

Hockessin: Another Delaware Place-Name Puzzle

C. A. WESLAGER

HOCKESSIN, an unincorporated town in Mill Creek Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware, near the Pennsylvania border, was described in an 1880 account of Delaware industries as “a stirring, go-ahead place.” Today, Hockessin has a second-class post office providing mail delivery to about 500 families on a rural route. Near the post office are several retail stores and the headquarters of the Hockessin Volunteer Fire Company. A new industry in the village is mushroom-growing, and flat, windowless mushroom houses are seen along the roads leading to town. Hockessin mushrooms are served in some of the finest restaurants in the East, and like the Chincoteague oyster or New Orleans shrimp, the name Hockessin may someday have gustative connotations.

There have been various interpretations of the origin and meaning of Hockessin. The town, it is now certain, derived its name from a Quaker Meeting House built in 1737, and the clue to the meaning lies in answering the question of why and how the meeting received its name.

In an unpublished history of Pennsylvania, written by Samuel Smith in the 18th century, occurs this explanation:

“Henry Dixon, John Baldwin, John Dixon and divers other Friends being settled in Miln Creek hundred New Castle County in the year 1737 had a meeting of worship established among them. It is known by the name of *Hockessing* meeting so called from an Indian Town that was formerly near that place. It belonged to Newark Monthly Meeting. It was first held in a Little School House and so continued until the year [illegible] when a piece of ground was purchased and a meeting house built which was enlarged in the year 1745 as it is at this time.”¹

¹ The history, a two-volume ms, undated, entitled “The History of the Province of Pennsylvania,” may be consulted at the Manuscript Room, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Penna. The above excerpt is from Chapter XX. The reference to the Indian town was also quoted in *Hazard’s Register*, Vol. 7, No. 9,

One of the early historians of the state of Delaware derived the name from the Algonkian language, stating that it meant "bark of tree" or "good bark hill," because of the excellence of the white oak found in the vicinity.² Although he did not cite the specific Algonkian word that prompted this interpretation, the explanation is plausible on linguistic grounds because *hokes* in the Lenni Lenape dialect did, indeed, mean "bark" of a particular tree, as opposed to bark in general, and white oak (as well as other trees) were plentiful in the immediate area.

In a later history, Hockessin is analyzed as meaning "place of many foxes," evidently an attempt to arrive at a synthesis of the Algonkian *hockus* "fox" with the locative suffix *ing*.³ This theory, of course, is at variance with Trumbull's theory that a locative in the Algonkian language was never appended to an animate noun.⁴

In our study of Indian place-names in Delaware, Dunlap and I gave careful attention to these earlier interpretations, but, despite diligent search, we were unable to find evidence that an Indian town was once situated near Hockessin. The environs have been carefully explored, and archaeological evidences point only to the existence of small camp sites. There are no entries on early maps or in 17th-century journals which refer to an Indian Town. In the conclusion of our study we stated, "We do not feel, however, that the meaning of this word has been determined with certainty; what is more, we do not feel – in view of the absence of early occurrences – that the authenticity of Hockessin as a Lenape name has yet been fully established."⁵

Since the publication of our monograph, I had the good fortune to examine an original surveyor's drawing in the possession of Samuel Stovall of Washington, D.C., which suggested an entirely different

Feb. 26, 1831, p. 133 and repeated in the *Historical & Biographical Encyclopedia of Delaware*, Wilmington, Del., 1882, p. 140.

² J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Delaware*, Phila., 1888, p. 928. Later Delaware historians copied Scharf's interpretation, e.g., *Conrad*, 1908, 2.487; *Bevan*, 1929, 2.802.

³ *Delaware – A Guide to the First State*, N.Y. 1938, p. 446.

⁴ J. H. Trumbull, "On the Composition of Indian Geographical Names Illustrated from the Algonkin Languages," *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society*, 2.1–50.

⁵ A. R. Dunlap & C. A. Weslager, *Indian Place-Names in Delaware*, Wilmington, 1950, p. 16.

route of inquiry. Dated March 12, 1787, the drawing shows the road in Mill Creek Hundred, now called Old Public Road, on which this description is lettered:

“The publick road leading from *Occasian* Meeting house to the Mill of Jno Garret Esq.”⁶

This meeting house of the Society of Friends, to which reference has already been made, holds a modest place in American literature. In the first edition (Boston, 1873, dedicated to John Greenleaf Whittier) of his narrative poem, *Lars: A Pastoral of Norway*, Bayard Taylor brought his hero to Delaware:

“The land was called *Hockessin*. O’er its hills
High, wide, and fertile blew a healthy air:
There was a homestead set wherever fell
A sunward slope, and breathed its crystal vein,
And up beyond the woods, at crossing roads,
The heart of all, the *ancient meeting house*.”

In 1730, the Friends of Mill Creek Hundred were granted the liberty of holding their meetings at the residence of William Cox on the sixth day of the week.⁷ This reference suggested further study of New Castle County deed entries to ascertain where William Cox resided. I was rewarded by finding a deed reference to 300 acres in Mill Creek Hundred granted Cox in 1721 by William Aubrey and his wife, Letitia, William Penn’s daughter. In 1725, Cox added 50 acres by purchase, bringing his total Delaware land holdings to 350 acres.⁸

Further study led me to another deed dated 1734 containing reference to “William Cox of *Ocasson*, farmer.”⁹ The similarity between the name of this place and the place called *Occasian* on the surveyor’s drawing made 53 years later is self-evident.

In 1737 (after holding Quaker meetings in his residence for several years) William Cox and other residents of Mill Creek Hundred were granted permission by the Quaker authorities to erect a meeting

⁶ I reproduced this drawing in *The Old Hollingsworth Plantation*, Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc., Wilmington, 1961.

⁷ C. A. Weslager, *140 Years Along Old Public Road*, Historic Red Clay Valley, Inc., Wilmington, 1960, p. 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ New Castle County Deed Book K-1-295.

house at the place then recorded as *Hocesion*.¹⁰ The meeting house was built on a corner of Cox's property.

Study of marriage certificates of the Society of Friends indicates that under date of 1742 John Dixon and Rebecca Cox were married "in a public meeting of the aforesaid people at *Occassion* meeting house in Mill Creek Hundred."¹¹ The similarity between the name herein given and the two above forms is also evident.

A missing Delaware deed dated in 1795 has recently been found, in which there is reference to "Okesian Meeting house."¹²

In 1808, a road passing in front of the meeting house was recorded as *Ockession* Road,¹³ and the same road in 1810 was described in a deed as the "great road leading from *Okession* to Wilmington."¹⁴ Another deed, recorded in 1812, cites a will written in 1809 in which the same road is given as *Okesan* Road.¹⁵

The late Mrs. L. Heisler Ball, widow of a U. S. senator from Delaware, told me that oldtimers said the road received its name when an old Quaker saw a young couple passing in a Dearborn, her head on his shoulder. The Quaker said, "Oh kissin'." In relating this folk etymology the accent was placed on the second word, as it was always given to the second syllable of Ho-késs-in. With the coming of new families into the area, the accent has moved in recent years to the first syllable, Hó-kess-in.

A store account book dated 1772-1774, in possession of the Historical Society of Delaware, gives a clue to the way the name was pronounced in the 18th century: the store is called *Okeshion* Store. It was doubtless accented on the second syllable.

This - and the other entries above cited - give me reason to suggest that the original word may have been *Occasion*, pronounced with the accent on the second syllable. This name would have perfectly suited the circumstances of William Cox's first settlement; namely, an ideal time or opportunity, or the time when something happened, such as the "occasion" of a meeting in Cox's home. As

¹⁰ Weslager, 1960, *loc.cit.*

¹¹ Recorded in the *Newark Monthly Meeting Marriage Book* on loan to the Friends Historical Library at Swarthmore College and brought to my attention by John V. Hollingsworth.

¹² See Weslager, 1960, p. 32, for a complete transcript.

¹³ New Castle County Deed H-3-51.

¹⁴ New Castle County Deed H-3-563.

¹⁵ New Castle County Deed M-3-498.

time went on, the "H" appeared as the first letter in the written name, reflecting the common English speech habit of adding an aspirate before a vowel.

Of parallel interest is the name Newark, also associated with the Quakers who settled in Delaware in the 17th century. Valentine Hollingsworth, who brought his family from Belfast, shortly before William Penn's arrival, settled on a tract of nearly 1000 acres in Brandywine Hundred called "New Worke."¹⁶ In 1688, he gave a small piece of his land for a meeting house, to which the name Newark came to be applied. The first meetings of the Friends of Brandywine Hundred were held in Hollingsworth's home at New Worke, a forerunner of Newark Meeting, just as the Mill Creek Hundred Friends met at William Cox's home at *Ocasson*, before the building of the meeting house variously known as *Occasion*, *Okesian*, *Occasian*, *Hocesion*, *Ockession*, *Okession*, *Okesan*, *Okeshion*, and finally *Hockessin*.

Of course, the possibility exists that there may be information relative to the name in as yet undiscovered sources earlier than the 1734 reference to *Ocasson*. For example, on the 2nd of August 1715, James Logan and Rees Thomas, American agents for William and Letitia Aubrey, conveyed 800 acres to one John Houghton. The deed of conveyance has not yet been found, but is briefly referred to in a later deed executed in 1726 by his widow, Ann Houghton.¹⁷ In later conveyances there is reference to "the Hockessin 800 acre tract," which is assumed to be the same property.¹⁸ There appears to have been a dispute about the bounds of this tract and commissioners were appointed to mark and bound it.¹⁹ Whether the name Hockessin, or a variant of it, was used as early as 1715, when the tract was conveyed to John Houghton, is still unknown, but that possibility exists. If so, it could necessitate a different explanation of the derivation of the word than that suggested above. Until such evidence is forthcoming, however, the writer will rest his case on the data herein presented.

¹⁶ In the old book at the State Archives, Dover, Delaware, entitled *Survey Book of New Castle County - 1806*, there occurs on p. 270 a map of "New Worke" as of 1684.

¹⁷ New Castle County Deed H-1-154.

¹⁸ New Castle County Deed Z-3-283.

¹⁹ New Castle County Deed Z-3-321, 429. The commissioners set a stone along the line of the Hockessin 800 acre tract sometime prior to 1829, New Castle County Deed I-4-71.