

## Christina, Christeen, Christiana: A Delaware Connection

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### Abstract

Fort Christina, named for Queen Christina of Sweden, was the site of the first Swedish settlement in America. The name shifted to a major tributary of the Delaware River and several other features. In later years the name underwent changes, and in an unprecedented act the Delaware Legislature in 1937 attempted to legalize the original form. Historical documentation over a 353-year period illustrates the name changes that have occurred.

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The late Professor Arthur R. Dunlap, a longtime member of the American Name Society, brought Kelsie B. Harder to my home in Wilmington in 1952. Arthur wanted me to show Kelsie the artifacts we uncovered during an archaeological dig of a Delaware colonial log cabin. The cabin had nothing to do with onomastics, but Kelsie was interested and seemingly enjoyed the visit. His name came up on several occasions when Arthur and I were working together. I've forgotten what prompted my first letter to Kelsie, but it started a correspondence that has continued intermittently for more than forty years.

Under Kelsie's and Arthur's influence I petitioned the American Name Society for membership and that affiliation brought us closer together. I saw Arthur frequently, but I have never seen Kelsie since his 1952 visit. Arthur died in 1974, and I am now an octogenarian. The distance between Potsdam and Wilmington has lengthened for me, but one of these days I'll wax impetuous and surprise Kelsie with a return visit.

I consider Kelsie a friend and teacher; I have been educated by his articles and judicious book reviews, augmented by our correspondence. In this lifelong learning process I recently received a letter from him telling me of his interest in exonyms, words pronounced differently outside a speech community from the pronunciation within the community, but spelled the same way within and without. By way of a tribute I want to give Kelsie six exonyms from the Delmarva Peninsula for his

collection. Five need no explanation, but the sixth is worthy of extended comment; hence this piece.

Our Delaware town in Milford Hundred, Kent County, spelled *Houston*, is not pronounced "HEW-stun" like the Texas city, but "HOW-stun," from the town's founder in 1884, John W. Houston (Scharf 2: 1187). *Leipsic*, in Duck Creek Hundred, Kent County, is locally pronounced "LIP-sick," and *Vienna* on the Nanticoke River on the Eastern Shore of Maryland is always referred to as "Vie-ENNa," just as *Berlin*, also on the Eastern Shore, is called "BURR-lin." Of course, it is widely known that *Newark*, our university town in White Clay Creek Hundred, is spoken of in two syllables of equal weight, "NEW ARK," not slurred as we refer to the same name used for the New Jersey city.

The sixth one (See Fig. 1) must be seen in its historical context to understand its unique connections. The Swedes were responsible for the name brought to Delaware 353 years ago in honor of Queen Christina, the twelve-year old orphaned daughter of the warrior king, Gustavus Adolphus, who was killed in battle in 1632 (Weslager, *New Sweden* 14). Actually she was then a princess, since she could not ascend to the throne until she reached her eighteenth birthday. While she waited, a regency of five noblemen ruled the kingdom.

Her name as an American placename was the work of a non-Swede, Peter Minuit, a native of Wesel on the Rhine. The regency engaged him to found a Swedish settlement in the New World (Weslager, *Man and Ship* 96). His instructions called for him to sail first to the Isle de Sable east of Newfoundland, "and finding no people on the island, take possession of it for the Crown of Sweden, naming the same Christina, and the [best] havens likewise naming after the great in Sweden" (Weslager, *Dutch Explorers* 170; Dunlap translation).

Minuit set out from Göteborg in November 1637, and severe winter weather deterred him from exploring northern waters. He took an alternate route via the Caribbean, and in the West Indies turned north and made his way to the mouth of Delaware Bay. Sailing up the bay and into the river debouching into it, he reached a tributary in March 1638 which the Dutch had already named the *Minquas Kill*. This combination of a Dutch geographical term and an Indian tribal name meant that the river would lead Dutch fur traders to the country of the Susquehannocks, also called Minquas. Although Minuit was familiar with the Dutch name, he gave the stream a new name, the *Elbe*, thus transplanting a name from his native Germany. But it proved to be short-lived.

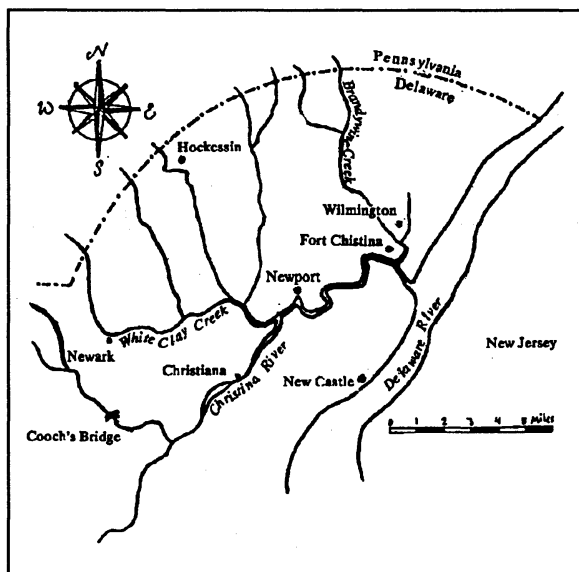


Fig. 1. Northern Delaware and the Christina River.

At a rock outcropping along the Minquas Kill, now within the city limits of Wilmington, Minuit built a fort which he named *Fort Christina*. It was an unpretentious log structure, unlike the medieval stone castles in Scandinavia worthy of a queen's name, but he followed the spirit of his instructions, if not the letter. The little princess had her fort instead of an icy island, and Minuit unknowingly started an onomastic snowball down a long slope.

After Minuit's death the name of the fort shifted to the stream on which it was located, and his *Elbe* gave way to *Christina Kijl* on Swedish maps (Lindeström 268). It was a deep, sluggish stream which maundered through marshland to the head of tidewater about seven or eight miles above the fort as the crow flies. Vessels as large as sloops could navigate it to the head, which made it commercially important as farms were laid out and mills built. The scattered log cabins in the vicinity of *Christina Skantz*, as the Swedes called the fort, were collectively referred to as *Christina*, without having specific bounds.

In 1654, a Swedish governor, Johan Rising, transferred the name *Stadhen Christina Hambn* 'Town of Christina Haven' to a new settlement north of the fort (Lindeström 268). The five or six houses there were destroyed by the Dutch in 1655 when they seized the Swedish colony, and that was the end of New Sweden. Of course, the Swedish population did

not suddenly disappear, and in Swedish households the old placenames did not readily yield to change.

The Dutch authorities gave Fort Christina a new name, *Fort Altena*, but they allowed *Christina Kill* as the name of the stream to stand, and they tolerated *Christina* as a placename used by their Swedish and Finnish subjects (Gehring 57). In fact, they used *Christina* themselves for the rowboat ferry that took travelers across the Christina at Fort Altena to the principal Dutch settlement six miles down the Delaware at New Amstel, which the English later called *New Castle*. Of course, many placenames of Dutch provenience appeared which have been discussed elsewhere and need not detain us now (Weslager, *Dutch Explorers* 229–32).

In 1664 the troops of James Stuart, Duke of York, captured the Dutch colony, a political change destined to bring English influences to bear on their Dutch and Swedish subjects. Some of the Duke's soldiers were compensated with grants of land and remained in America. The Duke's appointed governors tolerantly issued land patents to Dutch and Swedish residents confirming ownership of lands they were occupying in exchange for payments of quit rents. I have studied these land records and have noticed that the English scribes often spelled *Christina* as the Swedes rendered it, but just as often they referred to the stream as *Christeen Kill* or *Christeene Kill* (or *Creek*). In a document dated September 1, 1669, a new variant appears in the confirmation of four hundred morgens (about eight hundred acres) to Andries Andriesen, Sinnick Broer, and Walraven Jansen de Vos for land they were then occupying "on ye N. syde of *Christiana kill*." The quit rent they agreed to pay was eight bushels of wheat, due to the scarcity of specie (*Original Land Titles* 139).

The appearance of an intrusive *a* in the *Christiana* might seem to be accidental, but it also appears in subsequent surveys (*Original Land Titles* 34, 107). In this earliest record of a new transmutation lies the origin of what became the dominant name for the creek. However, the modified form did not suddenly replace the others. For instance, in the first formal English census, taken in 1671, the place the Swedes called *Christina* was officially recorded as *Christeene* (Gehring 104). At that time the little community had more Swedish than English residents, and it experienced growth in 1698 when members of the Swedish Lutheran church built Holy Trinity (Old Swedes), a stone edifice that is still standing. A *Christina Parish* shortly came into existence which included Swedish and Finnish families living at Crane Hook on the opposite side of the Christina River. They crossed the river by rowboat or canoe at the ferry.

Early in the English period, county assessment districts known as *hundreds* come into existence. One of these, called *Christina Hundred*, included parts of the Christina Parish. The English authorities used the Swedish spelling initially, but the intrusive *a* would later alter the spelling. Israel Acrelius, a Swedish-born pastor who served the parish from 1749 to 1756, enumerated the places that memorialized the name of the Swedish queen:

Although the English since they got possession of the government, have done their best to root out all Swedish usages, yet the first government still continues in worthy remembrance by the names of Christina Parish, Christine (Old Swedes) Church, Christina Hundred, Christina Fort, Christina Creek, Christina Ferry, and Christina Bridge which is the passage over the creek. (264)

This “passage” was a wooden span erected before 1700 at the head of tidewater in the back country where the creek narrowed. The hamlet that began to take shape here during the English period was first referred to as *Christina Bridge*, and later simply as *Christina*. During the Revolution, it became a thriving town where travelers who came by sloop from Philadelphia debarked and took an overland stage to the Head of Elk (present Elkton), where they resumed their journey by vessel to Baltimore (Richard Cooch 16; Weslager, *Delaware’s Forgotten River* 159).

Acrelius’ assertion that the English deliberately tried to “root out all Swedish usages” finds little support with regard to the use of *Christina* in the court records during the Duke of York’s government (1676–81). The word was recorded with the Swedish spelling by the English clerks, although variants such as *Christine*, *Christeen*, or *Christeene* are also on record (*Records* 288, 305, 340, 339, 466, 474, 482). The intermarriage between Scandinavians and English may have been a factor in sustaining the use of some Swedish placenames. In a census of members of the Swedish church in 1693, many heads of families were English, Dutch, and Holstein or Germans, who had married Swedish wives (Craig 3).

On the other hand, a political change took away from the use of *Christina* as a settlement downstream when Thomas Willing founded the borough named *Willingtown* in 1736. The lots he laid out were on the north side of a stream shown on the surveyor’s drawing as *Christiania River* (Ferris 294). Perhaps Willing was groping for a suitable spelling, because there is every reason to believe that within the community *Christina* was now pronounced “Christy-Anna”—a classic exonym. The evidence comes from a British manuscript map, dated 1777, used at the

Battle of Cooch's Bridge, fought above the Head of Christina.

Known as the *Howe-Clayton Map*, it was based on information obtained by British intelligence from local American informants, and the spelling reflected current folk pronunciation. The river is labelled *Christiana Creek*, and the former town called *Christina Bridge* appears as *Christiana* (Edward Cooch, map, facing 150).

Following the Revolution, engraved maps like *Delaware From the Best Authorities, 1796* repeat the entries *Christiana Creek* and *Christiana Bridge*. The settlement downstream near the Swedish fort formerly known as *Christina* is missing, but the Borough of Willingtown has blossomed into a new town with a new English name, *Wilmington*.

The decisive alteration of *Christina* to *Christiana* became a fait accompli in 1868 when Beers published his famous Atlas. On the map of Christiana Hundred (note the transitory *a*), *Christiana* is the name of the creek, and the map of the adjacent White Clay Creek Hundred shows *Christiana Mills* and *Christiana P.O.* at the site of the former Christina Bridge (Beers 11, 25). It might be argued that the adoption of the new spelling by the United States postal authorities made it official, but the legal turning point was still to come.

In 1938, when Wilmington was planning its tercentenary of the landing of the Swedes, invitations were extended to the Swedish royal family and other dignitaries to attend the ceremonies at Fort Christina Park, site of the first fort. To Delaware's archivist it seemed an affront to allow the Swedish guests to enter a misspelled river after crossing the Atlantic in the *Kungsholm*. At his instigation the Delaware Legislature enacted a law in 1937 reading as follows:

On or after the passage and approval of this Act the river in New Castle County now known as the Christiana River shall be known and designated as the Christina River. (Weslager, *Delaware's Forgotten River* 3)

Public notices were altered and state maps revised, but as I wrote, "speech habits do not yield themselves to sudden change despite legislative directive" (*Delaware's Forgotten River* 3). Today a new generation is growing up with the approved spelling, but senior citizens still call the river the *Christiana*, or *Christeen*, in direct violation of the law!

The Legislature said nothing about correcting *Christiana Hundred* or the unincorporated town of *Christiana* as they continue to appear on maps. Delawareans seem willing to accept *Christiana* for the name of a Hundred, but many persist in calling the town of Christiana by the old name *Christeen*,

another exonym. There is no longer a post office in Christiana, which relieves the federal government of getting involved in a strictly local connection. In 1944, the State Highway Department placed signs at the entrances to the town bearing the word *Christina*. The Christiana Volunteer Fire Company asked a prominent attorney, a former lieutenant-governor, to address the firemen and render an opinion whether or not they were extinguishing fires under an illegal name.

“It is a principle of law,” he told his audience, “that a man’s name is the designation by which he is known and called in the community in which he lives and is best known. So it is with the town. This town having been known as both Christiana and Christeen for over two centuries may claim both as legal names” (Edward Cooch 125). He neglected to say that the town’s earliest name on record was *Christina Bridge*, and to an onomast the earliest rendition of a name cannot be so lightly laid aside.

Nevertheless, the town continues to be spelled *Christiana*, and its two schools, Christiana Elementary School and Christiana High School, are two of the thirty-three public schools in New Castle County’s largest district – the Christina School District.

Proliferation of the name has gone well beyond the town. There’s a Christiana Construction Company in Elsmere; a Christiana Mortgage Company in Talleyville; and a Christiana Motor Freight Company in New Castle, all some distance removed from the town and the river. There are, in fact, thirty-three listings in the Wilmington telephone book of *Christiana* industrial, educational, health, and cultural enterprises. But there are also ten *Christina* listings in the same book, including Wilmington’s Christina House All Suite Hotel. I wish I were able to report it is on Christiana Street, but that thoroughfare is in another section of the city.

A final note about the little princess who ascended the throne in 1644 as Queen Christina. In 1654 she resigned her crown and abdicated. She accepted the Catholic faith and moved to Rome, where she died unmarried in 1689 at the age of sixty-three. As the daughter of a king who lost his life fighting for Protestantism during the Thirty Years’ War, she was a disappointment to her subjects. Since she took very little interest in the American colony during her brief reign, some have said she did not deserve having anything named for her – either in Sweden or in America. Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that her Delaware connection is running any risk of being expunged.

Hockessin, Delaware

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