

Corner Ketch

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IN THE UPLANDS OF NEW CASTLE COUNTY, Delaware, about five miles north of the city of Newark, is a village with the unusual name of "Corner Ketch." A land-record search has revealed that this name was in use as early as 1856.¹ At one time the village was called "The Six Roads,"² at another time simply "The Corners,"³ but before the turn of the century it was given the less folksy name of "Union"⁴ when a post-office was established there.⁵ Fortunately for the tangy flavor of our geographical names, however, "Union" disappeared with the closing of the post-office in 1902, and "Corner Ketch" has prevailed ever since.

Whence the name "Corner Ketch?" Speculation has been rife over the years, and a number of theories have been offered, all of them ringing the changes on the second element of the name. The surname of Jack Ketch, the notorious executioner, has been drawn into orbit, as has the French word *cache* "hiding-place," as well as the English word *kedge* (as in kedge anchor), the suggestion here being that a tavern with such a sign once stood in the village. Another explanation, this one with the ring of folklore about it, is that travelers used to be warned to be on guard against the village sharpers, the warning being couched in such words as these: "Keep a sharp lookout or they'll ketch ye at The Corners." It has also been argued, without much plausibility, that the name derives from a

¹ New Castle Deed Book VI Z, p. 7; cf. *ibid.*, IX W, p. 210, where the form "Corner Katch" occurs (date: 1867).

² F. A. Cooch, *Little Known History of Newark, Delaware, and Its Environs* (Newark, Delaware, 1936), p. 2.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ After a nearby school. See H. C. Bounds, *A Postal History of Delaware* (Newark, Delaware, 1938), p. 75.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

game called "catch corner." An additional suggestion is that, since six roads meet in the village and are confusing to strangers, the place came to be known as "Corner Catch," or, with dialectal variation, "Corner Ketch."⁶

Is this the only place in existence to bear such a name? The answer is no — on at least three counts. (1) A small community in Cecil County, Maryland, a short distance east-southeast of Colora and southwest of Rising Sun is still remembered as Corner Ketch (now West Nottingham).⁷ (2) A small community in East Brandywine Township a short distance northwest of Downingtown in Chester County, Pennsylvania, is another Corner Ketch. And (3) a small community in Bethel Township in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, once known as Bethel Hamlet and now as Chelsea, was, during the period intervening between the use of these names, called Corner Catch or Corner Ketch. It is interesting to note that some of the explanations offered for the Delaware name resemble ones advanced — independently — for the Maryland and Pennsylvania names.

What, if anything, do these names have in common? The four tracings from United States Geological Survey maps in the illustration show that the Corner Ketch communities are all at crossroads. The Cecil County community has four corners formed by a junction of roads (figure 1)⁸, as has the Chester County community, although the corners here are less regular in character (figure 2); the Delaware County community has five corners, similarly formed (figure 3), and the New Castle County community six (figure 4).⁹ It would thus seem in order to associate the name "Corner Ketch" with corners formed by a junction of roads. Such an association was

⁶ These attempts to explain the source of the name are conveniently brought together in an article in the magazine section of the *Sunday Star* (Wilmington, Delaware) for May 27, 1951, p. 12. See also F. A. Cooch, *loc. cit.*

⁷ Informant: Mr. George B. Prettyman, Northeast, Maryland.

⁸ It is to be noted that in George Johnston's *History of Cecil County, Maryland* (Elkton, Maryland, 1881), there is the statement (p. 533) that six roads meet in this Nottingham area. The dotted line in the tracing (author's insertion) indicates an old dirt road that once may have figured in the calculation.

⁹ Evidence of road-building in the vicinity of Corner Ketch, Delaware, in the 1830's, to be found in New Castle Deed Book IV R, p. 482, helps to fix the period when the corners in question were forming.

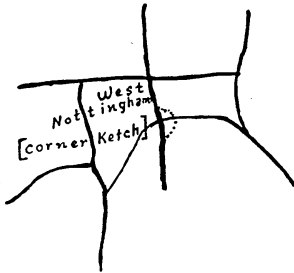


Figure 1
Havre de Grace Quadrangle,
U. S. G. S., 1900

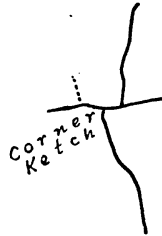


Figure 2
Phoenixville Quadrangle,
U. S. G. S., 1906



Figure 3
Chester Quadrangle
U. S. G. S., 1898

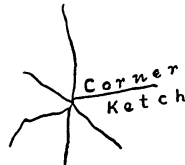


Figure 4
West Chester Quadrangle,
U. S. G. S., 1904
Wilmington Quadrangle,
U. S. G. S., 1906

made for the Chester County name by H. G. Ashmead in 1884,¹⁰ but he went on to include the apparently gratuitous notion that travelers would be “caught” up in confusion by the choice of roads presented. I would suggest that we are dealing here with “catch” (i.e., “ketch”) in the regional¹¹ sense of “a place of coming together” of angles, points, or corners¹²; and on the strength of the evidence presented above, I respectfully urge our lexicographers to add this meaning to the many they have already listed under the substantive “catch.”

¹⁰ *History of Delaware County, Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 1884), p. 306. Ashmead’s statement reads in part as follows: “. . . so many roads centered there that five corners are the result . . .”

¹¹ This label is tentatively employed. I should like to hear of the use of the name “Corner Ketch” beyond the limits of the four contiguous counties here mentioned.

¹² Compare other names apparently given for the same reason; e.g., Cornersville, Maryland (Choptank Quadrangle, U.S.G.S., 1898) or Ninepoints, Pennsylvania (Quarryville Quadrangle, U.S.G.S., 1912).