

# New Castle, Delaware—and its Former Names

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*At first all the thin scattering of names along the eastern coast had been Indian; later many had been Dutch and Swedish; then after the English occupied the country, they made the names over to fit English speech.*

George R. Stewart, *Names On The Land* (New York, 1945), p. 108

**W**HEN PROFESSOR STEWART WROTE these words I am sure he did not have New Castle, Delaware in mind, but this incorporated little city, population 5,500, situated on the Delaware River six miles south of Wilmington, is an excellent example to support his thesis. The oldest place-names in the state of Delaware were, indeed, products of changing national ownership, and the clues to their evolution can often be dug out of the historical documents where they lie deeply buried. This is the case with New Castle, which was the seat of the colonial government until 1777 when the capital of the state was moved to Dover.

To start at the beginning, on March 29, 1638, the Lenape chief Mitatsimint sold land along the Delaware River to Peter Minit representing the Crown of Sweden. Thirteen years later, Peter Stuyvesant, Director-General of the New Netherland, bought a portion of the same land on behalf of the Dutch West India Company from another Lenape Indian named Pemenacka. Pemenacka claimed that Mitatsimint, then deceased, had given the particular plot to him.<sup>1</sup>

In a deposition dated July 13, 1651, the plot sold by Pemenacka (which included the site of present New Castle) was described as “lying a mile below fort Christina [present Wilmington] by us named the Santhoeck, otherwise Quinamkot by the Indians. . . .”<sup>2</sup> (The reference to “a mile” meant either a Swedish or Dutch mile, both of which were considerably longer than an English mile.) Although the Santhoeck (“*Zand Hook*”), meaning “sand point,” is of Dutch origin the name was also used by the Swedish and Finnish colonists. The site of the Santhoeck was precisely described later by a Dutch visitor as follows:

“It is now called New Castle by the English. It is situated on the west

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<sup>1</sup> A.R. Dunlap, “Dutch and Swedish Land Records Relating to Delaware,” *Delaware History*, Historical Society of Delaware (1954), 6:29.

<sup>2</sup> *Loc. cit.*

side of the river upon a point which extends out with a sandy beach, affording a good landing place, better than is to be found else-where on that account. . . .”<sup>3</sup> The Dutch name persisted and it was still being called “the Sandhook” by the Swedes as late as 1679.<sup>4</sup>

The Indian name for the Santhoeck, Quinamkot, kwenamakot, has been translated by my good friend Touching Leaves (Mrs. Nora Thompson Dean), an Oklahoma Lenape speaker, as “an area that is long.” Her ancestors were evidently impressed by the long sandy spit that extended into the river and provided a convenient landing place for their dugout canoes. The Dutch later found it a natural wharf for their shallops or pinnaces sent ashore from the larger sailing vessels anchored in the river. This sandbank has long since eroded away.

As was customary among the eastern Indians, geographical features were often called by more than one name, and the Swedish engineer, Peter Lindeström recorded in 1654 a second Indian name in an entry on one of his maps, which reads: “*Tamakonck, de Sandhoeck, nu kallas Treefaldigheets Fort*” (“Tamakonck, the Sandhoeck, now called Trinity Fort.”)<sup>5</sup> There are other references to Tamakonck in contemporary documents with different spellings.<sup>6</sup>

I am also indebted to Touching Leaves for translating Tamakonck, i.e., tamákung, as “place of the beaver.” It would seem that not only was the Santhoeck a good landing place for canoes, but there were beaver colonies nearby to attract Indian trappers. The beaver, whose dams were plainly to be seen, also left tree trunks which they had gnawed with their incisors. The beaver could not be ignored in naming the places where they lived or their pelts were bartered, and one of the two principal streets in New Castle (present Fourth Street) was known as early as 1657 as Beaver Street. Albany, New York was known to the Dutch as Beverwyck (Beaver Town), and Bevers Eylant (Beaver Island) and Fort Beversreede (“Beaver Road”), were places in the Delaware Valley in the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup>

The Beaver Path used by the Indians to bring their pelts to trade with

<sup>3</sup> Jaspas Dankers and Peter Sluyter, *Journal of a Voyage to New York, 1679-1680*, Long Island Historical Society (New York, 1867), pp. 227-228.

<sup>4</sup> *The Records of Holy Trinity (Old Swedes) Church*, Historical Society of Delaware (Wilmington, 1890), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Lindeström, *Geographia Americae*, trans. Amandus Johnson, Swedish Colonial Society (Philadelphia, 1925), Map “A.”

<sup>6</sup> *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, ed. E.B. O’Callaghan (Albany, 1856), 1:599. Hereafter referred to as NYCD. See also Indian deed of 1654 referring to “Tamakonck or the Sandhook,” Amandus Johnson, *Swedish Settlements on the Delaware*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1911), 2:756.

<sup>7</sup> C.A. Weslager, *Dutch Explorers, Traders and Settlers in the Delaware Valley, 1609-1665* (Philadelphia, 1961), pp. 58, 226, 230.

the Dutch on Manhattan Island later became Beaver Street.<sup>8</sup> The name of the town of Tamaqua in Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, which was derived from a stream of the same name, is evidently a variant of the same Algonkian word, and many other beaver place-names could be cited.

In the rivalry between Dutch and Swedes for possession of the Delaware Valley, Peter Stuyvesant seized the Swedish colony on the Delaware in 1651, and at the Santhoeck = Quinamkot = Tamakonck, he erected a fortress which he called Fort Casimir. Casimir was the family name of Count Ernest of Nassau, a distinguished stadtholder and a soldier from Stuyvesant's home province of Friesland.<sup>9</sup> Fort Casimir came to be used thereafter as a generic name for the community of about 22 dwellings which were built "at Fort Casimir" or "on the South River at Fort Casamier."<sup>10</sup>

In 1654 the Swedes sent a tenth expedition to America under the command of Johan Rising.<sup>11</sup> Arriving on the Delaware River, Rising dropped anchor opposite the Santhoeck, and sent small boats ashore to seize the Fort Casimir community. The West India Company's flag was taken down, and the Swedish colors run up on the fort's flagpole. Lindström, a passenger on the vessel, explains that "after it had been captured by us on our arrival in the country on Trinity Sunday 1654 [May 21] this fortress was called Fort Trinity [Trefaldigheet] by the Swedes."<sup>12</sup>

As a place-name, Fort Trinity was short-lived. The Dutch recaptured the fort the next year, restoring the name Fort Casimir, which lasted until August 16, 1656 when the City of Amsterdam purchased the Fort Casimir community from the West India Company. This was a unique situation—a European city actually owned a New World colony, its burgomasters serving as commissioners in planning the government and the layout of the town. The commissioners also gave the town a new name, Nieuwer-Amstel (New Amstel), which perpetuated the name of a village and country district adjoining the City of Amsterdam.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart, *op. cit.*, 1945, p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Jeannette Eckman, "Life Among the Early Dutch at New Castle," *Delaware History* (1951), 4:257.

<sup>10</sup> *The Duke of York Records, 1646-1679* (Wilmington 1903), pp. 16-17.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *op. cit.*, 2:469-489.

<sup>12</sup> Lindström, *op. cit.*, p. 173; cf. pp. 87-88.

<sup>13</sup> An early writer stated that New Amstel was named for a stream of water that flowed through Amsterdam (Alexander B. Cooper, "Fort Casimir," *Papers*, Historical Society of Delaware [1905], 43:35); Eckman, 1951, p. 278 says it was named for Amsterdam itself, but I believe mine is a more plausible explanation, and an outstanding Dutch scholar has come to the same conclusion: Simon Hart, "The City-Colony of New Amstel on the Delaware," *de Halve Maen*, Holland Society of New York (1965), 39: n.p. 6.

The City's acquisition was strictly for commercial reasons, and the burgomasters hoped to obtain furs, naval stores, ships masts, and other products then imported from the Baltic. The intention was to make Amsterdam independent of foreign sources for its imports. Dutch settlers were encouraged to go to New Amstel, and by 1659 there were at least 1,000 people in the town including 30 or 40 soldiers. New houses, as well as several public buildings, were erected, although economic progress was slow. Exports from New Amstel to Holland were beginning to increase when a crisis occurred which resulted in changing the name again.

England claimed the land which had alternately been under control of the Swedes and Dutch, and in 1665 military forces sent by James, Duke of York, captured Fort Amsterdam on Manhattan Island. The leader of the expedition, Colonel Richard Nicolls renamed Manhattan Island New York, in the Duke's honor, and changed the name of the Dutch fortress to Fort James.

One of Nicolls' associates, Sir Robert Carr, sailed from Manhattan Island to the Delaware where he seized New Amstel from the Dutch. In a message he dispatched to Colonel Nicolls on October 13, 1664, following his conquest, he indicated he was writing from "Dellawarr Fort," which was the first English name applied to New Amstel.<sup>14</sup> The other commissioners on October 24, 1664 agreed that Colonel Nicolls should "repaire to Delaware Bay," indicating that the name New Castle had not yet been applied to the settlement.<sup>15</sup>

It seems likely that Colonel Nicolls was responsible for giving New Castle its name. Not only was he the ranking officer, but, in a fragmentary undated letter addressed to the Duke of York, he indicated he had given the name Albania to land west of Hudson River, and had named Long Island, Yorkshire, and Manhattan Island, New York, to honor the Duke's titles.<sup>16</sup> Nicolls also applied the Duke's Scottish title, Duke of Albany, to the Dutch town of Beverwyck.<sup>17</sup>

The first documentary reference to New Castle known to the writer occurs in a "visa" dated April 22, 1665, wherein Nicolls, writing from New York, granted permission to Martin Crieger "to Passe from hence to New Castle in Delaware Bay."<sup>18</sup> Crieger was desirous of trading with the Indians for furs, and a visa signed by Nicolls was necessary to give him clearance at "Dellawarr Fort" where Sir Robert Carr was still in command.

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<sup>14</sup> NYCD 3:74.

<sup>15</sup> NYCD 12:459.

<sup>16</sup> NYCD 3:105.

<sup>17</sup> Stewart, *op. cit.*, 1945, p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> NYCD 12:459.

Why Nicolls applied the name New Castle to the former Dutch town is not explained in the documents, but circumstantial evidence provides a logical answer to the question. On March 16, 1665, William Cavendish was created the Marquess and Duke of New Castle. During the Civil Wars in England, which occurred when Charles I (the Duke of York's father) was on the throne, Cavendish remained loyal to the Crown and won renown as a cavalier general.<sup>19</sup>

Although the date Cavendish was granted his dukedom was only 38 days before Nicolls used New Castle as a place-name, there was sufficient time (with favorable winds) for the news to reach Nicolls at New York. There can be little doubt that Nicolls knew the Duke of York would be pleased to have the former Dutch settlement in America named for a nobleman who had supported the Crown against Cromwell and the roundheads.

New Castle, incidentally, is not unique as a place-name in North America. There are New Castles in Alabama, Colorado, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Nebraska, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Texas, New Brunswick, and Ontario, all of which were named later than Delaware's New Castle.<sup>20</sup> Which of these names have been transferred from Delaware, or which may have been named for England's New Castle-on-Tyne or New Castle-under-Lyme is something the present writer cannot answer. But speaking for New Castle, Delaware, its name has now been in use for more than 300 years, and is well established on numerous maps, atlases, and in land titles and deeds. The likelihood is that it will not readily yield to another change.

## Brandywine College

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<sup>19</sup> *Burke's Peerage*, 102nd edition (London, 1959), p. 673. I am indebted to W.W. Mawdsley of Glazebury, England for assistance, and to J.R. Rimmer, Director of the Museum and Art Gallery, Warrington, Lancashire for the date Cavendish was created Earl of New Castle.

<sup>20</sup> New Hampshire's New Castle, formerly called Great Island, was apparently named as early as 1693 (personal letter from Robert A. Lauze, Director, Division of Records Management and Archives, State of New Hampshire, enclosing an entry in the New Hampshire Papers, vol. 12). All of the other American New Castles, with the exception of Delaware's, seem to be of much later vintage.