

Letters From France

In 1912, Firmin Dastugue sent home photographs of his three sons, Paul, Marcel and Fernard. The following are letters from the French Dastuges immediately following that correspondence, translated by Dr. Susan Spillman of Xavier University.

To Firmin Dastugue, from his brother, Eugene:

October 22, 1912

Tarbes

Dear Firmin,

You could give us no greater pleasure than to send us the portraits of your three sons; truly they are very pleasant to see, your boys. Since they must be as good as they are good-looking, you all must, both you and your wife, be proud of them. The people to whom we have shown these photographs have expressed to us their congratulations, which have overwhelmed us with great joy. Please accept my sincerest congratulations from my wife and my other relatives. We wish that the boys give back to you with tenderest affection the just reward that is due to you and your wife for the care that you both have taken to bring them up well.

I have not yet had the opportunity to send the photos either to Duffort nor to Tournous; I think that I will do this very soon. The portrait of Paul will go to his godchild Pauline who, without doubt, will be delighted to receive it. I will keep one of the four group pictures and the portrait of Marcel.

How can it be that this handsome young man who has only been married a few months is already traveling alone? If it is really him in person, that could cause problems and could cast doubt on whether or not the young couple is getting along. However, I don't doubt that they do. I would like to permit myself to make a little request for a portrait of his young wife which I will place next to his. This will give us the pleasure of seeing both of them and of thinking about them often.

In your next-to-last letter you told me that Paul was about to get married, and that he had taken on a pharmacy. I guess that these two events must have followed one after the other but I'm not certain which came first. You are conservative with your details. Whatever may be the case, I wish him perfect happiness in the marriage and great success with the pharmacy. I will ask him to be kind as well, and to understand that if I give his portrait to his goddaughter Pauline, it is because...

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...we try at least to preserve our health. That is the most important wish that we could make for you as well. I make this wish equally for your wife and your children.

I hope that your next letter will give us more details about the new households. As far as your trip to France is concerned, please don't put it off too long, since with age comes infirmity and the desire to travel leaves.

Please accept my greatest affection for you and your family. To my personal best wishes I add those of my wife.

E. Dastugue (Eugene Dastugue)

A note from Eugene's wife, Malvina, inserted in the above letter:

Dear brother-in-law and sister-in-law,

I cannot express to you the joy that we have had in receiving the photos of your children. We can't stop contemplating and admiring them.

The handsome boys! And how distinguished they are! And they seem very intelligent and serious! And I can tell that they are good, which is the best of all! As Eugene has told you — and he is very proud of them — we have showed them to everyone of our friends, all of whom have complimented them. I am sure that Paul and Marcel had good taste and that their young wives are charming as well. We want to get to know them, too, and we hope you will send their photos soon. (I'm talking about young wives — is Paul already married? Perhaps not yet...)

We are so happy to have news of you from time to time. Write to us more frequent, longer letters. And please decide that you want to take a trip to France next summer. You are freer now. Profit from that freedom. You will bring great joy to all of us by coming to see us.

Please accept my affection and my congratulations.

Malvina

To Paul Dastugue, from his uncle by marriage:

October 30, 1912

My dear nephew,

I am hurrying to answer your friendly letter which has brought us the greatest of pleasure, especially since we know that you are in very good health. My greatest desire is to be able to send to you our best wishes for a happy new year. Please know that I have the deepest desires that you may be happy. All my relatives join with me in formulating the same wishes.

I am delighted to tell you that we are all in good health and we hope that you will continue to have the same advantage.

It is with the greatest of grief that I must ask you for news of the Vignes family. I hope that you will send me news of them the next time that you write. I would enjoy very much going there myself, but alas! the long distance to cover requires that I have recourse to pen and paper.

As far as your brother is concerned, he never writes to us. I do not know the reason why we have no further news of him.

I conclude by sending to you, along with my whole family, good wishes for many long and happy years and while waiting to hear from you, please know that I am your most devoted and loving uncle.

P. Vidou

To Paul Dastugue from Pauline Nogués, Pelagie Vidou's daughter:

Dec. 31, 1912

Dear Godfather,

On the occasion of New Year's Day, I want to thank you again for everything that you have done for me, and at the same time send you my best wishes for the New Year.

I hope for you, dear Godfather, a good and happy year free from worries and pains and at the same time I ask that you express the same from me to your whole family.

Your godchild, who loves you and thinks of you always. My husband joins me in sending you the same good wishes.

Pauline Nogués

To Paul from his uncle Eugene Dastugue:

Dear Paul,

I have been wanting to write to you for awhile, but by delaying, my task has become much easier, since your aunt Malvina wrote before I did, and says things much better than I could have done. You certainly can see in her writing an indication of the affection which she has for you, so well done that there really is not much that I could add.

We have had a visit around New Year's from your uncles Louis and Jean Marie and your cousin Yvonne (editor's note: Yvonne is the daughter of Jean-Marie Dastugue and Eugenie Menvielle, and there will be more on her later). I have given them the photographs, yours for Pauline and a group for each family. They all expressed a lot of satisfaction. My dear Paul, I am happy to see that by your work and your initiative you have been able to found a business at such a young age, a business that will be successful and remunerative as you have stated in your letter. Having ambition to climb upward through intelligence and

hard work is very noble ambition. All my best wishes for your success. I hope also that you will have good health, without which nothing is possible.

I present my best wishes to your father and mother, as well as to your two brothers.

I embrace you with all my heart,
Your devoted uncle,

E. Dastugue

To Paul Dastugue from Malvina Dastugue:

April 26, 1913

Tarbes

Dear Paul,

I should have written to you earlier, if only to tell you how pleased we are to receive your letters, and how delighted we are that you speak to us with confidence and affection.

Everything you told us in your last letter interested us tremendously, since we hold your family in our hearts. And as I have already told you, your uncle Eugene tends to favor you. He doesn't forget that he has been in a certain sense a second Papa for you, which makes him extremely happy whenever anyone praises you. We have had a visit recently from Mr. Irénée Donis (?) who told us about how he was received by you in such a friendly way before he returned to France. He talked about you all extensively, about you in particular.

Yes, dear Paul, we are very interested in your future, which we hope will be happy and prosperous. May the young lady who occupies your heart be an ideal companion for you! May she support you with all her intelligence and with all her affection.

My husband went to Duffort last week for two days. Everyone was well at the house and also at the Vidous. Pauline is in a very interesting job situation. Yvonne accompanied her uncle on his return. So, she is here for several days, which is a great joy for her. She is bringing us a lot of pleasure also, since she is pleasant, kind and of a sweet nature. We had her photographed yesterday. If the photos are good we will send you some, or rather, she will send them to you.

Thank you again, dear Paul, for the letters which you sent us for Easter. They brought us a lot of pleasure. My husband recently wrote to your brother to send him news. However, I also send my best wishes. With all my best, please accept my fondest thoughts. Yvonne adds her greetings as well.

With all my heart,

M. Dastugue

Meeting Yvonne

In 1984, Isabelle and Christian Dastugue, great grandchildren of Jean Marie and Eugenie Dastugue, visited New Orleans and their American cousins. For the first time, the New Orleans Dastugue family held a reunion, gathering together the offspring of the three Dastugue brothers, Paul, Fernard and Marcel, and the Dastugue family separated by the Atlantic Ocean.

The reunion marked a significant milestone for the Dastugue family. Only a year before, the connection to France has been lost.

Paul Dastugue Jr. and his daughters, Danon and Cheré (your narrator), had visited the south of France in search of the French cousins over the New Year's holidays of 1982–83. Through the letters written to Paul Dastugue Sr., we knew the Dastugue family lived or had lived near the town of Trie sur Biase and the city of Tarbes. Paul had written to René Dastugue, a photographer he found in the Tarbes phone book. René insisted we were not related, but agreed to help upon our arrival.

We celebrated New Year's Eve, 1982, in Tarbes, enjoying the holiday merriment at a rollicking party at our hotel. Fortunately, the woman sitting at our table, a Madame René Flamant, was a French teacher living in Spain who also spoke English (she was vacationing in France as well). She agreed to help translate.

With René Flamant and her poodle Pils in tow, we began the New Year at the home of René Dastugue toasting the advent of 1983 and enjoying the French version (the original version, I might add) of the king cake. Danon received the bean and was crowned queen for the day. She chose René, the masculine one, as her king.

We then proceeded to the town of Duffort, where, a few days earlier, my father and I had stumbled upon a cemetery filled with Dastugue family tombs.

The mayor of Duffort, it turned out, is a Dastugue. The mayor informed us, however, that we are not related. Before we could offer a “merci,” he disappeared into the house and returned grinning, a copy of the New Orleans Abeille in his hands. The New Orleans newspaper, known mostly as the “Bee,” was popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

While we were standing in Mayor Dastugue’s yard, a man came pattering down the street in a man-made car, his daughter in his lap. He, too, was named Dastugue but said he was not related either.

The two men suggested we try Yvonne Tourné, who lived in a nursing home in Trie. She was a Dastugue at birth, we were told. By the time we made it to the home, the sun began to set. Our hopes began to diminish with the winter sun fading behind the nearby Pyrenees Mountains. We were escorted into a small, dark room, dimly lit by a lone lamp, and we waited for Yvonne to arrive. When she did, she glanced at us curiously. René Dastugue began to explain why we had come.

I will always remember the gleam that appeared in Yvonne’s eyes that afternoon when René mentioned the name of my great grandfather, Firmin. Goosebumps traveled up and down my spine when I realized we had finally made the connection. Yvonne’s eyes filled with tears as she told us that as a child she often wrote to my grandfather, Paul. She also informed us that she had sent a photo of her children to Paul, one that was taken by René Dastugue’s father.

Yvonne told us of our French families living in Duffort and Tournous Darré and said she would set up a meeting for the following day.

The next day began at the home of Louis and Marie Rose Sabathier Tourné. Louis is the son of Yvonne, who was married to Victor Tourné. (They were married June 4, 1949, and Victor died on June 8, 1975.) Yvonne is the only daughter of Louis Eugenie Dastugue and Leonie Peres.

Louis and Marie Rose opened their arms to us and we felt instantly welcome. Their son, Jean-Marc, was also present, representing my generation. We enjoyed a feast of many courses in the very room where Firmin Pierre Dastugue was born, and exchanged photos, letters and information. It was at this time that we received the photo of the three brothers, the very one that had been the subject of letters between Firmin and his brother Eugene.

After much conversation — most of which had to be translated — and plenty of food, wine and hospitality, we journeyed on to the house of the descendants of Jean Marie Dastugue and Eugenie Menvielle. There we were greeted by Pierre Dastugue and his wife, Lucette, their daughter, Isabelle, and other members of the family. Again, we were treated to wine, food and a massive warm fireplace. Danon and Pierre really hit it off, Pierre quite taken by Danon's vibrant blond hair and her equally bright personality.

We finally returned to our hotel in Tarbes as the sun dipped behind the magnificent Pyrenees. I rode with René Dastugue back to Trie, and we both marveled at the sunset's beauty. Some things don't need translating.

The following year, in August of 1984, Isabelle and Christian Dastugue visited New Orleans, the first time members of our Dastugue family had crossed the Atlantic since the late 19th century. The American Dastuges treated them to the World's Fair, Louisiana hot spots and a Dastugue reunion in which almost every descendant of Paul, Fernard and Marcel attended. We were all extremely thankful that Christian spoke fluent English and Isabelle understood more English than we did of French.