

An Early American Name Puzzle

C. A. WESLAGER

IN 1631 THE DUTCH made a settlement on the western shore of Delaware Bay at what is now the town of Lewes, Delaware, at the mouth of a stream known today as Lewes Creek. To this settlement they gave the name Swanendael, or 'valley of swans'; the creek they called Blommaert's Kil, in honor of one of the patroons, Samuel Blommaert, an Amsterdam merchant; and the bay, known to us as Delaware Bay, they named Godyn's Bay, after another patroon, Samuel Godyn. The colony was soon wiped out by Indians, and in 1632 when the Dutch navigator, Peter de Vries, landed with additional settlers he found the stronghouse in ruins and the bones of the colonists strewn on the ground.

By 1640 the name Hoeren-kil or Hoere-kil was used by the Dutch, instead of Blommaert's Kil, in referring to the stream or to the site of the ill-fated settlement and the region immediately about it.

With Swedish occupancy of the Delaware River area, the name was modified in many Swedish records to Horn-kil. Then with the conquest by the English in 1664, the original Dutch name for the creek and the settlement thereon became anglicized as the Whore-kill, Whorekills, Horekill, and other variants. Prior to the arrival of William Penn these various terms were used broadly to refer to a large district of land lying in what is now Kent County and Sussex County. Despite its indelicate connotation, the word appeared on maps, and in journals, correspondence, diaries, and public records.

In 1680 upon petition of some of the inhabitants of the Whorekills, Governor Edmond Andros permitted the name to be changed to Deal. Immediately thereafter the stream was referred to in print as Deal Creek, and the town was called Deal, New Deal, or Whorekill alias Deal.

In 1682, William Penn, the new proprietor, changed the name Deal to Sussex, and the latter term eventually came to be applied to the present Delaware county by that name. The town of Deal was given the name Lewis (or Lewes). Eventually the three so-called lower counties of Pennsylvania, viz., New Castle, Jones, and Horekill, or Whorekill alias Deal became known respectively as New Castle, Kent, and Sussex.

Thus the Dutch, Swedes, and English all played a part in the place-name puzzle represented by the Hoere-kil, but because of the meaning of the word, a certain prudery on the part of the historian has apparently prevented a frank, unbiased analysis of its significance. Moreover many errors have crept into print, and this has further clouded the issue. The question to be resolved is the derivation of the word *hoere-kil*. As part of the discussion I will offer a critical examination of some of the theories that have been advanced to explain its genesis.¹

A number of the historians of the state of Delaware claim that Hoere-kil and its plural form Hoeren-kil were derived from Hoorn, a town in Holland. Some maintain that the name honored the birthplace of the Dutch explorer Cornelius Jacobsen Mey (or May); others state it was to commemorate the birthplace of the navigator de Vries.²

Such claims are erroneous and entirely without historical foundation. Not only was the spelling Hoorn-kil never used in contemporary Dutch accounts, but officially the stream was first named for Blommaert, and, incidentally, this name is so used on one of the earliest Swedish maps of the Delaware area.³

The most convincing evidence that the word was spelled *hoere* and not *hoorn* by the Dutch appears in de Vries' own writings. In the journal describing his American voyages he uses the word in two places:

... want doen wy onse Collonie maectten Anno 1630 inde Zuyd-Rivier aen Swanendael often Hoere-kil ghenamt daer wy door kleyne beuselinghe door onse opperhoofd dien wy daer hadden, Gilles Oset genaemt, ...⁴ (for when we made our colony in the year 1630 in the South River at Swanendael, otherwise called Hoere-kil, our people were all murdered through some trifling acts of the commander whom we had stationed there, named Gilles Oset, ...)⁵

... alsoo hy wel wist dat om een beuseling met de Wilden, wy onse Colonie inde Zuyd-Rivier aen Swanendael inde Hoere-kil quyt raeckten, met

twee-en-dertigh Man die vermoordt wierde Anno 1630, . . .⁷ (. . . on account of trifling with the Indians, we had lost our colony in the South River at Swanendael, in the Hoere-kil, with thirty-two men, who were murdered in the year 1630, . . .)⁷

The word as used and spelled by de Vries, an accurate, intelligent observer, fluent in several languages, was *hoere* not *hoorn*. At that time, as at present, this word had only one meaning: harlot. The addition of the Dutch suffix *kil* resulted in a place-name translatable as 'harlot's river.' If the word had been intended to perpetuate the name of the town Hoorn, de Vries would not have made such a grievous error in spelling.⁸

Hoorn, of course, was perpetuated in Cape Hoorn or Horn, the birthplace of the explorer Schouten.⁹ Many Dutch settlers in America came from Hoorn, and for this reason certain historians apparently inferred that *hoere* was merely a corruption of the name of the town. The ear conditioning of the Swedes, for example, may have resulted in their hearing the pluralized form *hoeren* as *hoorn*. The Swedish equivalent for *hoere* was *hora*, but they never used the latter in referring to this specific place.

A second theory explains the name by attaching another meaning to *horn*. The stream, according to proponents of this theory, was Horn-Kil, derived "from the creek's winding much in the shape of a horn."¹⁰ This is purely speculative, because in early Dutch accounts the spelling was never given as *horn*. It was simply a Swedish version of *hoeren*.¹¹ The original meaning obviously lies with the Dutch, who first employed it, and not with their Swedish successors, who etymologized it. *Hoeren* came first—not *hoorn* or *horn*.

A third theory is that *hoeren* could have been a corruption of *horen* meaning horn or cornucopia, "symbol of the fruitfulness of the land."¹² We can give no more credence to this statement than to a suggestion in the same source that the name might be related to an Indian chief, or to a native Indian place-name.¹³

In still a fourth theory, the words *hoere* and *hoeren* are said to be modifications of a Dutch geographical term *horn*, meaning the space formed by an angle, recess, corner, or nook and used in the special topographical sense of a sheltering creek or bay.¹⁴ Although an interesting interpretation and studiously presented,

it lacks positive proof in Dutch sources. The hoere-kil was indeed a sheltering creek, not unlike many other tributaries to the Delaware, but proof has not been offered that the Dutch had any physical features in mind when they assigned the place-name. On the contrary, the Dutch term *hoek* or *hoeck*, meaning angle, corner, or cape, is commonly found on contemporary maps, while *horn* as a topographical term is absent. Even if *horn* were used in this sense, it is purely conjectural to assume that it was modified to *hoere* or *hoeren*.

There may be other theories to explain the meaning of Hoere-kil, and doubtless the future will bring new ones. The true explanation, however, probably lies in the literal meaning of *hoere*, although up to now no one has chosen to pursue this most obvious route of examination.¹⁵ Since the key to the meaning of a place-name lies with those who first coined it, it is important to review the earliest references to the name.

The earliest documentary reference known to the writer occurs in a letter written in 1640 by Joost van den Bogaert to Johan Beier, secretary of the first Commercial College in Sweden. He mentions specifically "the Hoeren-kil."¹⁶

Chronologically the next references are the two made by de Vries in 1642 to "the Hoere-kil" quoted above.¹⁷

In 1641 a tract was published in England describing Sir Edmund Plowden's land in America known as New Albion. Referring to the Dutch settlement at Lewes, the writer stated: "the creek near Cape James, by the Dutch called Horekill, by us Roy-mount, and by the Indians Cui Achomoca."¹⁸

In 1650 an account was published in Holland in which the Delaware region is described. The following appears therein: "The main channel for navigation runs close by the place we call the Hoere-kil."¹⁹

In 1684 Peter Lawrrnsen deposed that in 1630 he was in the Delaware River and that "the said vessel stopt at the hoorekill where the Deponant did alsoe see a settlemt of a brick house belonging to the west Indian company, . . ." ²⁰ Although Lawrrnsen's statement was made fifty years after his visit, it could be possible that the name hoorekill i.e., Hoere-kil was in use at the time of his visit. If so this would date the name as far back as 1630, although this is not a certainty.²¹

Hoere-kil appears on a number of early Dutch maps—as late as 1670 the entry “Whoore Kill or Swansdale” is found on Herrman’s famous map.²³

Wife-loaning and loose pre-marital relations were traits in the cultural pattern of the Eastern Algonkian Indians, and the natives were deeply conscious of an obligation to extend hospitality to the visitor.²³ There are numerous references in 17th century Dutch historical literature to loose conduct between Dutchmen and Indian women when measured against European moral standards.²⁴ We are able to point to specific statements made at an early date to indicate that the place-name under scrutiny was a by-product of this relationship.

For instance, the following is quoted in a Dutch document of 1661:

The name Hoeren-kil was reported to us to be the result of the liberality of the Indians, who intentionally at this place volunteered with the greatest generosity their wives or daughters to our countrymen.²⁵

On May 12, 1684, Gerrit Van Sweringen, another Dutchman, deposed concerning his knowledge of the seating of Delaware Bay and River. If he were not a Dutchman one might accuse him of attempting to prejudice Dutch interests:

In the year 1648 the Dutch haveing had had successes in the North River from whence they had bin driven by the New England men They resolved to looke towards the South and haveing information of that River otherways called Delaware formerly bought by one Manheer Godin from the Indians a Sloop was fitted out with some Cargo to Trade with the said Indians of that River.

They Landed first at a place called by the Indians Sisouestinqud²⁶ where they found out a Creeke Navigable for a sloop, as I was informed by those that hav been acquainted with these men that Landed there.

Those men or traders came a Shoare with their goods where they traded with the Indians and frequenting soe much with the Indian women till they gott the Country dutyes otherwise called the Pox²⁷ and soe they named that place the Whorekill. That is in English the whores Creeke, whereupon they returned home and ventured againe a second time with a Considerable Cargoe but remembering (as I suppose) how they had been served at the whorekill, they went some ten or twelve miles higher where they Landed againe and traded with the Indians trusting the Indians to come into their Stores a Shoare, and likewise aboard of their sloop drinking and debauching with the Indians till they were all at last barborously murdered and so that place was Christined with their blood and to this day called the Murderers Kill.²⁸

The historian Smith quotes from another early manuscript, which he states was a Swedish version found in the British Museum:

'A certain person who for several years together had been a soldier in the fort (at the Hoere-kil) informed us about the month of June, 1662, being then but lately come from thence, concerning the Hoern kill or Harlot's creek . . .

'The name of Hoernkill or Harlot's Creek, had as we are informed, its rise from the liberality of the Indians, for lavishly prostituting, especially at that place, their maidens and daughters to our Netherlanders.'²⁹

To these lucid quotations we might add another one from Dutch sources published in 1650: "This place we call the Hoere-kil. From whence this name is derived we do not know."³⁰

The statement can be accepted at its face value or perhaps the author had reasons for not wanting to admit the truth.

If, as suggested in this paper, the name Hoere-kil was a by-product of generally loose relations between Dutchmen and Indians, one might ask why the specific name does not occur elsewhere. The fact is that it does occur in other place-names given under Dutch influence. There was a Horen Hook in the Hudson River and a Hoeren Eylandt in Connecticut.³¹ Elsewhere in America there are to be found place-names which utilize the same element.³²

In summation, therefore, the *Hoere(n)-Kil* is an incident name well attested by early documentary sources, and in view of the evidence presented there should be little reason to doubt its origin and significance.

NOTES

¹ Assistance is acknowledged to Jeannette Eckman for advice and guidance, and to Deryck Sivén of Helsingfors, Finland, and Engelbert Ter Kuile of Enschede, Holland for Swedish and Dutch translations.

² One of the earliest historians to make this claim was Benjamin Ferris, *A History of the Original Settlements on the Delaware*, Wilmington, 1846, p.21. The supposition was repeated by successive Delaware historians, principally, *Vincent*, 1870, p.130; *Scharf*, 1883 V.1, p.32; *Conrad*, 1908 V.1, p.14; *Powell*, 1928, p.43; *Bevan*, 1929 Vol.1, p.27.

C. H. B. Turner, *Some Records of Sussex County, Delaware*, Phila. 1909, a generally accurate work, expresses the same idea with touching sentiment, p.2, "The Hoorn Kil, the name given these parts by the Dutch settlers unfortunately spelled Horekill, Whorekill, and so many other ways, suggests the love of David Pietersen de Vries for his native place the municipality of Hoorn."

Amandus Johnson, considered the best authority on the Swedish period, in his

Swedish Settlements on the Delaware, Phila. 1911, V.1, p.171, refrains from drawing positive conclusions regarding the origin of the name, stating that "he has adopted the Swedish form or name for the river Horn) since this form is found in almost all the Swedish records." Although he thus escapes controversy, Johnson was aware that the Swedish name was derivative. Harry Emerson Wildes, *The Delaware*, N.Y. 1940, pp. 18-19, states positively and without offering proof that Mey named the river the Hoorn-Kill. Then he adds the fanciful statement that "Lazy English vocal chords soon made an unfortunate corruption of the sound."

³ Peter Lindeström, Map A (1654) in *Geographia Americae*, translated by Amandus Johnson, Phila. 1925 shows Blommer Kihl. Godyn's and Blommaert's names were also used as place-names along the Hudson River, e.g., Godyns Island, Godyns Kil, Godynsburch, Godins Point, Blommaertsburch, Blommaerts Islands, Blommaerts Kil, Bloemerts Point, etc., see *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts*, Albany, 1908, pp. 198,374. The patroon of a colony could give to places within his jurisdiction "such names as he shall see fit," *op. cit.*, p.174.

⁴ David Pietersz de Vries, *Korte Historiae*, Colenbrander edition, 's-Gravenhage, 1911, p.251.

⁵ Translation in H. C. Murphy, *New York Historical Society Collections*, second series, V.3, pp.1-129. Mr. Ter Kuile made a new translation of this passage for me which agrees with Murphy's.

⁶ de Vries, *op. cit.*, p.263.

⁷ Murphy translation, *op. cit.* also checked for me by Mr. Ter Kuile and found to be accurate. Note that de Vries refers to the murder of thirty-two men. It is believed that one man escaped death, see *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts*, *op. cit.* p.222, reference to Theunis Willemsen "who was left over in Swaendael." At the time of the Indian attack the colonists apparently numbered thirty-three.

⁸ Although de Vries' immediate family were of Hoorn, actually he was born in France. This fact further invalidates statements that he intended the Delaware stream to be named for his "birthplace." Incidentally de Vries used the word Swanendael, which many modern writers have modified without reason to Zwaanendael. The erection at Lewes, Delaware of a memorial called the Zwaanendael House (modelled after the Town Hall in Hoorn, Holland) has helped to perpetuate the Hoorn myth.

⁹ Isaac Taylor, *Names and Their Histories*, N.Y., 1896, p.148.

¹⁰ Samuel Smith, *History of New Jersey*, Burlington, 1765, followed by Robert Proud, *History of Pennsylvania*, Phila. 1797, V.1, footnote, pp.130-131.

¹¹ An early Swedish reference to Horn Kill (1653) is found in *The Instruction for Johan Printz*, translated by Amandus Johnson, Phila. 1930, p.43. Another (1654) is in "The Report of Governor Rising," *Narratives of Early Pa., West N.J. and Del.*, edited by Albert Cook Myers N.Y., 1912, p.140. Lindeström in his *Geographia*, *op. cit.* (1654) refers to the Hornkill, p.30. Other examples could be cited, but these will illustrate the point.

¹² *Delaware—A Guide to the First State*. Federal Writers' Project, N.Y. 1938, p.32.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p.195.

¹⁴ A. R. Dunlap, "An American Place-Name Puzzle: Hoere (n)-Kil," *American Speech*, April 1944, pp.112-114.

¹⁵ One place-name scholar, George R. Stewart, accepts the literal interpretation; see *Names on the Land*, New York, 1945, p. 71.p.99. Also in *American Speech*, October 1944 he comments on Dunlap's paper: "I see no reason why *Hoere (n)-kil* should be a name under suspicion. It is well attested by early Dutch and English sources. It is apparently an 'incident name' of a type frequently given by explorers and fur traders, . . ." (pp.215-216).

¹⁶ *Swedish Settlements*, *op. cit.*, V.1, p.143.

¹⁷ de Vries, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ The 1641 anonymous pamphlet was entitled *A Direction for Adventurers . . .*, and there is a photostat copy in the New York City Public Library. The work was re-published in 1648 under the title *A Description of the Province of New Albion*, and the author is given as Beauchamp Plantagenet.

¹⁹ From a document entitled "Vertoogh Van Niew-Neder-Land," translated by J. F. Jameson, *Narratives of New Netherland*, p.313. The account was written in 1649 and originally printed the following year.

²⁰ *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, edited by E. B. O'Callaghan, Albany, N.Y. V.3, p.50.

²¹ The fact that Lawrrnsen's visit antedates de Vries by approximately two years suggests that *Hoere(n)-kil* was in use in the 1630's.

²² Dunlap, *op. cit.* footnote 2, lists a number of early maps on which the Dutch name is indicated. Other Dutch maps which have come to attention are listed in A. R. Dunlap, "A Checklist of Seventeenth Century Maps Relating to the Delaware," *Delaware Notes*, Univ. of Delaware, 18th series, 1945, pp.63-76. For Herrman's map, see "The Rare Map of Virginia and Maryland," by P. L. Phillips.

²³ Regina Flannery, *An Analysis of Coastal Algonquian Culture*, Catholic University, Washington, D.C. 1939.

²⁴ I have in my files a number of such references, which in the interests of good taste I have not introduced in this paper.

²⁵ From the *Kort Verhael*; see Dunlap *op. cit.*, 1944 for the original Dutch and for the English translation.

²⁶ In the Maryland records (see below) the Indian name appears in this form, but in the New York version it is given as *Siconescingue*. The latter is a more accurate rendition of the Indian name for the place; see A. R. Dunlap & C. A. Weslager, *Indian Place-Names In Delaware*, Wilmington, 1950, p.38.

²⁷ William Strachey in his *Historie of Virginia*, London, 1849, states: "... both sexes of them are given over to those intemperances and the men to preposterous Venus for which they are full of their countrye desease (the pox) very young."

²⁸ Van Sweringen's deposition is found in two sources, viz., *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of N.Y.*, V.3, p.342; *Maryland Archives*, V.5, p.411.

²⁹ Smith, *op. cit.*, pp.57-58.

³⁰ "Vertoogh van Niew-Neder-Land," Jameson, *op. cit.*, p.313.

³¹ Dunlap, 1944, *op. cit.*

³² Stewart, *op. cit.*, pp.109,222,268, cites various sexual symbols used in place-names. I have in my files two Maryland place-names which give the anglicized form of *hoeren*.