

The Dey Family of New Jersey



Where the "Dey" comes from? The name "Dyrssen" is still prevalent in the area where Laurens was born and raised. "Dyrssen" means son of "Dyr". In Danish "Dyr" means "animal, beast, dear, expensive, lovely, valuable". But how is it pronounced? Evidently, though written Danish is standardized, every one of the islands where Laurens was born has its own spoken dialect, so it's impossible to know. However, it seems nearly certain that "Duyts" was pronounced as "dites", since the long "T" vowel sound has endured to this day. Spellings of names often varied wildly, but pronunciations were usually persevered. "Duyts" was probably an abbreviated form of old "Duytssen", or "son of Duy", the "t" sound exiting, perhaps, as part of the regional dialect.

Settlers in the American colonies adopted the English practice of giving a son the same surname as the father. So "Dytssen" became "Duyts", which then, eventually, eroded to "Dey" or "Dye"—but still pronounced as if it were spelled "Duy", (rhyming with "guy").

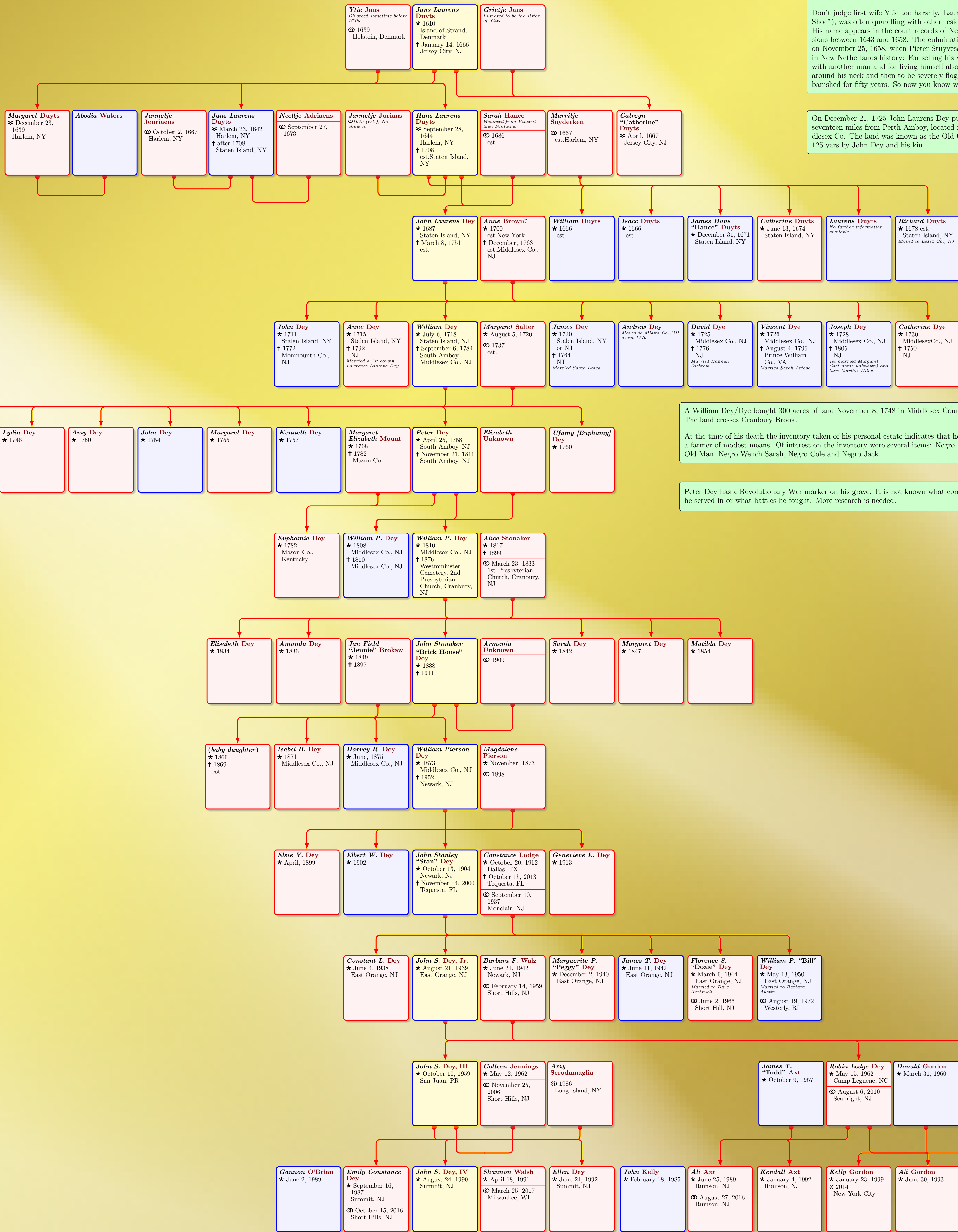
It seems that each generation of ancestors moved to a different area of New Jersey. The land that John Laurens bought in Middlesex Co., near Cranbury in 1725 was originally part of South Amboy Twp.; township and county division then had his descendants living just a few miles away in areas that were included on the censuses of Monroe Twp., Middlesex Co.; S. Brunswick Twp., E. Windsor, Mercer Co., and finally in Cranbury (village), Middlesex Co. Even though it appears that the Dey's moved around quite a bit, the ancestors did not move at all (until Elbert went to Newark).

Cranbury Village is one of the oldest settlements in the state and existed as early as the late 1600's. It was not officially incorporated as a village until 1872 at which time its village limits straddled the old township of S. Brunswick and Monroe. Then in 1838 an area of Middlesex Co. where many Dey descendants were living became part of the new County of Mercer. Some of the Dey's drifted just a few miles west and ended up in Freehold—which was literally just a few miles across the border of S. Brunswick.

William Dey helped build the new Presbyterian Church building at Cranbury in 1739. Prior to this time many Dey's/Dye's worshipped at the Old Tennent Presbyterian Church across the county border in Manalapan, Monmouth Co. The churches are known as the First and Second Presbyterian Churches, respectively.

In the 1850 Cranbury census there were 3,001 recorded people living in the Village of Cranbury. One hundred and seventy-two of them had last names "Dey". Of the 172 persons named Dey twelve of them were named William. Of the 12 persons living in this little village three of them were listed as "William P. Dey"! What a nightmare for researchers.

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On November, 25 1658 Ytte was sentenced to a whipping and banishment from living in adultery with Jan Parell. The two sorrowful sinners petitioned for a reversal of the sentence of being whipped and then banished for twenty years, and they must have been successful since Jan must have found a way to marry Ytte, since a wife by that name survived him and was his widow in 1684.

Don't judge first wife Ytte too harshly. Laurens, nicknamed Laurens Grootshoe ("Big Shoe"), was often quarrelling with other residents and in trouble with Dutch authorities. His name appears in the court records of New Amsterdam on more than fifteen occasions between 1643 and 1658. The culmination of his courtroom experiences occurred on November 25, 1658, when Pieter Stuyvesand rendered one of the severest verdicts in New Netherlands history: For selling his wife, and for forcing her to live in adultery with another man and for living himself also in adultery, he was to have a rope tied around his neck and then to be severely flogged, to have his right ear cut off and to be banished for fifty years. So now you know why your ancestors ended up in New Jersey!

On December 21, 1725 John Laurens Dey purchased 200 acres of land situated about seventeen miles from Perth Amboy, located near Prospect Plains and Cranbury, in Middlesex Co. The land was known as the Old Church Farm and was occupied for at least 125 years by John Dey and his kin.

A William Dey/Dye bought 300 acres of land November 8, 1748 in Middlesex County. The land crosses Cranbury Brook.

At the time of his death the inventory taken of his personal estate indicates that he was a farmer of modest means. Of interest on the inventory were several items: Negro Jack Old Man, Negro Wench Sarah, Negro Cole and Negro Jack.

Peter Dey has a Revolutionary War marker on his grave. It is not known what company he served in or what battles he fought. More research is needed.

The information presented herein comes from the research paper by Janice Rosenthal rrosent839@aol.com, prepared for Tom Dey tomdey@mac.com, November 13, 2006 with note added December 11, 2006.

★=born,
 ✝=baptized,
 ⚭=married,
 †=died, ✖=killed in action.