

House Nicknames

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SO FAR AS I AM AWARE, the use of nicknames for houses occupied by private families is not a practice that is generally followed today in the U. S. However, slang terms or nicknames are often applied to business houses both in a specific and a generic sense. Such colorful expressions as "the Greasy Spoon," "the Bucket of Blood," and "the Hole in The Wall" have been used, for example, to designate specific eating establishments. Generic slang designations cover the gamut from "flea bag" and "flop house" (for low-grade lodgings) to "hock shop" (pawn shop)¹ and "cat house" (brothel). There are many others.

The word "joint" as applied to certain types of business enterprises has a multitude of associations: "clip joint," "beer joint," "booze joint," "eating joint," etc. In the carnival business a "crooked joint" is a concession where the customer is fleeced, whereas a "strong" or "straight joint" is one which is honest. It is of interest that as far back as the Middle English period "jointe," i. e., "joint," was used for a resort or abode.

In the early court records of the New Netherlands there occurs an interesting and unusual reference to the use of house nicknames in America by the Dutch colonists in 1655. The court of Fort Orange and Beverwyck (at present Albany, N. Y.) was an inferior bench of judicature composed of the commissary of the fort and commissarissen, or local magistrates. On Feb. 2, 1655, Claes Gerritsz was summoned by the court and asked whether he was guilty of bestowing certain house nicknames then in circulation. He denied guilt, placing the blame on Cornelis Vos.²

¹ My Dutch informant, Donald Driebeek, tells me that the word "lombard" from Lombardy is widely used in Europe as the slang designation for a pawn shop.

² *Minutes of the Court of Fort Orange & Beverwyck 1652-1656*, trans. and ed. A. J. Van Laer, Vol. 1, Albany, 1920, p. 199.

Gerritsz testified further that he learned from Vos "out of his own mouth" that he had given the names in question which appear in the second column below:

<i>Owner</i>	<i>House Nickname</i>	<i>Translation</i> ³
Jan Thomasz	het Koeckoeek Nest	the cuckoo nest
Goosen Gerritsen	de Eendracht	concord (state of agreement and harmony)
Rut Jacobsz	Soesende Wint	the whistling wind (the sougling wind)
Jan van Aecken	het Vinckenest	the finch's nest
Andryes Herpertsz	t' Huys Onbeschoft	the house of ill manners
Philip Pietersz	Vliegende	fly like the wind
Schuldert		(flying wind)
Evert Wendel	de Vogel Grijp	the griffin (the grasping bird)
Gerrit Jansz	Haspel in de Sack op det Dack	House of discord (Literal: spool in the bag on the roof)
Dirck Jansz Kroon	de Spaerpot	the savings bank (Literal: the saving pot, i. e., "piggy bank")
Mother Bogaerdus	die Gierswerelt	the vulture world
Volckert Jansz	de Vogelsanck	the bird song
Mr. Renssealer	Vroegh bedorven	spoiled early
Pieter Hertgert	het Huysmusgen	the little sparrow
The Eating House	Selden satt ⁴	seldom satisfied

³ The translations are Van Laer's, *op. cit.* However, Mr. Driebeek reviewed the translations for me, and although he found nothing objectionable in Van Laer's renditions, he felt that further shades of meaning were present in some of them. I have indicated these in parentheses. All of the words are, of course, 17th century Dutch forms and some of them had nuances which escape us today.

⁴ Willem Fredrixsz testified that Claes Gerritsz was responsible for naming the eating house and also the house of Cornelis Vos. The nickname for the latter house was also "het Vinckenest," like the one listed above for Jan van Aecken. *Op. cit.*, p. 201.

It is obvious that certain of these house nicknames were reproachful and intended to hold the residents up to ridicule. Cuckoldry is perhaps suggested in the name *het Koeckoeck Nest*; *t' Huys Onbeschoft* apparently characterized residents of slovenly manners; miserliness is suggested in *de Spearpot*; and Mother Bogaerdus must have been a crone to have had her home designated as *die Gierswerelt*. Mr. Rensselaer, probably related to the patroon, must have been indulged by parents in his childhood to have warranted the house label *Vroegh bedorven*.

Selden satt as the name of an eating place is probably an example of folk humor, and can we not imagine that the occupant of *de Vogelsanck* may have been possessed of a voice that was anything but musical? Van Laer has another suggestion: in Gouda, *de Vogelenzang* was a street assigned to women of ill fame.

We can only guess at what domestic turbulence must have justified the nickname *Haspel in de Sack op het Dack*. Van Laer helps our understanding of this term by pointing out that persons who disagree are referred to in Dutch idiom as *haspels in een zak*, i. e., "spools in a bag." He also explains that *het Huysmusgen* was used figuratively in old Dutch for a homebody.

The outcome of the charges made against Cornelis Vos, and what penalty was inflicted, is still a mystery. He was summoned again to clear himself of the charge of "having given the familiar nicknames and to explain the meaning of the words and to declare what induced him thereto and who advised him to do so and whether he did it alone or who helped him with it."⁵ On April 27, 1655, he reappeared in court and stated that he was not guilty of nicknaming the houses; he was told to submit his replication in legal form and this was done on May 9.⁶

There the records end.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 210

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 213, 218