

Some Indian and Dutch Names Reflecting the Early History of Brooklyn*

MARGARET M. BRYANT

THE EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT OF BROOKLYN, as is well known, began with the arrival of the Dutch, who had been offered inducements from the home government to settle in the New World because of overcrowding in the homeland. The island Seawanhacka (Long Island) with its rich soil across the East River from Nieuw Amsterdam, now Manhattan, appealed to them because of their agricultural bent and because of the appearance of the land, the kind they had been used to at home – marshy, surrounded by water. A group of Dutch colonists settled in what is now called Flatlands in 1630 and in 1634 the first settlement was made in what we now know as Flatbush, on land purchased from the Canarsie Indians.¹

Soon the Dutch laid out for themselves a *bouwery*, or “farm,” called *Achterwelt*, for as they approached it from Nieuw Amsterdam it lay “after” or “beyond” the Great Flats, an “open plain” or “field,” the *veldt*. This area, because of the thrift and industry of the new inhabitants, began to grow in population and in strength and towns began to spring up.

In 1664, 34 years after the arrival of the first Dutch settlers in Flatlands, the English demanded and received the surrender of the entire Dutch colony, and thus began the period of English control. The five original Dutch towns of Nieuw Amersfoort, Breuckelen, Medwood, s’Graven-sande, and Nieuw Utrecht were incorporated in 1665 into the West Riding of Yorkshire² and on November 1, 1683, were renamed Kings County, the name still in use. In 1896, Flatlands was annexed and Brooklyn and Kings County became one. Two years later, the City of Brooklyn

* As a native of Brooklyn and a lifelong resident of the New York City area, Elliott Dobbie encouraged local studies like the present essay even though he chose for himself the study of names farther afield. A dedicated scholar and teacher, he gave himself totally to his profession, taking a deep interest in the welfare of his students and pursuing his own investigations, whether in onomastics or in some other branch of philology, with love and devotion. He was, moreover, a whole man – a completely unselfish, sympathetic, tolerant, and broad-minded human being. We shall not look upon his like again.

¹ Edmund D. Fisher, *Flatbush Past and Present* (Brooklyn: Flatbush Trust Co., 1901), p. 14.

² Maud Esther Dilliard, *Old Dutch Houses of Brooklyn* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1945), “Foreword.”

became the Borough of Brooklyn, the most populous borough of the City of New York.

As the names already cited show, the original Dutch settlement of the area is still reflected in many Brooklyn names. In addition a certain number of Indian names came to us through Dutch transmission. I therefore include them here by way of preface.

The Canarsie Indians, one among the 13 bands of Indians living on Long Island, have not been forgotten. One entire section in the eastern part of the borough is known as Canarsie and there are also Canarsie Road, currently running from Avenue L to Seaview Avenue, and Canarsie Avenue, running for three blocks along the western end of Holy Cross Cemetery in Flatbush today. The Canarsies were practically wiped out in 1655 by a band of Mohawks who frequently raided them and exacted wampum and dried clams for tribute. It was not, however, until 1830 that Jim de Wilt, the last of these Indians, died in "his wretched hut at Canarsie, the miserable remnant of the once proud possessors of these fertile lands."³ The sachem of the Canarsies, Penhowitz, was also commemorated. Since he was the great chief in this area, the Dutch on settling there thought it appropriate to give his name to a road, known today as Pennowits Avenue.

Rockaway, Rockaway Avenue, and Rockaway Parkway preserve the name of the Rockaway Indian tribe. This name is believed to be derived from the word *regawihake*, meaning "sandy land," employed to describe the southern coast of Long Island, the place from which the tribe originally came. Another Indian name is found in the section known as Bay Ridge: Nyack, meaning "a point or corner of land." It is the point in New Utrecht where Fort Hamilton is located. This land, inhabited by the Nyack tribe of Indians and known as the "Nyack Tract," according to a deed of 1652, was purchased by the Honorable Cornelis Van Werckhoven from Utrecht, Holland, for "six coats, six kettles, six small looking glasses, twelve knives, and twelve cans on condition that they the Indians and their descendants remove immediately from the land now occupied called Naieck and never return to live in the limits of the district again."⁴

The Dutch settlers have left many more names, including Brooklyn itself, spelled in numerous ways throughout its history. During the seventeenth century one may find the spellings *Bruijkleen*, *Breucklen*, *Breucklyn*, *Bryckline* and during the eighteenth century *Brookland*, *Breukelen*, *Breucklyn*. Other variations are *Brucklyn*, *Broucklyn*, *Breuckland*, *Brooklane*, and *Brookline*. The earliest form, *Bruijkleen*, still means a

³ Henry R. Stiles (ed. in chief), *The Civic, Political, Professional, and Ecclesiastical History and Commercial and Industrial Record of the County of Kings and the City of Brooklyn, New York, from 1683 to 1884* (New York: W. W. Munsell and Co., 1884), Vol. I, p. 65.

⁴ William W. Tooker, *The Indian Place-Names on Long Island* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1911), p. 155.

“free loan” in Modern Dutch. The word was formed from *bruijken*, “to use,” and *leen*, “a loan” or “a manor.”⁵ The early Dutch settler became an owner of the land given him as a free loan. He was a kind of homesteader, had to cultivate the land and pay an annual quitrent, one-tenth of the produce, to the Dutch East India Company. Later the Dutch adopted a similar name, spelled *Breukelen*, because of its likeness to the older name, because of its reference to a town by the same name in the province of Utrecht, and because of the similarity of the topography of the new and the old towns. The English then, confusing the origin of the word with a Dutch equivalent *Gebroken Land*, “broken land,” a Dutch translation of an Indian name for part of Long Island, employed *Brookland*, which was ultimately altered to Brooklyn, the name and spelling which were finally accepted by the growing village and later by the borough.⁶ There is also a Brooklyn Avenue.

In Bay Ridge are Conover’s Lane and Cowenhoven Lane, named for the Cowenhoven family, among the first settlers of this section, New Utrecht. In the records one finds many spellings of *Cowenhoven*, ranging from *Van Kouwenhoven* and *Van Couwenhoven* to *Conover*. Other variations are *Kouwenhoven*, *Koieuhoven*, *Koinhove*, *Koinhoven*, *Kovenhoven*, *Couwenhoven*, *Cowenhover*, *Covenhoven*, *Cowinhoverd*, *Couenhoven*, *Cownover*, *Counover*, *Connover*.⁷ It was Wolfert Gerritsen Van Cowenhoven who arrived in this country with his wife and three sons between 1620 and 1624 from Amersfort, Utrecht, Holland, and named New Amersfort, one of the original Dutch towns. He has been remembered in the name of a large community, Gerritsen Beach. One likewise finds in Bay Ridge Van Brunt’s Lane, named for another of the original settlers of New Utrecht, Rulif Van Brunt.

In Flatbush a number of Dutch names remain, among them Erasmus, Lefferts, Martense, Midwood, Newkirk, Paerdegat, Snyder, Vanderbilt, Vanderveer, and Flatbush itself, which has given its name to the section and to an important avenue in Brooklyn. Flatbush, a descriptive name, was formed from the Dutch words *vlachte*, “a plain,” and *bos*, “wood,” describing level land in the midst of the woods as distinguished from the hilly section, now Prospect Park.⁸ Various spellings of the name were *Vlachtebos*, *Flackebos*, and *Flacckebos*, which finally stabilized about 1750

⁵ Eugene L. Armbruster, *Bruijkleen Colonie: 1638—1918* (New York: not published, 1918), p. 9.

⁶ Eugene L. Armbruster, *Brooklyn’s Eastern District* (Brooklyn: privately printed, 1942), pp. 1—12.

⁷ Lincoln C. Cocheu, *The Cowenhovens and Kinsfolk* (New York: privately printed, 1947), p. 91.

⁸ Gertrude Lefferts Vanderbilt, *The Social History of Flatbush* (Brooklyn: Frederick Loeser and Co., 1909), p. 31.

as *Flatbush*.⁹ Officially the name was changed to Flatbush in 1665,¹⁰ but the Old Dutch spelling was retained for nearly a hundred years after the English took control of the colony. The anglicization of the name, however, caused the voiced *v* to give way to the voiceless *f* and the *ch* sound, which is absent in English, to disappear, leaving the *t* of the original *Vlachtebos*.

Since Flatbush was geographically the center of Kings County it was made the county seat, which it remained until 1832, when the courthouse was destroyed by fire.¹¹ From that time on the judicial business of the county was conducted in the City of Brooklyn.¹² It was not, however, until 1894 that Flatbush relinquished its independence to join the City of Brooklyn. The early settlers congregated around the Indian path now designated Flatbush Avenue and described their settlement as *Midwout*, at times spelled *Midwoud*, or *Medwoud*, and reflecting the Dutch words *med*, "middle," and *woud*, "woods." This name has been given to a street in Flatbush and to one of the larger Brooklyn high schools. A number of avenues and streets in Flatbush derive their names from the family names of former landowners. Lefferts Avenue was named for a family, descendants of Leffert Pieterse, who came to Flatbush from North Holland in 1660. His son Pieter was then called Leffertsen, the son of Leffert. The spelling of the surname of this family finally stabilized in the eighteenth century on the patronymic Lefferts.

In the same way Martense, another street, memorializes another prominent family. This surname is derived from a patronymic meaning the son of Marten. Marten Adriance, the son of Adrian Reyerse, who was the son of Reyer, owned a very large farm in Flatsbush and was the ancestor from whom most of the family took their name.¹³ Formerly Martense's Lane, in the western part of Flatbush, was also named for the family. In order to avoid duplication of names and confusion, it was changed to the numerical designation of 36th Street. Some other avenues bearing Dutch names are Newkirk, named for a town in Holland by the same name, Nieuwkirke; Paerdegat, literally meaning "the Horse Gate," from the Dutch words *paard*, "horse," and *gat*, "gate"; and Snyder, from the Dutch word for "tailor," named for an old Dutch family, owners of property who had lived there for many years.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁰ Dilliard, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹¹ Thomas M. Strong, *History of the Town of Flatbush* (Brooklyn: Frederick Loeser and Co., 1908), p. 37.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹³ Charles A. Ditmas, *Historic Homesteads of Brooklyn* (Brooklyn: Charles A. Ditmas, 1909), p. 78. Cf. Rosalie F. Bailey, *Dutch Systems in Family Naming: New York—New Jersey* (Washington, D.C.: National Genealogical Society, 1954), pp. 2—4.

Two other Dutch families who have bestowed their names upon Flatbush are Vanderbilt and Vanderveer. The Vanderbilt family came to this country about 1650 from Bild or Bilt, a village in the province of Utrecht. The name means "from (*Van*) the (*der*) hill (*bilt* or *bylt*)." The street in Flatbush bearing the name is on land that once belonged to John Vanderbilt. There is also a much longer avenue in another part of Brooklyn named for this very wealthy and influential family of Flatbush. The Vanderveers have left their name to Vanderveer Place. This name is derived from *Van* plus *der* plus *veer*, meaning "from the ferry." The Germania Improvement Company, which purchased most of the Vanderveer property about 1892, also called its development Vanderveer Park.

One other street name should be mentioned here, Erasmus, named in 1834 for Erasmus Hall Academy, the oldest secondary school in New York State, which opened in 1787 and had among its founders Aaron Burr, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay. The Academy was named for the great Dutch humanist and philosopher. In the Flatlands area among the oldest settlers was the Schenck family for which an avenue and a place are named. The Schencks were already living there in 1654.¹⁴ Their name is from the Dutch meaning "cup bearer," no doubt a surname which pertained to the trade or occupation of the ancestor.

Another old Dutch family was the Remsens, for whom Remsen Avenue and Remsen Street in Brooklyn Heights are named. The colonial founder of the family in this country was Rem Jansen Vanderbeeck, whose descendants dropped Vanderbeeck and took the name of Remsen, meaning "son of Rem." It was the second son of the original ancestor, Joris Remsen, who purchased most of the property now called Brooklyn Heights in 1706. Schermerhorn Street in Brooklyn Heights also bears the name of one of the oldest Dutch settlers in Brooklyn. The family house in Gowanus was considered for a long time the oldest in the borough, erected before 1696.¹⁵

The names I have discussed here are not the only ones that have come down to us from the Dutch, but they are sufficient to illustrate the various patterns of name-giving involved.

Brooklyn College of The City University of New York

¹⁴ Stiles, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁵ Henry R. Stiles, *A History of the City of Brooklyn* (Brooklyn: By subscription, 1869), Vol. II, p. 150.