Neau's death. In his preface to the second edition, the editor sums up M. Neau's life as one guided by the principle: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and thy neighbor as thyself."

M. Neau was born in Moïse (now spelled Moeze), in Saintonge (now department Charente-Maritime) in the principality of Soubise, in southwestern France. At age 12 years, he went to sea as a cabin boy and then a common sailor at about 17 years of age. (Neau 1699) Thus he had little formal education though he could read and write. It is assumed that he was self-taught. Since Neau left France at a young age, he escaped the persecution and forced conversion to Roman Catholicism, which many faced, who lived in this stronghold of Protestantism both before and after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Elias Neau sailed to the island of Hispaniola and the Antilles and spent a few years in the Caribbean.

Elias Neau tells us little about his parents except that they were Huguenots. His father and his mother continued to live in Moïse after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. There were living as late as 1692 when Elias wrote to his father from prison in St. Malo asking for an attestation that he, Elias, had left the kingdom of France before Louis XIV's prohibition. In a letter to Mr. Jean Morin written years later, Elias Neau states that heard from his father a couple of times but then silence. This silence disturbed Elias Neau but there was not much he could do. A letter from his sister, Rachel, told of his mother's death about 1695. Two of Elias Neau's sisters, Susan and Rachel, immigrated to Boston, married and had children but what became of Elias' other siblings is not mentioned in the letters. Wills abstracted in New York indicate that a brother James was unmarried and without children at the time of James' death in 1712. Elias Neau wrote his will on August 15, 1722, three weeks before his death, bequeathing legacies to his sisters' children. Both sisters apparently predeceased him.

Neau considered the depth and foundation of his faith for the first time while in the Caribbean. At age 16 years, he experienced a religious conversion that strengthened his faith and personal piety, and his dependency upon Jesus as his Lord and Savior. In 1679, aged 17 years, Elias Neau was at San Dominique (now Haiti). Finding that repression of Protestantism had reached in Caribbean area, Elias Neau moved to Boston. While in Boston, M. Neau sent papers to London for denization. This action was typical of a pattern identified by Jon Butler and others in which Huguenots rapidly economically if not culturally rapidly assimilated into the dominant English culture. (Butler 1992) On 31 January 1689, in London, denization papers were issued. Without the denization, M. Neau could not captain a vessel. His denization initially caused him many problems when he was taken as a prisoner to France, but in the end, may have helped save in life.¹

¹ The letters of denization were usually issued by the British government. Colonial legislatures took it upon themselves to encourage applications for denization, beginning with Virginia in 1671, followed by New York and South Carolina. Letters of denization allowed a status similar to that of a permanent resident. The Crown objected to this usurpation of British power by colonial legislatures and the Crown refused to recognize these colonial grants of residency status. It was seen as the prerogative of Parliament to issue such letters. Moreover, giving to foreign-born subjects all the rights and privileges of native born British subjects remained controversial. Though the Naturalization Act of 1697 (An Act

While in Boston, Elias Neau met and married Susanne Paré in 1688. Together they had three children. The first child, a daughter, died 8 days after birth. (Morin 1749) The second child, a son, died as a toddler. Only one daughter mentioned below lived to adulthood though she predeceased her parents.

Suzanne Paré's family came from the Saintonge area. (Baird 1885, 1998) They left France in 1681, leaving behind a townhouse in La Rochelle and an estate in Marsilly. They apparently spent some months in London before arriving in Boston in 1682 along with 9 other Huguenots. Their circumstances on arrival in Boston were destitute. The governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the council ordered a collection of money and goods to relieve their distress. (State of Massachusetts, Secretary of the Commonwealth 1996)² The family consisted of Marie Tissau, the widow of Jean Paré who died in France in 1681, and three daughters: Judith, Marie and Susanne. (Torrey 1985) All three of the daughters married. Judith or Judy married Stephen Robineau and settled in Narragansett, RI. Marie married Ezekiel Grazillier in Boston and settled in New York City. Their children were baptized in the French Church of New York. Susanne married Elias Neau. (Maynard 1938, Wittmeyer 1968)

Neau lived in Boston about five years until he moved to New York in 1690 or 1691. While Neau lived in Boston, he came to know John Eliot, the Puritan divine. The Rev. John Eliot (1604-1690) was an old man when Elias Neau learned about Eliot's work. Eliot, often referred to as the Apostle to the Indians, had worked on converting the American Indians to Christianity since about 1646. In that year the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England was formed in England to raise money to support the conversion of Indians to Christianity. (It was chartered in 1649.) Eliot had started by learning the Algonquian language. He began his work of translation with the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. He translated the Bible into Algonquian as well as wrote several catechisms. This Algonquian language Bible was the first Bible printed in the colonies. Eliot travelled widely in Massachusetts regularly preaching and teaching individual and groups of Indians. He established towns for the "praying Indians." Eliot supported education and the building of schools in every town. In 1676, Eliot started his own school in a town outside of Boston. Toward the end of his life, he published an Indian grammar book. Of all the work of John Eliot, it was his emphasis on education which was to have the most enduring impact on American life for the European colonists as well as the American Natives. It is this emphasis on education that influenced Elias Neau.

When he removed to New York, Elias Neau joined L'Eglise Françoise a la Nouvelle York. It is in the records of that church, that the birth and baptism of Suzanne Neau is recorded. Her god-mother was her grandmother Mme. Marie Tissau (or Tisseau), and her uncle Ezekiel Grazillier was her god-father.

to naturalize the Children of Officers and Soldiers, and others, being the natural-born Subjects of this Realm) passed during the reign of William III (Stat. 12 W. III c.2) confirmed property rights to naturalized citizens, though they could not become members of Parliament or the Privy Council. Rights of naturalized citizens were extended under act was passed during the reign of Queen Anne (7 Ann c.5). An Act for the Naturalization of Foreign Protestants was only in effect for 3 years before it was repealed in 1712 ((10 Ann c.5).

² *Order of the Governor and Council that Church Elders be requested to take up collections in their congregations for the relief of Newly Arrived French Protestants* 15 June 1682.

*Baptême—Aujourd'hui dimanches sixiesme jour de
nouembre 1692 apres l'action du soir a Este baptisée en
cette Eglise par M^r Peiret nostre ministre suzanne fille
d'Elye neau et de suzanne paré née le 27^e octobre der^r sur
les quatre heures apres midy présentée au S^t Baptême
par Ezechiel Grazillier Et marie tisseau parrain et mar-
raine.*

MARIE TISSEAU

EZECHIEL GRASILLIER
PEIRET, ministre.

Figure 1. From the Register of the French Church. p.22

Elias Neau did not attend the birth or the baptism of his daughter Suzanne. In 1692 Elias Neau took command of a small trading ship of 80 tons called *La Belle Marquise* owned by Gabriel LeBoyteulx, a merchant in New York City. (Malefyt 1999) The vessel was bound for Jamaica when she was captured by a French privateer, Julien Boussant on the 8th of September 1692, near Bermuda. (Read 1874) The privateers were in the employ of Louis XIV. (Morin 1749) The privateers' primary home port was St. Malo, a town on the northwest coast of France on the English Channel in the Brittany region. The privateer Boussant obliged Elias Neau to ransom the vessel for 3500 livres and *La Belle Marquise* was sent back to New York. But the vessel never made it back to New York. Instead it arrived at Tenerife in the Canary Islands which was governed by Spain. There the vessel was seized by the governor since it was a French prize.

In the meantime, Neau was transported on a French vessel to St. Malo where he was confined to the public jail until such a time as the ransom could be paid, but events took a more complicated course. Neither the privateer nor the burghers wanted the case of M. Neau taken to court since they wanted the ransom money. Once the case got into the court system, any hope of ransom money was lost. Nevertheless, the case was taken to court and Elias Neau was ordered to sign a document of abjurement and convert to Roman Catholicism. If he would sign the document, the ransom of 3500 livres would be forgiven. Neau refused and countered with the fact that he was an English citizen and should be set at liberty. When asked why he left France, he quoted part of Matthew 10.23: "When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next." While he waited in jail, Elias Neau related that he was visited by missionaries nearly every day to try to get him to convert. Neau's response to the attempts at conversion was to quote Mark 8. 36: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Neau was given the choice of death or the Mass (*la mort ou la messe!*), and he chose chains. (Morin 1749) (Read 1874) After four months imprisonment, the court condemned Elias Neau to be a galley-slave for the rest of his life. (Arber 1908)

Elias Neau was taken in shackles to Rennes. (Neau 1699) An appeal to the court (parliament) at Rennes (Bretagne) confirmed the sentence. Elias Neau was condemned not only because he was a heretic but he had left France without proper permission and he had renounced his French citizenship to become English.

On May 3, 1693, eight months after his capture, Elias Neau was chained together with about 200 other men who were condemned as galley-slaves. (Neau 1699) They walked for 37 days from Rennes, a town in eastern Brittany in the north of France, across the length of France to Marseille (Morin 1749). There was little food, and the men suffered from dysentery. At one point in the journey, Neau was so weak that he spent what little money he had with him so that he could ride in a cart. (Neau 1699)

Elias Neau was first placed onboard the galley *Vieille Madame* for six months and then *La Magnanime*. Elias Neau was not alone. There were other Protestant brethren who also suffered for their religious faith in addition to the ordinary criminals. The Huguenots evangelized the other slaves who had been condemned for crimes such as theft. The efforts were successful. This angered the chaplain of the galley who considered Neau a “pestiferous and poisonous fellow” ordering that Neau be removed from the galley to the dungeon of the Marseille castle. Writing on March 8, 1698, Neau described the conversion of a young man on the galley *la Guerriere* which was next to *La Magnanime*. The young man was converted by Mr. Pierre Carriere, a galley slave on the *Guerriere*. (Neau 1699) The young man had the audacity to tell that chaplain that he no longer believed in Roman Catholicism. The chaplain threatened him and took from him his New Testament. This also resulted in further persecution for Elias Neau was required to carry double weight of chains until he was removed to the castle at Marseille.

After a year as a galley slave, on May 3, 1694, Elias Neau was taken from the vessel to a dungeon in the castle of Marseille. (Neau 1699) (Morin 1749) The conditions at the castle were somewhat better in that Elias Neau could write to his friends and receive mail from them. But the governor died and was replaced by a major. Elias Neau liked to sing psalms and hymns that the major could not abide. So Neau was moved to a more distant location in the castle until his transfer to the Chateau d’Ye. The major also took away Neau’s books, paper, pen and ink. Even so, Neau found a pencil and acquired some paper and an English Bible, seven sermons and other books. Neau was comforted by the scriptures and in turn, comforted his fellow sufferers. Neau shouted consoling words to a man chained in the dungeon below his, further annoying the prison authorities. The only complaint recorded by Neau about this terrible place was the dampness which made it difficult for him to breathe. (Morin 1749)

After more than two years at Marseille, in July 1696, Elias Neau was transferred yet again. This time Neau was transferred to the infamous Castle d’Ye (Chateau d’If of the Count of Monte Cristo) on an island off the coast from Marseille. Much to Elias Neau’s surprise, the few things he had at the castle in Marseille were transferred with him to Castle d’Ye. There he was confined in the tower for 50 days where he could see the sea and sky. This was not to last. He was transferred to a cell without light or sanitation or companionship for 6 months. While transferred from this one dungeon to another, Neau had a glimpse of sunshine on a spring Sunday afternoon. Neau says his skin was white as plaster. He was so thin that he and the other prisoners were skin and bone, with long hair and beards, full of lice and bugs. On his head, Neau said he had a cap like a slave that he wore more than three years.

After the transfer to another windowless hole, he found himself with the companionship of a man Neau describes as a babbling idiot. In the next cell which Neau describes as a ditch were three other Protestants. There only light was that which came through a crevice in the door. The place was full of “stench and nastiness” to use Neau’s words. What rags he had on his body were filled with vermin and rotted on the body. In these conditions, the prisoners were expected to pay for food and any meager care that might be provided for them. Neau points out that what little money any of them could get, they all held in common and shared among themselves. After about a year, Neau’s cell mate died. Neau was then put into another cell with the other three Protestants. (Neau 1699)

Even in the midst of such terrible deprivation, starvation, and suffering, Neau could sing praises to God quoting from Isaiah 58, 1: “Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet.” He also composed hymns though he had no means to write them down until many years later.

Finally, on July 3, 1698, almost six years after he was captured, Elias Neau was released from prison by the King of France, Louis XIV after intercession by William III's plenipotentiary ambassador to France, Hans William Bentinck, 1st Earl of Portland. The release of Elie Neau was a part of the Treaty of Ryswick which ended the Nine Years' War (or King Williams War) which pitted France against England, United Provinces, Holy Roman Empire and Spain. As part of the negotiations with France, Huguenot prisoners and galley slaves were supposed to be set free, though this was never systematically carried out. Elias Neau was given a pass which gave him six weeks to leave France. Writing the next day to his pastor, Neau wrote: "The Sun of righteousness has at least dispersed the clouds that hung over me near these six years past." Neau wrote with obvious distress that though one of the other Huguenots was released with him, two were left in prison when he was set at liberty.

After leaving Marseilles, Elias Neau travelled to Holland and the Lyons, France and finally to Geneva. There he spent some time regaining his health and visiting several of the Protestant cantons of Switzerland. His efforts were directed toward raising money to secure the release of fellow Protestants from the galleys and prisons in France.

Elias Neau spent several months in England before returning to New York. By 1700, back in New York, Elias Neau was reunited with his wife and the daughter who was born while he was away. It was a new life. Elias Neau became an active member of the L'Eglise Françoise, becoming an elder under its founding pastor, the Rev. Pierre Peiret.³ With the influx of Huguenots following the Revocation, the French Church needed a larger space. (Eglise Franciase du Saint-Esprit 2012) The church that the congregation called the Temple of the Holy Spirit was built on Pine and Nassau Streets in lower Manhattan in 1704 and continued to serve the city as a francophone church for about 130 years before the church moved again. Neau prospered as a cloth merchant. The wealth and prominence that Elias Neau gained in New York were clearly not sufficient for him.

Elias Neau did not write about what prompted him to begin his next venture. Perhaps it was related to church politics. The Rev. Pierre Peiret died in 1704 before the new church edifice was completed. The second pastor, sent from England, the Rev. Jacques Laborie, pressured the French church to conform to the Church of England, but the congregation refused to conform. As an elder, Neau must have been touched by the conflict within the congregation. After two years, Laborie resigned and moved to Connecticut. Perhaps, Elias Neau looked around him and saw slaves and free man and women, black, white and Indian, who could not read and write and therefore could not read the Bible for themselves, something which had sustained him through six difficult years.

Trinity Church was chartered in 1697 by King William III, and the Rev. William Vesey became its first rector on December 25, 1698. The first church building was still being built at the time the Rev. Vesey became rector.

Even before Elias Neau became an Anglican, he wrote to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts asking that a catechist be sent to the slaves who were "without God." But the Society responded that there was no one to send. (Hewitt 2000) Neau joined Trinity Church in 1704. The Rev. Vesey proposed Neau as a Catechist. Neau began his work in 1704 even before he received

³ The first French minister seems to have been the Rev. Pierre Daille who established or revived French speaking congregations on Manhattan Island and Staten Island as well as New Paltz and Hackensack (NJ). He was described by Donine Selyns as "full of fire, Godliness, and learning." The Rev. Pierre Peiret arrived in New York from London on Nov. 19, 1687. He became the pastor of the French church in New York City while the Rev. Pierre Daille became pastor of the outlying French speaking congregations. (Riker 1904).

official approval from the Society in 1705. Writing about his change in profession of faith, Neau write, "I have learned part of the Liturgy by heart in my dungeons, and ever since that time I have had both affection and esteem for the divine service as it is used in the Church of England." (Hawkins 1845) (Anderson 1856)

Neau had to conform to the Church of England since he needed a license from the colonial governor of New York which was issued on August 24, 1704.

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was chartered in 1701 and headed by the Bishop of London. It was under the auspices of this group that Elias Neau became a catechist to Indians and Negroes. Writing about his project, Neau was not exceedingly hopeful. He wrote that though he had been 19 years in the New World and known John Eliot. "I never saw any of them that were true convert," penned Elias Neau. Even so, Elias Neau put aside his business activities and began to work for the SPG for a salary of £50 a year. (Hewitt 2000)

The difficulties that Elias Neau encountered when he started seemed quite insurmountable. The rector of Trinity Church, the Rev. Vesey, was not initially supportive of Neau but he soon changed his mind. He watched as Neau struggled for a whole year without being able to bring a single person to the Rev. Vesey for baptism. (Hewitt 2000)

Though there were estimated to be about 1500 slaves in New York City as the time, Neau was required to go house to house to instruct the Negroes and only after the work of the day was completed. Many slave owners thought that Negroes had no souls. Other owners refused to have their slaves receive religious instruction, because of the common misapprehension that baptism would free a person from slavery. (Foote 2004) (Hawkins 1845) In fact, a law was passed in New York in 1706 that confirmed the right of ownership of slaves after baptism. The Rev. Vesey called upon slave owners to send all their slaves on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday at 5 p.m. for religious instruction. At first they met on the lowest floor of the steeple at Trinity Church. After some time, the number of students exceeded the space available at Trinity Church. Then Neau gathered the slaves in a large room at his home in the evening for instruction. Neau would begin each two hour class by having the students kneel and recite those prayers which Neau thought were the easier to explain and understand, and therefore easiest to commit to memory. At the end of each class, the students recited a psalm and again prayed.

After just a year, Neau had 46 students of which 28 were women. The ethnicity was noted in the report that Neau sent to the SPG and his students included not only black slaves but also four Indians and 1 mulatto. (Hewitt 2000) By 1706, Neau had 100 students and in only four years, in 1708, there were 200 slaves under instruction. The colonial governor of New York appointed in 1710, Robert Hunt, was a member of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. He issued a proclamation in January 1711/12 which called upon all heads of families in New York City to "Promote the Service of God in their Respective Families and Instruct their Children and Servants in the Principles of Piety and Vertue." (Hewitt 2000)

A slave insurrection in New York in 1712 nearly ended the work that Neau had begun. On the evening of April 6, 1712, 23 slaves set fire to a building on Maiden Lane. As the white colonists were fighting the fire, they were attacked by the slaves. Nine whites were killed and another six were wounded. The local militia was mustered and 27 slaves were captured. Of these, six committed suicide and the remaining 21 were executed by various means. (Singer 2010)

Almost immediately, after the slave revolt was put down, there was a loud clamor against Elias Neau. The anger and vitriol hurled against Neau was so vicious that he feared to leave his home because of the threats against his life. Elias Neau denied that teaching slaves was the cause of the riot, but it seemed that no one believed him. At the trials of the captured slaves, it was learned that only one of his students, an unbaptized man, participated in the conspiracy. In fact, men who refused any education or religious instruction for their slaves owned the rioting slaves. (Anderson 1856) (Cohen 1971)

Strict slave codes were enacted including one which limited the number to 3 the slaves who could meet. Negroes could not appear on streets after dark without a lantern or candle, the cost of which most slaves could not afford. (Singer 2010) (Anderson 1856) If these laws were strictly enforced, this would have been the end to Neau's instruction of slaves. But the colonial governor of New York, Robert Hunter, intervened, encouraging Neau to begin again his school for Negro slaves and others three days a week. Neau gained the support of the Council, the mayor and other officials for his school that included not only slaves but also free Indians and poor whites. Under the protection of the Society for Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, Neau would continue as catechist until his death in 1722 except for a brief period in 1715 when there was a falling out between Vesey and Neau.

Apparently in 1715, Vesey refused to baptize an 18-year-old female slave even though she had her owner's written permission. Neau protested to the SPG and in response, Vesey fired him on the pretext that Neau was spending some of his time engaged in business activities which violated his agreement with the SPG. Neau had the support of Governor Robert Hunter and other prominent officials. Vesey rehired Neau.

Records of the SPG indicated that Neau had 78 students in 1720 including three free black women. Thirty men, women and children had been baptized and seven were communicants of Trinity Church. In 1722, Vesey reported to the Bishop of London that there were 1362 Negro and Indian slaves. He reported that many attended church and were baptized and "some" were admitted to the Lord's Table, without giving any specific numbers. (Hewitt 2000) Trinity Church was a segregated congregation. The non-whites were meeting in the church itself at 5 p.m. on Sunday afternoon since they had long outgrown any other space. (Cohen 1971)

The eighteen years which Elias Neau spent teaching the slaves of New York ended with his death of September 7, 1722. Other catechists would be sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, but these men were priests. Elias Neau was the only lay catechist. The descendants of Neau's catechumens continued to worship at Trinity until the 19th century. (Hewitt 2000) Elias Neau never called for an end to slavery. Perhaps because he had been a slave himself, he viewed slavery as part of the human condition.

Both Elias Neau and his wife Susanne are buried in the old churchyard at Trinity Church. On September 7, the Episcopal Church commemorates Elias Neau in its liturgical calendar.

One last note. In his will, Elias Neau set aside money that the hymns which he wrote while a prisoner of conscience would be published.



Figure 2. Gravestone for Elias Neau in the churchyard of Trinity Church (Episcopal) Wall Street, New York City.
https://www.trinitywallstreet.org/sites/default/files/pictures/20151118_Memorials-4011.jpg

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