

NOTE

FÉLICITÉ COCHARD
AND THE FOUNDATION OF
THE SYDNEY FRENCH BENEVOLENT
SOCIETY

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According to information published in the *Courrier australien* of 3 November 1900 and again of 19 August 1905, the *Société française de bienfaisance*, which is still in existence and active, was founded in 1891 by Dr Laure, the doctor of the local French colony, and other members of the Sydney French community, in response to the death in Parramatta Park of Félicité Cochard. According to the *Courrier*, this elderly Frenchwoman, a victim of the depression of the early 'nineties, had died of starvation and exposure during the Australian winter.

Until quite recently this story was never challenged and it has been re-told time and time again in the context of the history of the creation of the French Benevolent Society.

With the increasing interest in this country for family history, the circumstances of Félicité Cochard's death and her background have now been questioned by a family who believe themselves to be her descendants. As novices to family history, they have asked a close friend and experienced researcher, Diane Esmond, to explore web-based archival material on their behalf.

The new information presented in this note is the outcome of research conducted by Diane Esmond¹ who would welcome enquiries and further details readers of *Explorations* might be able to provide.

According to the registration of her death² Félicité Cochard died on 8 April 1891 at the age of 33. The place of death was Ross Street, Parramatta, almost certainly her home. She was buried at the Roman Catholic cemetery at Rookwood, although so far her grave has not been located. The priest presiding over her burial was James J. O'Reilly and the undertaker William Metcalfe. The

cause of death, reported on 16 April, is given as ‘Syncope, Lupoid disease’, a condition she was supposed to have suffered from for one year and nine months. She was last seen by her doctor, J.A.S. Kearney, on the day of her death, 8 April. Corrections were made to the registration by the Registrar, Geo Wickham, on 21 April, more specifically, to the name of the deceased.

Not only was Félicité Cochard NOT ‘une vieille Française’, as reported nine years after her death by the *Courrier australien*, but she was married and had two children. According to her death certificate, she was the daughter of Jacques Cochard of Boulogne-sur-Mer (France) and of Félicité Houstam. She had been in the Colony for ‘about two years and four months’.

The birth certificate³ of her younger son, Edwin John Williams (later known as Edward), gives the mother’s name as ‘Felicie [sic] Cochard’ and the father’s name as Edwin Williams, both aged 30. The father was born in Birmingham, England, and his profession was tailor.

The birth took place on 7 June 1889 in Ross Street, Parramatta, and was reported by the father. Edwin and Félicité were supposed to have married on 24 March 1888 in London. At the time of his mother’s death young Edwin John was one year ten months old. It might be significant that the death was reported by a neighbour, Elizabeth Ann Medgwick, of Ross Street, Parramatta, rather than Edwin Senior.

According to the death certificate, Félicité had been married before, in France. The only detail given is the first husband’s surname, ‘Guachard’, probably a misspelling for ‘Guichard’. There was one surviving male child, name and age not listed, and three deceased sons. Lack of information about the name of the surviving child suggests the boy was not with his mother in Ross Street at the time of death.

According to the revised version of her death certificate (dated 21 April 1891), the full name of the deceased was ‘Felicite Augustine Williams’. Her living descendants are the offspring of her son Edwin John Williams.

Although Diane Esmond’s research has clearly demonstrated the inaccuracy of the legend of the death in a public park of a lonely old Frenchwoman during the winter of 1891 (a legend based on the two *Courrier australien* sources of 1900 and 1905, many years after the actual event), there are enough pointers in the newly discovered archival material to justify the foundation of a Benevolent Society ready to provide help to immigrant Frenchmen and French women in difficulty. The suspected absence of her husband at the time

of Félicité's death, the survival of two sons, one of whom was under the age of two and the other apparently separated from his mother, and a potentially devastating illness (which apparently her female descendants have inherited) indicate distressing circumstances, especially for a new settler.

It is to be hoped that the *Société française de bienfaisance* will take this recent research into account and revise the history of its foundation.

Nothing produced by this research lessens the claim of the French Benevolent Society to our admiration—its establishment in 1891 was a wonderful and much needed gesture of humanity and solidarity.

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Notes

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- 2 Parramatta, NSW, ref. n° 1891/12005.
- 3 Parramatta, NSW, ref. n° 1889/18711.