

New Castle on the Delaware

DUTCH TERCENTENARY EDITION

1651-1951



Seal of New Netherland

Edited with some additions
by Jeannette Eckman

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In this house lived Rebecca McWilliam, a daughter of Zachariah Van Leuvenigh (by his second wife, Esther Lewis), who married Richard McWilliam, the younger. Richard McWilliam, the elder, a native of Ireland, came to New Castle in the 1730's and married first, Mary, the daughter of Chief Justice Jehu Curtis, the younger, and after her death, Margaret, the daughter of William Shaw. The elder McWilliam became an associate justice, 1764, chief justice in 1773. Both men were distinguished local statesmen in their day and this house until recent years was known by their name.

30. The houses now on the river side of the Strand between the Jefferson House at the corner of Delaware St., and the lawn opposite the Read House, were built soon after the fire of 1824 to replace the dwellings then destroyed. On the site of several large dwellings shown on the survey charts of 1804, small houses were built of which the ROW BUILT AFTER THE FIRE is typical. The houses are of brick, two full stories to the cornice and an additional story with one dormer back and front, beneath the pitch of the roof. Though narrow, having only one window and the entrance door on the street, the broad gables and the kitchen wings added at the back give an unexpected spaciousness within. The simplicity and attention to detail, characteristic of New Castle, give to these houses dignity and attractiveness, and something more, for in spite of being in a solid row, each house preserves individuality.

31. On the landward side of the Strand, No. 20, THE PRESBYTERIAN MANSE, is a fairly typical example of New Castle's brick houses of a century ago. The interior has some fine mantelpieces of slate or dark gray marble and simple, dignified woodwork and finishing throughout.

In 1673, and probably much earlier the site was owned by the Dutch George Waale; his step-son, George More sold the house and double lot extending south, to Ephraim Herman who traded it with Isaac Tayne Sr., for lots up the Strand. From the Tayne estate it came into possession of Thomas Janvier I who married the granddaughter of Isaac Tayne Sr., Sarah Desjardins (Jordain). The fire of 1824 destroyed the houses then on the double lot.

32. PACKET ALLEY, between the Strand and the river, and halfway between Delaware and Harmony Sts., takes its name from its former use in the era of packet stages and boats. It was traveled by many persons now to be met only in histories and biographical dictionaries—a tablet set at the entrance of the alley names some of them—such as Jackson, Webster, and Louis Napoleon. It was a link in what might be called a trunk line of coast-wise travel; important or unknown persons who followed the route between Philadelphia and the South often hurried up the little alley to seek refreshment or overnight accommodations before taking stagecoach and later the train at the end of the Strand, or hurried down it to catch the river packet for Philadelphia.

Packet Alley is now used only as a driveway to several garages and a private tennis court. Flaked oyster shells and crunched stones remain as

evidence of the paving used to accommodate swaying Conestoga wagons with shouting drivers, and brisk, well-painted coaches-and-fours.

Down at the water's edge, the once-bustling wharf lies in ruins, and its black pilings lean as if about to fall. Fragments of stone, mortar, and timber lie about, for the wharf was built in days prior to the use of concrete. Young trees and crabgrass hide much of the toppled remains in summer.

33. Along Packet Alley on the up-river side is now a brick dwelling with old fashioned store windows and a central door. Over the pavement a porch supported by posts at the curb and decorated by a scrolled wooden valance, now removed, is shown on the cover of this book. The post next Packet Alley was not set at the corner of the porch, but several feet in to allow vehicles room to turn the corner from the narrow alley into the Strand. The structure, the Boulden store, was built after the fire of 1824, upon the site of a tavern destroyed in that fire. The tavern, variously known from early days as the "Indian King," "Ship Tavern," and the "Delaware Hotel," had served travelers since the first sailing packets met the first "waggon" that carried passengers and goods across the peninsula to Frenchtown. It is now often referred to as the OLD STAGE TAVERN, and as Stage Tavern it appears on the survey of 1804. Unfortunately, no sketch of the tavern or its sign has been found, but the Boulden store building with its porch gave a character to the Strand that could hardly have been surpassed in individuality by the original tavern. The store was first a ship chandlery and then a general store with an interest in the traveler's needs that dated from the Boulden family's early connection with roads in Pencader Hundred. David Boulden was the proprietor of the store; Levi Boulden in 1813 was one of the commissioners of the New Castle and Frenchtown Turnpike Company for constructing the road to Frenchtown; the "artificial" surface had by that year been built as far as Hare's Corner about 3 mi. W. of New Castle.

Externally the store building has been little changed in its more than a hundred years of life. On the wall next the alley is a painted soap advertisement of the gay nineties. In summer, blue morning-glories with enormous blossoms cover the low wall of the old tavern yard behind the building. The dwelling is now leased from its owner, Mrs. Philip Laird.

34. Among the SURVIVORS OF THE FIRE of 1824, along the E. side of the Strand, are two double houses, the oldest, No. 49-51, built of wood with flush clapboards and the later house, No. 53-55, of brick with stone belt course above the first floor and marble key-plates above the windows. The clapboard house originally had two doors, one for each dwelling. The present single door came from an old house in Wilmington as part of repairs and minor changes made in recent years by the late owner of both buildings, Philip Laird. The side of the house next to the Laird lot is believed to have been damaged by fire in 1824, for its first story corner and front have been replaced, probably about that time, and this replacement is the reason for the noticeable difference in height between the front windows on this side of the doorway and those on the up-river side. Circular staircases four feet

NEW CASTLE, DELAWARE:
A WALK THROUGH TIME

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the town's artisans made a variety of items such as bricks, beer, and barrels for residents, tradesmen, and those passing through the town.

New Castle was also a center of government. It served as both the seat of the court in a fast-growing county and the home of government for the Delaware colony. Every year the Assembly met in October, bringing eighteen legislators, six from each county, to the town to make the laws. The governor, who was sometimes a son of William Penn and sometimes an administrator hired by the Penns, traveled down from his headquarters in Philadelphia to attend the session. The legislative session began with the governor's address to the assemblymen. He then interacted with them about pending legislation and finally placed the Penn family seal on those laws that he approved. While in New Castle, the governor stayed at the town's best inn, the Indian King, located on The Strand across the street from Packet Alley, run by Judge Jehu Curtis and then his daughter and son-in-law, Anne and Slaytor Clay.

In 1706 England was engaged in one of the nation's intermittent wars with France, this one known as Queen Anne's War. Freed from the control of Pennsylvania's anti-war Quaker majority, the Delaware Assembly voted to construct a defensive battery supported by a few cannon on the down-river side of the town. Its purpose was to stop French privateers from sailing up the Delaware River to attack New Castle and the towns further up the river. It is now called Battery Park, but the cannons are gone.

By the middle of the eighteenth century New Castle had become an important port town and colonial capital. Its increasing population and economic development, together with the introduction of English law and legal procedures, attracted lawyers to live and work in New Castle. Indeed, lawyers occupied several of the most admired houses in the town's historic center, and New Castle remained a popular residence for lawyers and judges.

Two of the most important New Castle lawyers in the late colonial period were George Read and Thomas McKean. They had much in common. Both played leading roles in the Assembly and in the Revolutionary War. Both men's signatures are on the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution.

manship he gave Read. The quality of materials and high level of workmanship suggest an owner with high ambitions.

Rebuilding after the fire began almost immediately. Most buildings were total losses, but portions of some could be saved or salvaged and incorporated into new foundations or buildings, as can be seen in basements, attics, or during renovations. Rebuilding provided the opportunity to change building material from wood to brick and to reposition and even expand the size of some of the structures. Most builders and owners chose both options. The rebuilding process also provided an opportunity to build in the more avant-garde architectural styles being championed by the new architects of America, including the very men who had produced the town survey of 1805. No one along The Strand chose that more modern course. New Castilians clearly preferred to retain the more conservative, tried-and-true Federal style. The lovely, large Federal-style townhouse at Number 17, for example, rose in brick over the ruins of a frame house that had been part of a four-

generation-old complex of workshops and warehouses.

Several men built more than one house on the block. Jeremiah Bowman, the lumberman and carpenter, whose shed was ground zero for the fire, built numbers 9, 13, and 15, all in brick, and merchant James McCullough built Number 30 for himself and Number 25 for a shop. He also built numbers 27, 29, 31, and 33 as rental units. This row of four brick houses reflects both careful attention to materials and craftsmanship balanced with a restrained simplicity in design.

Some of the buildings arising from the ashes of 1824 were designed to be



Advertising remains on the Packet Alley side of 25 The Strand long after the store became a residence. (Courtesy of Carlo Viola)

AROUND THE TOWN

lots up the Strand. From the Tayne estate it came into possession of Thomas Janvier I who married the granddaughter of Isaac Tayne Sr., Sarah Desjardins (Jordain). The fire of 1824 destroyed the houses then on the double lot.

The DEAKYNE HOUSE, No. 21, built about 1870, shows how pleasantly a house of that era has accommodated recent alterations in early style to blend with its neighbors of The Strand.

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The former BOULDEN'S STORE, 25 The Strand, at Packet Alley, retaining store windows and store doors, has been lovingly turned into a dwelling. It was built of brick after the Great Fire and did business for well over a century.

Evidence of that character is still retained (by the owner's choice) all along the Packet Alley side of the house and from top to bottom. Painted on the bricks, faded but legible, are these words:

DRY GOODS, GROCERIES, PROVISIONS
HARDWARE, PAINTS, OILS, SHIP STORES, ETC.

and in the bottom line in letters four feet high:

IVORY SOAP

Before the store there were taverns on the site variously called the Indian King, the Ship, and the Delaware Hotel. Under successive managements they had served travelers on the land-and-water route up or down along the Atlantic seaboard, as well as local Delawareans from town and county. Sailing packets and steam packets tied up at the wharf now rotted away. Always there were deck hands from vessels and (in season) shad fishermen and other watermen coming in for a dram or two.

It is said the name was just "the old stage tavern" at the turn of the 19th century. As a store it was first a ship chandlery and then a general store. David

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