Our Orser Ancestors in America

by

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Introduction

This is a short history of our branch of the Orser family in America. Traditional genealogical studies tend to focus mainly on tracing the family “pedigree” trail of births, marriages, and deaths. Lots of bones, but not much meat. In putting this story together, we have provided some historical context and tried to create a sense where and how our ancestors lived, and what their lives were like. In order not to burden the flow of the story, we have left out the scholarly footnotes and source citations, though we do have them if anyone is curious. This is the story of only 20 people, ten generations of our direct line Orser ancestors. Here is the genealogical cast of characters:

1. **Aert Willemzen** (b. ~1615 in Netherlands – d. 1659 in New Amsterdam)
   m. **Wyntje Elberts** (b. ~1620 in Netherlands – d. ? in New York)
2. **Willem Aertszen** (b. 1640 in New Amsterdam – d. ~ 1716 in Philipsburg, New York)
   m. **Christina Nagel** (b. 1655 in New Amsterdam – d. ? in New York)
3. **Aert Aertse** (b. 1677 in New York – d. 1716 in Mamaroneck, New York)
   m. **Mary Mott** (b. 1677 in Mamaroneck, NY – d. 1727 in New York)
4. **Joseph Orser** (b. 1723 in Philipsburg, NY – d. 1783 at sea en route to Quebec)
   m. **Ann Jurkes** (b. 1726 in Philipsburg, NY – d. 1818 in Kingston Ontario)
5. **Gilbert Orser** (b. 1765 in Philipsburg, NY – d. 1851 in Hallowell Township, Ontario)
   m. **Sarah Wright** (b. ~1765 in NY – d. 1845 in Kingston, Ontario)
6. **William Orser** (b. 1811 in Hallowell Township, Ontario – d. 1886 in Hallowell, Ontario)
   m. **Lydia Orser** (b. 1809 in Kingston, Ontario – d. 1894 in Hallowell, Ontario)
7. **Charles B. Orser** (b. 1835 in Hallowell Township, Ontario – d. 1910 in Cherokee County, Iowa)
   m. **Loverna Blanchard** (b. 1836 in Elizabethtown, Ontario – d. 1893 in Meriden, Iowa)
8. **Ransom Eugene Orser** (b. 1860 in Hallowell, Ontario – d. 1923 in Chicago, Illinois)
   m. **Ida Anderson** (b. 1869 in Stockholm, Sweden – d. 1957 in Chicago, Illinois)
   m. **Myrtle Cecile Eklund** (b. 1898 in Chicago, Illinois – d. 1994 in Sheboygan, Wisconsin)
    m. **Marion Alice Groneman** (b. 1926 in Chicago, Illinois – d. 1971 in Morton Grove, Ill)

Much of what we know about our family’s origins in America was originally published in 1975 by Daniel Turner in a nearly 600 page typed manuscript called **ORSER, A Genealogy of the Descendants of Aert Willemzen**. In that book, Turner traced the family that became known as Orser from a single early Dutch settler to the three main branches of the family centered in Westchester County, New York, New Brunswick, Canada, and Ontario, Canada. In telling our story, we have relied on Turner’s work, as well as on many other sources, in an attempt to find out as much as we can about our family history from the records that still exist. Like most families, ours does not have many “famous” people who have left large footprints in the historical record. Most Orser family ancestors were self sufficient pioneer farmers. Although not “high profile” people, many of them lived through momentous times that we can try to explore through their eyes and experiences.
Aert Willemzen to Orser? – Evolution of a Name

You might be wondering how in the world did our family name get from Willemzen to Orser? To answer that question, we must understand something about the naming system used by the Dutch, and many other northern European peoples, in the 17th century. The first thing to remember is that in pre-industrial times, most people lived in small rural villages and most people only had one “call” name – John, William, etc. As population increased and there were several people with the same call name, “John” or “William”, they needed a way to distinguish among them. One solution was to add their occupation as a second name: John the Baker became John Baker.

The Dutch and the Scandinavian countries, among others, used the patronymic naming system, where the son’s last name was derived from the father’s call name. So, if William had a son John, he would be named John Williamszen – (John, William’s son) “zen” is “son” in Dutch. Using Paul as an example, in the 17th century Dutch patronymic naming system, his name would be Paul Paulsen because his father’s first name was Paul; Paul’s son Ben would be named Ben Paulsen; and Ben’s son Clay would be Clay Benszen, and so on.

Going back to our original ancestor, Aert Willemszen, he was Aert (Arthur), son of Willem. His sons’ patronymic last name would be Aertszen – (Aert’s son). The Dutch usually added “s” to the “z” - “szen” instead of just “zen.” In the New Amsterdam Dutch church baptism records, for example, Aert Willemszen’s name used the “sz” spelling. The Dutch also often abbreviated the ending to just “s” or “se.” Aert Willemzen’s grandson, for example, used the last name “Aertse.”

As New Amsterdam became New York after the British took over in 1664, patronymics ended officially in 1687 with the advent of surnames. Back in the Netherlands, patronymic naming continued much longer, and finally ended during the Napoleonic period around 1811 when everyone had to register and select a family surname.

Once the family name was shortened to Aertse, spelling of the name evolved over the next 70 or 80 years and several phonetic simplifications occurred as the Dutch and English cultures, pronunciation, and spelling interacted. The best place to trace our name evolution is in the records of the Old Dutch Church at Sleepy Hollow, where we find various spellings of the name: Aertszen, Aarsen, Aartse, Aarse, Arser, Auser, among others. Part of this variation is explained simply by the lack of standard spelling rules and semi-literate people writing what they thought they heard when the name was spoken. The Dutch vowel “a” is pronounced like the “a” in “saw,” so the final change from Auser to Orser was probably an attempt to provide an English spelling that matched the sound of the name. By the 1780s, “Orser” had finally emerged as the standard spelling, especially in the Canadian branches of the family.
Our Orser Family History in a Nutshell

The Orser family has lived in North America for a very long time. The earliest Orser ancestor we can trace in the documented records arrived in America from the Netherlands before 1640, and lived in the Dutch West India Company’s New Amsterdam colony on the southern tip of Manhattan Island. About 1700, our early American ancestors moved about 25 miles north up the Hudson River to Philipsburg Manor in Westchester County, New York near present day Ossining, and Sleepy Hollow - made famous later as the setting for Washington Irving’s ghost story, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*, published in 1820. Our Orser ancestors lived and farmed there until 1783.

In the 1770s, the movement for independence from England divided Westchester County residents between those who sought independence and those who wanted to remain loyal to the King. The resulting conflict was played out not only in the battles between armies we read about in history books, but also in often violent local conflict. Neighbors fought neighbors and families were torn apart. Our ancestor at the time, Joseph Orser, chose to remain loyal to the king, as did several of his sons, who fought on the side of the British. By 1783, at the conclusion of the revolutionary war, our Loyalist ancestors had lost their land and nearly everything else they had, and fled north to Canada. They restarted their lives and were among the first pioneer settlers in the wilderness of “Upper Canada” along the northeast shore of Lake Ontario, in what is present day Kingston, Picton, and Hallowell Ontario. So, our early Orser ancestors were among the first pioneer settlers of both New York and Ontario.

Our family ancestors moved back to the United States from Canada in 1864. After growing up on the family farm in Hallowell Township, Ontario and getting married, Charles B. Orser moved his young family to the United States. He lived first in Ames, Iowa, and later moved about 100 miles further west to Cherokee County in northwest Iowa, where he owned a farm near the small town of Meriden. His son, Ransom Eugene Orser, left farm life, learned the printing trade, and moved to Chicago where the more familiar urban phase of our recent Orser family history unfolded.

Beginnings in America

The beginning of our family history in America is intimately connected to the Dutch colony of New Netherlands. Dutch exploration of North America began in 1609 when a group of Dutch merchants hired Henry Hudson, an English sea captain, to search for a northwest water passage to the riches of the Far East. Hudson explored the river that now bears his name as far north as present day Albany, and reported back to his Dutch patrons on what he found. Of special interest was the commercial potential of trade in beaver fur, which was then in high demand back in Europe for making fashionable waterproof felt hats. In 1621, the Dutch government chartered the Dutch West India Company to develop the commercial potential of the Hudson River area. By 1625, the Dutch West India Company decided to build Fort Amsterdam at the southern tip of Manhattan Island to control the gateway to the valuable fur trade up river, and set up New Amsterdam in the shadow of the fort as its capital and commercial center. By the 1640s, the New Amsterdam colony had grown to about 270 inhabitants. The image below is a reconstruction of what New Amsterdam would have looked like in about 1660.
The colony was governed by the Dutch West India Company. It continued under Dutch rule until the English captured it without a fight in August 1664, and renamed it New York the following year. Much earlier, while under Dutch control, the fourth director of the New Netherland colony was a man named Wouter van Twiller. He served in that leadership position from 1633 to 1638. By most accounts, he was not a very effective leader, but he was a very good businessman and became a wealthy man. His wealth was accumulated through his skill in developing lands, establishing farms, and good management of his properties. Our original ancestor, Aert Willemszen was the foreman of van Twiller’s New Amsterdam farm.

**Generation 1: Aert Willemszen (~1615-1659) & Wyntje Elberts (~1620-?)**

We have no documentation about exactly where or when Aert Willemszen was born. Turner says that he probably came from Barneveld, which is located about 30 miles southeast of Amsterdam, but Turner gives no source for this. Aert Willemszen’s wife was Wyntje Elberts. She was also born the Netherlands, probably in Nieukercken, Zeeland, which is about 75 miles southwest of Amsterdam, so, given the distances involved, it is unlikely that they knew each other while in the Netherlands.

There are many things we do not know about Aert Willemszen’s life in New Amsterdam, but what we do comes mainly from two existing sources: records of membership, marriages, and baptisms of the Dutch Reformed Church of New Amsterdam, and the administrative and legal records maintained by the Provincial Secretary and Council of the colony. The church baptism records, for example, list not only
the date and name of the baptized child and its parents, but also the names of the witnesses at the event. Using that information, we can get a glimpse of Aert Willemzen’s level of church involvement and network of friends and associates. The civil records, on the other hand, provide some insights into his business affairs, social standing, and activities.

The first time we encounter Aert Willemzen in the written record is in May 1640 when Wouter van Twiller sent him this directive from Amsterdam:

*Aert Willemssen, foreman, on receipt of this, deliver from among the animals which are on my farm and in your keeping to Cryn Cornelissen van Houte, for the account of the colony called Rensselaerswyck, two milch cows now three years old to be drawn by lot from the three which are on the farm; also two heifer calves born this year; and although this memorandum contradicts my letter, you are to comply with this last order and do right.*

*Done at Amsterdam this 30th of May 1640*

Aert was clearly a trusted employee responsible for managing van Twiller’s farm during his absence. We have a record that shows that van Twiller leased “farm No. 1 on Manhattan Island” from the West India Company in April 1638, so Aert could have been the farm’s foreman for up to two years. We know that he was still working for van Twiller in December 1641 because he was the defendant in a local court case on December 13, 1641, "Cornelis Volkersz, plaintiff vs. Aert Willemsz, defendant, on account of the killing of a hog by the dog of Mr. Twiller."

We do not know when Aert Willemssen was born, or when he originally arrived in New Amsterdam, but it appears that because he had a responsible position working directly for one of the leaders of the colony, it might be safe to assume that he was at least in his mid 20s at the time. That would put a good guess for his birth date at somewhere around 1615, but it is only a guess.

We do not know where or when Aert and Wyntje were married, but we do know from the New Amsterdam Dutch Church records their first child, Willem, was baptized on August 12, 1640. Four other children and baptisms followed: Anntje on March 30, 1642, Wyntje on March 8, 1643, Elbert on June 21, 1643, and Evert on February 5, 1645. Aert and Wyntje continued to be active in the Dutch Church records. They served as witnesses at eleven other baptisms throughout the 1640s and 1650s, with the last one being in September 1656.

We can also get occasional glimpses into Aert Willemzen’s world through the court records of the day.

On August 27, 1643, “Aert Willemssen promises to pay within two months from this date to Wolphert Gerritz for Frans Allerz of Amsterdam the sum of fifty-eight guilders (about $1,000 in today’s money) for which he gives security in court.”

On December 7, 1645, Aert was back in court. “Henry Bresler vs. Aert Willemssen, defendant, for wages amounting to 100 florins. The defendant’s wife, appearing for the defendant, promises to pay this week as much as possible, and the remainder after Christmas, with which the plaintiff is satisfied...”
On November 17, 1649, Aert Willemszen was given Power of Attorney by Willem Woutersen to receive on his behalf, his share of the prize money from a captured Spanish ship. “Before me, Jacob Hendrickz Kip, in the absence of the secretary appointed by the honorable director general and council of New Netherland, appeared the worthy Willem Woutersz from Hitland (Dutch name for the Shetland Islands) arrived here with Captain Blaeuvelt’s prize called ‘De Hoop’, who in the presence of the undersigned witnesses appoints and empowers, as he does hereby, the worthy Aert Willemsz, an inhabitant here, to ask, demand and receive (if the Spanish bark called the ‘Tabasco’ and the lading come in here be declared a good prize), from the honorable director and council of New Netherland, or whoever may happen to divide and distribute the goods such ship’s share and payment as is due to him, the principal; to execute a receipt in full therefore, which shall be valid, and further to do and act in the principal’s absence as he might and could do were he personally present. He, Willem Woutersz, this 17th of November, 1649, New Amsterdam. This is the “X” mark of Willem Woutersz, made by himself; Jacobus van Curler, witness; Adriaen van Tienh, witness; Acknowledged before me, Jacob Kipp, Clerk”

Sometime in 1652, we have this undated, but rather curious case: “Aert Willemsen, plaintiff, against Kempe Labady; the plaintiff demands eight pieces-of-eight which he gave him to buy butter for the plaintiff. The defendant says that because he could not acquire any butter he offered to return the aforesaid money, but was told that he should hold on to it. He gave the money to a certain Thomas Dozie who fell overboard with it and drowned. His wife declares under oath that he did not give her the money; therefore, Labady is prepared to pay.”

On September 15, 1655, an Indian attack on the colony of New Amsterdam caused extensive damage. In order to repair the damage, assessments were made upon the male citizens. "Arent Willemsen, Brower" was assessed 20 florins. Aert evidently had been established as a brewer for many years, according to Turner.

On February 25, 1656, the dangers of frontier New Amsterdam life were underscored when a man named Cornelis Groesen and his wife Lysbeth were killed during an Indian uprising. Their two young children were captured and held for ransom. In settling the parents’ estate, Aert Willemszen was listed among the couple’s creditors. (The town Orphanmasters paid 60 guilders for the return of the little boy, and 94 guilders for his sister.)

There are a few things we can infer about Aert Willemzen from these scant records. First, by 1643, he was probably no longer working for van Twiller since the secured loan did not appear to be connected to his role on the farm. By 1645, he is employing Henry Bressler in some capacity. By 1649, he is thought responsible enough to be empowered to act on behalf of the sailor in recovering his prize money. His lawsuit about the money for butter suggests that he was no longer farming and his need for that much butter suggests he might have been operating some kind of store or eating establishment. It is only in 1655 that we finally have a clue to his occupation, a brewer, and perhaps inn keeper. This, plus his good standing and active involvement in the Dutch church, suggests that he was a reasonably well respected businessman and community member, though not part of the elite leadership group.
Yet another mystery is when and how Aert Willemzen died. There is no record of his death and burial, but we know that he died before December 21, 1659, probably earlier that month, because his wife Wyntje appeared in court on “Tuesday, December 21, 1659, Wyntje Elberts, widow of Aert Willemszen, made a declaration in an action.” Wyntje’s legal actions after Aert’s death shed more light on both occupation and their economic means. Preparing to remarry in 1662, she set up her childrens’ inheritance: on “Thursday, February 23, 1662, Wyntje Elberts, widow of Aart Willemszen, has settled 2,000 guilders (about $36,000 in today’s money) on her children, who are: William Aartzen, Anjje Aartzen, Elbert Aartzen, and Evert Aartzen. Security: Dwelling, Mill, and Lot.” In 1662, about three years after Aert’s death, Wyntje married Cornelis Aartszen, himself a widower. According to Turner, he had a farm or market garden just north of the wall.

We know where Aert and Wyntje’s New Amsterdam property was located, and approximately when they acquired it. Aert’s name appears twice in the new Amsterdam land records, once in 1645 and again in 1656. In both cases, city lots were being sold that adjoined his existing property. So, we know that he owned the house and garden lot before 1645. Researchers of New Amsterdam land ownership are lucky because a very detailed map of the colony was made in 1660. That map, called the Castello plan, still exists, and when combined with property census records, makes it possible to determine the exact location of their house! The family house was number 10 in Block “C” on De Heere Straet on the map reproduced on the next page. It is just up the street from Fort Amsterdam on the main route north through the only gate in the northern defensive wall. The family house sat on pretty expensive real estate today – on Broadway a little south of Wall Street. As you can see from the map, current day Wall Street got its name because it really was a wall in New Amsterdam. It was built in the 1640s and
strengthened in the 1650s as a defense against Indian attack.

There is some confusion about when Willem was born. There is a baptism record for Willem dated August 12, 1640, so he would probably have been born earlier that year, or possibly in 1639. However, Turner says that this Willem died young and a second Willem was born in 1650, although he gives no evidence for this conclusion. I think Turner is mistaken. The first Willem did not die in childhood, and there was no second Willem born in 1650. The reason I think this is because there is no baptism record

Manhattan Island has been greatly enlarged with a lot of fill since colonial times, and this map shows the outline of New Amsterdam superimposed on modern day lower Manhattan.

**Generation 2: Willem Aertszen (~1640-1716) & Christina Nagle (1655-?)**

In 1662, at the time of their mother’s remarriage, four of Aert Willemzen’s children were still alive: Willem (about 22), Anne (about 20), Elbert (about 19), and Evert (about 17). We descend from Willem’s family.
for a second Willem. Aert and his wife were active in their church and had all of their other children baptized, so it would be very unusual not to baptize a child of theirs born in 1650, at a time when the church records show they were active church members, serving as witnesses at many other baptisms. Also, in Wyntje’s inheritance settlement record in 1662, the children appear to be listed in birth order, not alphabetically, and Willem is listed first, not last. So, all the existing evidence suggests that our ancestor Willem was born in 1639 or 1640, not 1650.

Unfortunately, we know even less about Willem Aertszen than we do about his father. Willem married Christina (Styntje) Nagle in the Dutch church in New York on August 1, 1677. She was baptized on September 26, 1655 in New Amsterdam, so she would have been about 21 years old at the time of their wedding. Willem would have been about 35. Christina was the daughter of Jan Nagle and Grietje Dirks. Jan Nagle was born in Limburgh in the Netherlands, and came to New Amsterdam as a cadet working for the West India Company, and later became a freeman.

Willem was listed as a freeman of the city on November 22, 1678. His occupation was identified as a “victualer” (inn keeper). They lived on Broadway, possibly in the old family house and carrying on the family business. Willem and Christina were on the membership roll of the New York Dutch Church in 1679 and in 1686. They had five children:

Aert, baptized on April 29, 1678; Jan, baptized on September 13, 1680; Margaret, baptized on July 29, 1682; Elbert, baptized on February 26, 1688; and Evert, (no baptism record) probably born about 1692.

In about 1702, Willem and Christina left Manhattan and moved about 25 miles north up the Hudson River to Philipsburg Manor. They were probably lured to make the move by an offer of free leased manor land, and they settled into a new life as tenant farmers on the great estate that was owned by a former neighbor, who had lived just down the street from them in New York.

By the time they moved north, their eldest son, Aert, was married and living away from home. But, presumably, the rest of the family moved along with their parents. Willem subsequently became a deacon, and later an elder, of the Old Dutch Church at Sleepy Hollow. He died in his mid 70s, sometime before May 1716.

It is in and around the Upper Mills area of Philipsburg Manor, near what is now Sleepy Hollow, and Ossining, New York, that the Orser family story continues for the next eighty years.
The story of Philipsburg Manor begins sometime before 1653 with the arrival in New Amsterdam of a man named Vredryck Flypsen. He was originally a carpenter working for the West India Company, but also quickly showed ability as a building contractor. He was employed frequently on a variety of small and large building projects by Peter Stuyvesant, the Director General, in the 1650s. His wealth grew quickly, both through his ability and through marriage into a wealthy family. In 1660, he was a neighbor of Aert Willemzen’s family, living in New Amsterdam in house #24 on “Block D” facing the Fort. As his wealth grew, Flypsen acquired more and more land along the Hudson north of Manhattan Island. When the English took over in 1664, he adapted quickly and anglicized his name to Frederick Philips. By 1693, he had amassed a huge estate of about 90,000 acres. In that year, the estate was given the status of the “Mannour of Philipsborough” by the British crown. The estate was bounded by Spuyten Duyvil Creek on the south, the Hudson River on the west, the Bronx River on the east, and the Croton River on the north. On the north end of the estate he built a two story stone Manor House, known as “Philipse Castle,” and a water-powered mill, both shown in this picture. He also built the Old Dutch Church at Sleepy Hollow, just a short walk from the manor house. He is buried on the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery. Philipse imported African slaves to run the mill operation. He owned 23 black slaves. The Philipsburg Manor house and mill have been restored as a national historic site that focuses on reconstructing 18th century colonial folk life at Philipsburg, and particularly on the lives of the black slaves who operated the mill. Like colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, it is open to the public.

On the south end of the estate, in what is now Yonkers, Philips built this elaborate manor hall worthy of an English gentleman. It too still exists, and has been designated a national historical landmark. It contains a museum that is open to the public.
Generation 3: Aert Aertse (1678-1755) & Mary Mott (1680-1727)

Willem’s eldest son, Aert, appears to have been comfortable in the increasingly English dominated society. His was the first generation that had no personal experience living under Dutch rule; he was baptized in 1678, and been born probably a year earlier. He dropped the Dutch naming system in favor of a more anglicized version of his father’s patronymic surname. He was also the first family member to marry an English rather than a Dutch, woman, and he was married in her home town of Mamaroneck, not in the Dutch Church in New York.

Aert married Mary Mott in 1698. Mary was born about 1680, the daughter of James Mott and Mary Richbell. Her maternal grandfather, John Richbell, was the original land owner in Mamaroneck, New York, on the north shore of Long Island Sound, and her father, James Mott, owned “long lot 6” on the original patent there. Three of her four grandparents were born in England.

After their marriage, Aert and Mary moved back to live in New York, but returned to Mamaroneck before the birth of their second daughter, Mary, in 1710. In all, they had eight children: Anna, Mary, James, Grace, Jan, Elbert, Joseph, and Christina.

Although operating in an increasingly English American world, Aert continued to retain much of his Dutch heritage. Aert and Mary moved to the Upper Mills area of Philipsburg, north of the Manor House, sometime before 1718. Their son James was baptized in the Sleepy Hollow Dutch Church on October 28, 1718. Three more of their children, Grace, Jan, and Elbert, were baptized together on the same day the next year, on April 21, 1719. Their youngest son, Joseph, was probably born in 1723 and was baptized on August 27, 1723. Our family is descended from Joseph.

Why did Aert and Mary move to Philipsburg when they did? We do not know for sure, but Turner might provide a clue when he says that Aert’s father died sometime around 1716. If that was the case, one plausible explanation for the move would be that, as eldest son, Aert would have inherited his father’s Philipsburg farm. Whether or not that was the case, when Aert moved to Philipsburg and joined and his brother Evert already living there, they founded the two main Aertse family branches in 18th century Westchester County.

Generation 4: Joseph Orser (~1723-1783) & Ann Jurckes (1726-1818)

Joseph Artse was born about 1723 in Philipsburg, and was baptized in The Old Dutch Church in Sleepy Hollow on August 23, 1723. He married Ann (Anntje) Jurckes on September 13, 1746 in the Dutch Church in Sleepy Hollow on the same day Joseph’s cousin Jan married Rachel Bulyea. Ann was born in 1726 in Tarrytown. Her father’s family came from the Albany area, and may have been among the early settlers in the northern part of the New Netherland colony. Her mother was Rachel Willemse from an early Philipsburg family.

Joseph was a farmer in the northernmost part of Philipsburg Manor, near the Croton River. His land adjoined the town of New Castle which lay to the north of the property. The location of Joseph Orser’s
farm is highlighted on this map from 1785.

We know from the property inventory that was filed in Canada in 1787, that he was a relatively prosperous farmer. Paul found the document on the next page in the Public Record Office in London when he was there working on his doctoral dissertation in 1970. 18th century handwriting is a little
Account of the losses sustained by the heirs of the late Joseph Orser of Colonel Phillips Manor in the Province of New York during the Unhappy Dissention in America

100 acres of land improved @ £5 per acre..............................................................£500
95 “ditto” tenantable @ £4/10s per acre ...............................................................£427/10
Frame of a house just not finished burnt to the ground by rebels.....................£100
1 yoke of steers.................................................................£12
8 cows @ £6......................................................................................................£48
A stone house....................................................................................................£30
2 fine promising horses @ £20.........................................................................£40
2 mares @ £12..................................................................................................£24
2 calf yearlings @ 40s......................................................................................£2
2 mares @ £12..................................................................................................£24
2 calf yearlings @ 40s......................................................................................£2
20 hogs @ 15s..................................................................................................£15
Household furniture includes farming utensils...............................................£60
33 sheep @16s.................................................................................................£26/8

£1,286/18
Joseph and Ann had a very large family, not unusual in those days. In all, they had nine children, 6 boys and 3 girls; John, Gabriel, Solomon, Gilbert, Isaac, Arthur, Rachel, Phoebe, and Rhoda. John, the eldest son, was born about 1748. We descend from their son Gilbert.

What was unusual, and disappointing to learn, was that they were also slave owners. In 1783 when they left for Canada, they brought two black slave children with them, listed as servants; Abigail, who was 14, and Oliver, who was just 11. Most likely, they were children of the adult slaves that operated the mill at the nearby Manor House. There is no record of what happened to them after the Orser family arrived in Canada.

Revolution comes to Westchester County

The successful separation of the American colonies from British rule was a momentous accomplishment. American historical tradition tends to focus attention on the independence movement as a clash of ideologies and the triumph of freedom over old world despotism. The reality of the revolutionary movement, particularly in New York, was a more complex and far darker story. In Westchester County, New York City, and Long Island, support for independence was much less widespread, and opinion far more divided, than in most other parts of thirteen colonies. New York was both the headquarters, and the last bastion of British rule. It was the refuge to which beleaguered Loyalists could retreat “within the lines” for protection, and it was the place from which many Loyalists eventually evacuated when the war was finally lost in the summer of 1783.

For much of the war, Westchester County was a no man’s land lying between the camps of the opposing British and Continental armies. It was a dangerous place punctuated by irregular guerilla warfare and vigilante action, often exploding in very personal nastiness and brutality. There was a deep divide in that county between Loyalists and Patriots. It is best described as civil war. Families, including members of ours, found themselves on opposing sides of the conflict. Our branch of the family was actively or passively Loyalist, but, for example, a neighborhood cousin, Jonas Orser, served as a Captain in the Continental Army.

Joseph Artse’s quiet agricultural life was completely upended by the seven years of war that followed the Declaration of Independence. The owner of Philipsburg Manor at that time was Frederick Philipse III. A staunch Loyalist, he was attainted for treason in 1777 and all his property declared confiscated, including Joseph’s manor leasehold farm. If the patriots won the war, Joseph would lose his land and his source of livelihood. He was in his fifties at the time and too old to fight, but although he kept a low profile, he was firmly in the Loyalist camp. Testifying after the war at a hearing on the Orser family’s claim for damages, Emanuel Ellerbeck, a fellow Loyalist, who was “often backwards and forwards on secret service” stated “that the old man [Joseph] often supplied the witness with provisions for himself and other Loyalists.”

With the exception of his eldest son John, four of his other sons served in the military on the side of the British. Solomon, Gilbert, Isaac, and Arthur were part of a pretty notorious irregular Loyalist volunteer force known as DeLancey’s Refugees. Its leader, James DeLancey, was a staunch Loyalist who had been sheriff of Westchester County from 1769 to 1776. In 1777, he recruited force of up to 500 horsemen
that harassed their patriot neighbors, mostly in his home county. His unit went by several names: *Westchester County Militia, Westchester Light Horse, or Westchester Chasseurs*, but most patriots called them *DeLancey’s Cow-boys*. They received no pay, but earned their keep by rustling cattle and looting supplies from their patriot neighbors and selling them to the British army. One such a raid was described with sympathetic approval by the Tory leaning *New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* on October 16, 1777:

*Last Sunday Colonel James DeLancey, with sixty of his Westchester Light Horse went from Kingsbridge to the White Plains, where they took from the rebels, 44 barrels of flour, and two ox teams, near 100 head of black cattle, and 300 fat sheep and hogs.*

DeLancey also conducted more traditional and effective military operations, and was dangerous and elusive enough to get the attention of General George Washington. On May 17, 1781 Washington wrote to Congress about an attack by “surprise near Croton River by 60 Horse and 200 Foot under Colonel James DeLancey…44 killed, wounded and missing...attempted to cut him off but he got away.”

Against this background, it is not surprising that the local clashes between Patriots and Loyalists were particularly personal and ugly. For example, in June 1779, *The New York Gazette and Weekly Mercury* carried this report:

*We hear from Sing-Sing [Ossining] on Croton River that Thursday last nine rebels, amongst whom were John Oakley, Isaac Oakley, and John, son of William Fisher, went to the house of Elbert Artse, seized the man and severely whipped him, tied him to a the stump of a tree, and then for their diversion, fired small shot at him, till he became a miserable spectacle.*

*They also apprehended one Isaac Artse, tied him up, and whipped him inhumanly, they made him run from them. Then they fired at him with ball, which wounded him in the leg. After, they proceeded to Arthur Jones’s, seized his wife and whipped her in a manner shocking to relate.... The reason assigned for these cruelties were their refusing to appear when called upon to take up arms against the King’s troops, with the Militia.*

The instances of intimidation and reprisals against Loyalists intensified in 1782 and 1783 after the tide of war turned in favor of the patriots. Joseph Orser’s family was subjected to intimidation and vigilantism. The Orser family’s experiences were recorded in a series of sworn depositions recorded in 1783. Even Joseph’s eldest son John, who had not joined the military conflict as his brothers had, did not escape:

*John Orser, of West Chester in the County of West Chester, Farmer, being duly sworn on the Holy Evangelists of Almighty God,*

*Deposeth, that on Friday last being at work on his farm in West Chester aforesaid, a party of men consisting of about twenty, and armed with swords, pistols and Clubs and under the Command of a certain Israel Honeywell, as this Deponent than understood, came aiding up to the Deponent as he was at work and also demanding the Deponents name, instantly knocked him down and repeated their blow until they had laid his Skull bare in several places, when one*
of the party called out to the others to Strike lower, upon which they began at his knees and beat and bruised his thighs and body until he lay motionless. That they then stole three horses from him, and went off with them.

That during the whole transaction (?) this Deponent did not speak a word to them, unless it was to spare his life, and all that he recollects to have heard them say, was, that he should go to Nova Scotia.

(Signed) John Orser
Sworn the 20th day of May 1783, Before me, D. Mathews Mayor

Here is Arthur Orser’s experience:

Arthur Orser of West Chester in the County of West Chester, Farmer, being duly Sworn on the Holy Evangelists of Almighty God,

Desposeth that on Friday last being at Work on this Farm at West Chester aforesaid he discovered a party of five men armed with swords pistols and clubs coming towards him mounted on horseback. That the Deponent suspecting they came on some bad design, thought it most prudent to retire behind a stone fence in hopes to prevent their coming at him. That on their coming up to the said fence they demanded the Deponents name and what he did there, he told them his name and that he lived there and that he would come over the fence in case they would not hurt him which they engaged not to do. And the Deponent accordingly came over to them, when they instantly began to beat him with their Clubs which they continued to do for a considerable time and then demanded his money, but this Deponent persisted in denying that he had any, that they then took away a mare and suit of cloaths (sic) belonging to this Deponents brother and went off. That the said party of five men were a part of a larger body commanded by one Israel Honeywell as this Deponent then understood.

(Signed) Arthur Orser,
Sworn the 20th Day Of May 1783, (signed) Mathews, Mayor

Earlier, in May of 1782, again under the leadership of Israel Honeywell, a band of patriot neighbors attacked Joseph and Ann Orser, burning down their home and confiscating all of their animals, furniture, and clothing. Joseph and Ann were forced to leave what was left of their farm and live the last year of the war in a refugee camp inside the British controlled part of New York near James DeLancey’s base of operations in the Bronx. Amazingly, this map showing its location still exists. DeLancey’s house is in the green rectangle, and the Westchester refugee camp is in the red rectangle. The blue rectangle is where
Joseph and Ann’s sons Arthur and Isaac were captured while trying to visit their mother in June 1783.

In May, 1783, Joseph Orser was back on his farm, probably trying to salvage whatever remained of his property in preparation to leave for Canada, when Honeywell showed up again with his thugs, as Joseph later testified:

*Joseph Orser of West Chester in the County of West Chester, Farmer, aged about sixty years, being duly sworn on the Holy Evangelist of Almighty God,*

*Deposeth that on Friday last the Deponent then being at his house in West Chester aforesaid, a party of men consisting of about thirty, and armed with swords, pistols and clubs under the Command of a certain Israel Honeywell came to this Deponent’s said house.*

*That the first man that entered was the said Israel Honeywell with a large club in his hand and without saying a word to the Deponent instantly struck him over the head with the said club, which laid the Deponent’s skull bare and knocked him down. That others of the said party then joined in beating the Deponent, and repeated their blows until they had nearly put an end to the Deponent’s life, and then left him weltering in his blood and his head cut in several places.*

*That the Deponent has never given any occasion for such treatment. That he has not bore arms during the late contest but has endeavored to live in a peaceable manner during the whole time. That he has often been abused by the said Israel Honeywell, and had his house and barn burnt by the said Honeywell’s orders. That he is now in a most deplorable situation and hardly able to move by reason of the wounds and bruises he received from the said Honeywell and his party.*

*(Signed) Joseph Orser*
Finally, there is this story from Arthur, Isaac, and Arthur’s brother-in-law James Bulyea who were trying to visit their mothers in the Westchester refugee camp:

**Information of James Bulyea a Native of the Manor of Cortlandt, Isaac Aerse of the Manor of Philipsburgh, and Arthur Aerse of the same place. That they were of the corps called DeLancey’s Refugees, and by their colonel’s order above a month ago quitted the county of West Chester, and have since spent their time on Long Island and York Island.**

That yesterday three weeks, they cross’d in a boat from Long Island to Frogs’s Neck to visit their mothers, who then resided on the Neck and get from them cloaths and some supply of provisions. That they had scarcely landed and fastened the boat before they discerned a party that were armed and commanded by Lt. Hill of Col. Sproat’s Corps, advancing towards them. Taking them to be Continental Soldiers, they put off their boat, but were called back and fired upon, and verily believe had thirty shot at the boat before she got to the Shore.

The Party promised before they landed that they would be well used and yet as soon as they were landed they were beaten several blows, and had their cloaths or part of them taken from them, vis: from James Bulyea, a pair of shoe buckles and a pair of knee buckles, both of silver, a plated stock buckle, a pair of stockings, a Manchester jacket and britches; and from Isaac Aerse a silk handkerchief, a pair of fustian overalls, a pair of shoes and brass buckles; and from Arthur Aerse a new Castor hat.

They then led them to a house possessed by Joseph Castin on Frog’s Neck, where they were detained that night, and conveyed them next morning to West Chester Jail. This happened on a Thursday morning. On the Saturday following they were taken out jail, and sent under a guard to Frog’s Neck, where they were allowed to get their things together, and ordered to begone by that night, threatening that if found there afterwards they should be treated as thieves and robbers.

They were twice examined before they were dismissed from jail by Mr. Morris, who was stiled the judge. They were treated very civilly by him. The scope of his questions respected their being out in service during the war on the side of the Crown, and that cattle or other property had been at any time taken, and he declared at the close that in his opinion none that had been in arms for the King would be permitted to continue in the country.

*(signed) James Buylea, Isaac Orser, Arthur Orser*

Sworn the 19th June, 1783, before me, Wm Smith (Chief Justice)

By the end of the war in the early summer of 1783, the Loyalist Orser family had been harassed, intimidated, beaten, robbed, and burnt out of their home. They were now huddled in a refugee camp inside the British lines with almost nothing left, beyond the need to evacuate to some other safe British possession.
New York in the summer of 1783 was chaotic. Thousands of soldiers and nearly destitute Loyalist refugees crowded into the city and severely taxed the ability to house and feed them. The need for a massive evacuation of people who had few personal resources left posed a daunting problem. And with the peace settlement being negotiated, time was running out. Some Loyalists, those with the personal economic means, had already left for England or the Caribbean colonies, but most folks had nothing left. The destination of choice for most of them was Nova Scotia. It had an already developed a maritime economy and there were some settlements in place. It is possible that the Orsers considered this option, but then they met Michael Grass.

“A Voyage of a Different Kind” (with thanks to Larry Turner)

Michael Grass presented a daring alternative to relocating to Nova Scotia. Grass wanted to settle instead near the site of the old French Fort Frontenac, on the northeast shore of Lake Ontario, at the head of the St. Lawrence River. It appears that, when serving with a provincial company attached to the British army during the French and Indian War in the 1760s, he was captured and held for some time in or near the French fort and came to know the area.

Grass called a meeting at his house in New York on May 20, 1783 to explore the idea and gauge interest. A week later, on May 27, 1783, the *Royal American Gazette* printed this notice:

> Those Loyalists who have had a meeting at the house of Michael Grass, in the outward of this city, on the evening of the 20th inst. & have signed their names to form a settlement on Fort Frontenac, at the mouth of Lake Ontario & head of the River St. Lawrence, in Canada. The only eligible place left by the late treaty for the King's subjects, to carry on the Indian & fur trade, etc. are hereby notified, that their request has been communicated to his Excellency the Commander in Chief, by the gentlemen appointed for that purpose, & that his Excellency was pleased to give them the encouragement they desired. A list of the names of those who may be inclined to settle in this new country, is opened at the house of the said Mr. Grass, in Chatham Street, near the Tea-Water Pump, New York May 26, 1783.

Apparently undaunted by the fact that there was absolutely nothing in this remote area but miles and miles of untamed wilderness, Joseph Orser and his family put their faith in Michael Grass and signed up to go. He had been back in Philipsburg in May, probably packing whatever was left of their belongings, when the last savage attack by Honeywell took place. That was, no doubt, yet another incentive to relocate as far away from “civilization” as possible.
The commander in New York, Sir Guy Carleton, (himself a former governor of Quebec Province), enthusiastically endorsed the Grass plan. On June 7, he wrote to General Frederick Haldimand, the current Governor of the Province of Quebec, that while many thousands of Loyalists have taken refuge in Nova Scotia,

There are others, Sir, of the above description in Number about Two Hundred Families as I am informed who wish to pass into Canada and find Grants and Habitation there, and I think it my Duty, Sir, to recommend in the strongest Terms to your Excellency's consideration, the making Grants of Land to those Persons in the Neighbourhood of frontenac where they are desirous to settle and without any Reservation of Rents or the Payments of any Fees or Expenses whatever, to which I hope your Excellency will add Aid of a years Provisions in like manner as has been given in Nova Scotia.

By early July, a fleet of eight ships was assembled to take the Loyalist refugees to Quebec, on the first leg of their trip to begin a new life. A total of 106 people originally signed up to leave with Michael Grass: 33 men, 21 women, 40 children, and 12 servants. There were unrecorded additions and cancellations to this list prior to sailing, so it is not a completely accurate record of those who actually boarded the ship, but Joseph Orser’s family, along with adult sons Arthur, Isaac, Solomon, and Gilbert were among them.

The Orser family sailed with Michael Grass on the 293 ton transport ship “Camel” under the command of Master William Tinker. The “Camel” departed, probably from Staten Island, sometime between July 5 and July 12. Joseph Orser boarded the ship no doubt still feeling the effects from the nearly fatal attack he endured at the hands of Honeywell back in May. Sometime during the four week voyage to Canada, Joseph Orser died at sea. We do not know if he died from complications associated with his injuries, or from reported outbreaks of measles and smallpox aboard the
ship. Later, Ann Orser, appearing at the loyalist compensation board hearings in Montreal, simply testified that her husband had "died on his passage from New York." When the ship reached Quebec about four weeks later on August 16, ninety-five passengers were accounted for: 40 men, 15 women, 37 children, and 3 servants.

The Loyalist exiles arrived far too late in the short growing season to move on to their final destination on Lake Ontario. The area had not even been surveyed, nothing was built, and there was no way to sustain them through the oncoming winter without food, shelter or supplies. Instead, they were sent to spend the winter at a military base at Sorel, on the St. Lawrence River, about 100 miles up-river from Quebec. Sorel was still over 200 difficult river miles short of their final destination. By the time the Loyalist refugees finally arrived at Sorel on August 28, 1783, their numbers continued to dwindle. Grass’s party numbered only seventy-four: 27 men, 13 women, and 34 children. However, many were sick with smallpox and had been quarantined, so they may not have been included in this number. Others may have decided to stay in Quebec.

The grim reality of life on short rations on a frontier military base crowded together with nothing to do in the middle of a Canadian winter, took its toll. Discontent with the harsh reality they faced compared to what they thought they had been promised in New York, led to bitterness and complaints. Grass was increasingly self-important and vocal, and antagonized Governor Haldimand with a stream of complaints and unwanted suggestions. Haldimand, though well meaning enough, was rigid in his military style thinking, frugal, and greatly annoyed by what he considered to be affronts to his power and authority.

Haldimand had not sought this resettlement but had to find ways to accommodate it. One of his concerns was that he did not want to settle the British American exiles in the middle of the French speaking eastern part of Quebec Province. That was asking for trouble. He was also concerned that settling several hundred Loyalist families in the Indian country to the west was also problematic. But, he also did not want to see a revival of American style dissention among the restive and impatient Loyalists encamped at Sorel.

In the end, he agreed with Grass and thought it best to send the Loyalists where they wanted to go. He backed the Frontenac settlement concept, and put the wheels in motion to survey the area. He also needed confirmation from London to give him the authority to establish the settlement, which was finally granted on June 12, 1784.

A New Home at Last
In May and June, 1784, the remaining Loyalists finally began the long difficult trek up river from Sorel to Cataraqui (as the Kingston area was called at that time) and the prospect of
new homes. The survey work was finally finished. This survey map shows the original Orser land grants in what is now the city of Kingston, Ontario. In October 1784 a list of the 94 original adult settlers of Township 1 was compiled. Our Orser ancestors were among those who survived the “voyage of a different kind” to carve a new life out of the Ontario wilderness.

**Generation 5: Gilbert Orser (1765-1851) & Sarah Wright (1765-1845)**

Gilbert was Joseph Orser’s second youngest son. He was about 18 years old when he left New York with the rest of his family. After arriving in Sorel, he joined the survey crew that laid out Township 1, his family’s future home. He was an assistant to Deputy Surveyor John Collins, and testified at a subsequent inquiry into the survey, that Kingston Township had been surveyed first, and Kingston town after that. Apparently Collins had been instructed to do it the other way round.

In about 1788, Gilbert married Sarah Wright, the daughter of Samuel and Mary Wright. He was 23 and she only about 16. The Wright family left New York on the “Camel” with the Orsers as part of the Michael Grass group. And, like Joseph Orser, Samuel Wright did not survive the trip to Kingston. Ann Orser and Mary Wright were the only two women grantees listed as widows in the 1784 landowner list of Township 1, and their land grants were next to each other. They must have had a lot in common in the struggle to establish a new home. This is most likely how Gilbert and Sarah met.

Once married and settled, we have just a couple of documents related to their life. In 1789, Gilbert was sworn in as a member of the first recorded jury in Kingston, to try a case of assault and battery. From 1789 through October 5, 1790, Gilbert was the Rev. Dr. John Stuart's first clerk in the Parish of Kingston, Church of England. The records of St. George’s Church show that Dr. Stuart baptized their son Samuel Orser, on February 23, 1790.

In 1793, after she reached the legal age of 21, Sarah submitted a petition for a land grant, to which she was entitled as an adult child of a Loyalist parent. A copy of that petition still exists and is reproduced on the following page. It is the oldest document I have that contains an actual signature of one of our ancestors. In transcription it reads as follows:

*The memorial of Sara Orser alias Wright Daughter of Samuel Wright, deceased*

*Humbly showeth*

*That your Excellency’s Memorialist being married to Gilbert Orser humbly begs that the portion of land under the Order in Council of 9 November 1789, may be assigned as the daughter of a Loyalist that has made due improvement on his farm.*

*And your Memorialist as on duty bound shall ever [illegible]*

*[signed] Sarah Orser alias Wright*

She was granted 200 acres of land on April 17, 1793.
Perhaps one reason that Gilbert and Sarah do not appear more often in the public records is that they were very busy developing their frontier farm land and raising a spectacularly large family. In all, they had 15 children, easily winning the procreation championship in our family history! For the record, their children’s names were: Samuel, Phebe, Jesse, Elijah, Abraham, David, Enoch, Joseph, Gilbert, Ann Hannah, William, Elizabeth, Martha, and Mary. We descend from William, who was born in 1811.

Possibly to secure more room for his rapidly expanding family, and because much of the land around Kingston had already been claimed, in June 1806 Gilbert applied for and received a 400 acre Loyalist land grant in Hallowell Township in Prince Edward County, about 35 miles west of Kingston.
The 1808 Tax Assessment of the Township of Hallowell, shows that Gilbert had 330 acres of uncultivated and 70 acres of cultivated land. There was clearly a lot of work left for the family to do. Gilbert and Sarah spent the rest of their lives there.