

# Sugar Helps Make Lemons Into Charlotte LeRoy's Lemon Cheesecake

by Lynne Belluscio

On November 7, I am scheduled to share some of the research that I am doing on the 1823 manuscript receipt book that belonged to Charlotte LeRoy – Jacob's wife.

She was born in 1800 in Boston. We don't know much about her early life. We know that she had a sister Helen (who married her husband's cousin – who was also named Jacob LeRoy) and that Charlotte had two other siblings who died very young. Her father, Thomas Otis, was a merchant and in 1820, was in New York City. At some point the family moved to France and it was said that Thomas made a fortune in Europe.

In 1821, Charlotte's mother died in France and was buried there. The family history indicates that Charlotte was educated in France, but that has not been proven. On May 20, 1822, Charlotte Downes Otis married Jacob LeRoy in New York City. The date in the receipt book is June 16, 1823, Pelham, New York. Her first child, Thomas was born a few weeks later on July 9, 1823. It is speculated that he was born in LeRoy, but at least one source indicates he was born in New York City – only a few miles from Pelham. (Pelham is actually in the Bronx.) The LeRoy family owned property in Pelham and I now believe that Thomas was not born in LeRoy but in New York City -- perhaps Pelham.

There are many recipes in the little book, and according to Peter Rose, a noted author and authority on Dutch history and Dutch food, at least ten of the recipes are of Dutch origin. (More on the Dutch recipes later.) Many of the other recipes include lemons, oranges, and even limes.

Think about that - - - where did lemons, oranges and limes come from in 1823? Certainly not Florida or California. From what I can find out, most of the oranges and lemons came from Spain and the Mediterranean region. Picked green, they were packed in boxes and shipped to New York, sometimes taking weeks before being sold.

The benefits of lemon juice to

alleviate scurvy had been known for a long time, especially on shipboard during long months at sea. So apparently Charlotte wanted to make sure she had all her recipes for lemon cake, and pudding, and lemon drops, and lemon cheesecake written down for her move to the frontier town named after her father-in-law. I have to wonder, how many of those lemon recipes did she use after she came here, but maybe she had boxes of lemons shipped from New York City to LeRoy.

With lemons, it was necessary to have sugar, and preferably white refined sugar that came in cones. Most of the folks in LeRoy probably used maple sugar that they could make themselves, but the LeRoy family had the money to buy white cone sugar.

So I did a little more research and was surprised at what I discovered. I knew that the source

of sugar came through the islands in the Caribbean, produced by slave labor. But what I didn't know, was that most of the sugar refineries were located in New York City. As early as 1730, sugar was being refined in New York at a refinery owned by Nicholas Bayard. By 1760, sugar refineries were owned by leading families – the Van Cortlandt's, Cuylers, and Roosevelts.

In 1764, British Parliament passed the Sugar Act which taxed all raw sugar coming into American ports. This taxation helped to fuel the need for the Revolutionary War. After the British captured New York City, they used the large brick sugar refineries for prisoners. Conditions in the sugar house prisons were horrendous and many men died. But after the war, the sugar refineries went back into production and expanded. By 1870, almost

half of the sugar consumed in the United States was refined in just one New York refinery.

By 1882, the American Sugar Refining Company was the largest refinery in the world. In May 1896, American Sugar Company became one of the original 12 companies listed in the Dow Jones Industrial Average. By 1907, 98% of the sugar used in the United States was refined in New York City. (So it stands to reason, that all the sugar shipped to LeRoy for the production of Jell-O, came from New York City.)

In 2000, the sugar industry in New York City was devastated by a strike that lasted nearly two years. In 2004, refining operations stopped at the huge Domino refinery. The Domino refinery site was declared a National Historical Landmark, and there are plans for adaptive use of the buildings.

