A History of Christiana, Delaware

by

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Foreword

This booklet had its genesis at a meeting of the Christiana Bicentennial Commission, Inc., in early 1975. That Commission had formed for the purpose of organizing the celebration of the American Bicentennial in Christiana. It was decided at that first meeting that one of the Commission’s Bicentennial projects would be the publication of a “History of Christiana” in addition to its various other plans.

Any student of Delaware history interested in the local history of Christiana soon becomes aware that there does not exist any single history of the village; instead, one must refer to many reference works dealing with Delaware history in the attempt to see the entire picture. This booklet is an effort to draw together those several sources into one single work.

I would like to express my appreciation to those persons who assisted me in this project: these include the staff of the Historical Society of Delaware; Dr. John A. Munroe, H. Rodney Sharp Professor of History at the University of Delaware; and Mr. James B. Owen. I am grateful also to the Delaware American Revolution Bicentennial Commission for its financial assistance to this project.

I think it appropriate also at this point to recognize the tireless efforts of Mr. Joe G. Harper towards the bicentennial celebration in Christiana; the contributions of Mrs. Robert F. Coon in reviving interest in the historic Christiana area; and the enthusiastic response of the many friends and residents of Christiana as manifested in their projects to raise the necessary matching funds to cover the cost of publication of this booklet.

A bibliography has been included at the end of this history.

Richard Rodney Cooch
New Castle, Delaware
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The Origin of the Name

Any history of Christiana might well begin with an inquiry into the name of the village. The village was named for Queen Christina of Sweden, who reigned at the time of the Swedish settlement on the Delaware River in the early part of the seventeenth century. In 1688, the Swedes named their settlement at “The Rocks” in present-day Wilmington “Fort Christina” in honor of their Queen. The Swedes gave the river which empties by The Rocks the same name.

This river is, of course, the same creek that flows through Christiana. Over the course of two centuries, “Christiana” gradually replaced “Christina” as the accepted spelling for the Hundred, the river and the village. In 1857, however, the General Assembly passed an act restoring the name “Christina” to the river, as a “gesture of good will” to the citizens of Sweden. It should be remembered that many Swedish dignitaries, including Crown Prince Gustaf Adolf and Prince Bertil, were to visit Delaware in 1838 in celebration of the Swedish Tercentenary. The Act did not alter the spelling of the Hundred or the village. Christiana today is pronounced “Christeen” by some persons, and, in fact, some early documents refer to the village by that spelling as well as referring to it as “Christeen Bridge.”

But the accepted spelling of the town today is “Christiana,” and most persons seem to use the four-syllable pronunciation.

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For a more complete account, the reader is referred to Edward W. Cooch, “Christiana, Christeen or Christina?”, from Delaware Historic Events (1946), p. 123.
Christiana and the Penn-Calvert Boundary Dispute

One of the first recorded incidents in Christiana history occurred in 1684, when residents of Christiana became embroiled in the famous boundary dispute between William Penn and the Calvert family of Maryland. That historic dispute arose from conflicting land grants in the Middle Colonies to the two English families. In 1632, Charles I granted to Cecilius Calvert, second Lord Baltimore and first proprietor, what is now mostly the State of Maryland; included in that grant was much of the present-day State of Delaware. In 1682, however, James II (then Duke of York) conveyed to William Penn land situated on the west bank of the Delaware River, which later came to be known as the “three lower counties” - also the State of Delaware. This, of course, conflicted with the Calvert claims.

In 1688, George Talbot, a cousin of Charles Calvert, third Lord Baltimore and second proprietor, obtained from his cousin a patent for approximately 2,000 acres at Head of Elk (now Elkton, Maryland). The eastern end of this patent came very near to the settlements in New Castle County, whose inhabitants were generally loyal to the Penn family. Talbot called this patent “Belleconnell.”

It must be remembered that western New Castle County was very sparsely settled at this time. Thus, in 1685, in a some effort to strengthen the Calvert claim to the region, what was known as the “Belleconnell” fortress and a small log fortress just west of Christiana. (The exact location of this small fort will probably never be known: it was about one-half mile west on Route 273 from the present traffic light in Christiana.)

An historic marker was erected in 1932 by the Historic Marker Commission of Delaware on the approximate spot, and reads:

TALBOT’S FORT

Colonel George Talbot, Cousin of Lord Baltimore, erected a fort nearby, 1684, on land of the Widow Ogle. Talbot dispossessed settlers between here and Iron Hill who refused to acknowledge Baltimore as Proprietor. Fort garrisoned about two years. Boundary settled by agreement, 1760. Surveyed by Mason and Dixon, 1768. Confirmed by Proclamation of the Provincial Governor John Penn, 1773.

This small fort (its exact dimensions are also unknown) was garrisoned with approximately a half-dozen Irishmen under the command of George Talbot. It was situated on land owned by the “Widow Ogle.” Legend has it that Talbot threw the Widow Ogle’s hay into the Christina Creek as a dramatic illustration of the authority he intended to exercise over the immediate region. Apparently, Talbot intended to intercept settlers heading west from Christiana Bridge and to demand that they swear allegiance to Calvert.

Talbot made life unpleasant for the settlers around Christiana. He threatened harassment of Jonas Erskine, Andrew Tille and the Widow Ogle unless they “Yield[ed] Obedience to Ye Lord Baltimore.” John White, a Christiana settler, was forbidden by Talbot to harvest his hay since he refused to swear allegiance to Talbot. Finally, after receiving numerous complaints, the Sheriff at New Castle journeyed out to Christiana and confronted Talbot at the log fort, demanding to know by what authority Talbot was intimidating the settlers on Penn’s territory.

“Here, you dog,” replied Talbot, flourishing a document, “is my Lord Baltimore’s commission for what I do!” The Sheriff and his posse, uncertain of what action to take, retreated to New Castle.

Further action by Penn proved unnecessary, however. Soon after that confrontation, after a night of drinking, the Irish soldiers suffered severe cases of frostbite and the garrison was forced to disband. As far as is known, the Calvert family (or their supporters) made no further effort to intimidate the early residents of Christiana.

It is a little ironic to note that two later boundary commissions had their headquarters in Christiana. One commission was set up in 1764 to resurvey Delaware's twelve-mile circle, and another was established in 1766 to decide the boundary line between Maryland and Delaware. Both these commissions met at Christiana.4

![The George Hillis House, built prior to 1770. Residence of Mrs. Elizabeth Takach.](image)


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**Christiana During the Revolution**

Apparently there was a bridge across the Christina Creek as early as 1686.5 One historian recounts that by 1737, there were approximately ten houses at Christiana.6 After this time, however, the village expanded, as it began to profit from its advantageous location at a crossroads and at the head of navigation.

The Christiana Presbyterian Church was organized about 1732, and by 1738 a frame edifice had been erected. (The present church building was built in 1857).8 Charles Tennent was the first minister of the Christiana Presbyterian Church. In 1739, it is reported, George Whitefield, a prominent evangelist (and friend of Charles Tennent's brother), preached to 2,000 people at Christiana Bridge.9 Whitefield probably preached on the hillside outside the present church. There are many ancient gravestones in this churchyard.

That the village had achieved some prominence by the year 1748 is seen by the fact that the Court at New Castle in that year ordered the records of the Prothonotary be removed to Christiana Bridge for safekeeping, in light of the French and Spanish privateers nearby in the Delaware Bay.10

By 1770 there were perhaps seventy-five houses in Christiana. A Friends' Meeting was active in Christiana around this time. Meetings alternated between Stanton and Christiana. At

Christiana, the Friends met at Hannah Lewden’s House. It was in the year 1770 that Josiah Lewden, a prominent merchant of the area, built the handsome Georgian mansion which is situated on the easterly side of today’s stone bridge over the Christina; “Lewden House.” (The Lewden family continued to occupy the house until 1900.)

Colonel John Read, the father of George Read who was a signor of the Declaration of Independence and a signer also of the United States Constitution, lived in Christiana on a farm of 180 acres “adjacent to Christiana Bridge.” The exact location of his house is uncertain. Colonel Read and his wife, Mary Howell Read, are buried in the churchyard of the Christiana Presbyterian Church.

Another prominent resident of Christiana at this time was Dr. John Vaughan, who lived in Christiana from about 1795-1799. Dr. Vaughan was an eminent physician and was later renowned for his study of yellow fever.

During the Revolution there were two hotels in Christiana, the Christiana Inn and the Shannon Hotel, both located at the town’s main intersection. These structures are still standing today, although neither is used as a hotel. Both inns are believed to have been built prior to 1770; the exact date of their construction is not presently known. Both inns were well known to travellers throughout the colonies. Supposedly the Shannon Hotel was particularly known for the quality of its food. Such luminaries as Washington, Lafayette, Benjamin Latrobe (the architect) and Mason and Dixon are believed to have stayed in these places of public accommodation.

In 1769, a school was built in Christiana at a cost of more than one hundred pounds.

Ofentimes during the Revolution, troops were deployed to Christiana. The town commanded a strategic location. (At this time during the Revolution, the bridge at Christiana was the farthest bridge downstream on the Christina River; the bridges at Newport and at Wilmington were not built until after the Revolution.)

13William Thompson Read, Life and Correspondence of George Read (Philadelphia, Pa., 1870), p. 149.
The news of the battles of Lexington and Concord reached New Castle early in the morning of April 25, 1775; the dispatch was forwarded to Col. Samuel Patterson of Christiana Bridge, who in turn sent the news on to Col. Thomas Cooch at Cooch’s Bridge. From Cooch’s Bridge, the news of the battles was forwarded to Head of Elk. This was part of the relay system of the Committees of Correspondence that had been formed in the colonies.17

When the Continental Congress received word in Philadelphia in August, 1777, that many thousands of British troops under the command of General Howe had debarked near Head of Elk (preparatory to the capture of Philadelphia and the removal of Washington’s army to Valley Forge), the Continental Congress, on August 22, 1777, requested:

“one thousand of the Delaware militia to rendezvous at Newport and Christiana Bridge there to wait the orders of General Washington, to be in the pay of the Continent until the 30th of November [1777] unless sooner discharged.”18

On August 27, 1777, in further preparation towards the upcoming confrontation with the British (which was to occur at Cooch’s Bridge on September 3, 1777), Washington ordered three battalions of militia under the command of Colonels Evans, Hunter and Undree to march to Christiana Bridge and to wait there until further orders were issued. The troops were supposed to be able to leave Christiana on immediate notice. It does not appear likely, however, that these troops fought in the battle of Cooch’s Bridge.19

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16Col. Patterson was a wealthy miller from Christiana. He was elected to, but did not serve in, the Continental Congress, was elected to the Delaware State Senate, and was elected as Delaware’s Treasurer. His mill was at the present location of Smalley’s Dam, west of Christiana; he, too, is buried in the graveyard of the Christiana Presbyterian Church. For a fuller account of his career, see W. Emerson Wilson, Forgotten Heroes of Delaware (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 55-56.
19Ibid., p. 18.

Major John Andre indicates in his journal for September 6, 1777, that Washington’s troops at Christiana Bridge were supplied by “gondolas” which would come upstream to Christiana.20

The British Army, on its way to Philadelphia after the battle of Cooch’s Bridge, did not pass through Christiana, but rather went through Newark and into Pennsylvania from Mill Creek Hundred.

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20Major Andre’s Journal, Issued by the Bibliophile Society, Boston, Mass. (1903), Volume I, p. 82.
 Probably the most noteworthy event in Christiana's Revolutionary history was the landing of approximately 1500 troops in early March, 1781. These troops were under the command of the Marquis de Lafayette. Washington had ordered Lafayette to proceed with the troops to eastern Virginia against Benedict Arnold. Arnold was then waging a successful military campaign, terrorizing and plundering that state. On January 20, 1781, Washington ordered Lafayette to proceed from Trenton, New Jersey, by water with 1500 troops to Christiana Bridge. If the Christiana were frozen, Washington directed, Lafayette was to land at Marcus Hook or Chester. A letter from Timothy Pickering, Quartermaster of the American Army in Philadelphia, indicates that, in addition to the troops, "six field pieces and howitzers about fourteen pieces of cannon 18 and 24 Pounders with their shot shells, powder and implements" were included in this expedition.

It is believed that these troops landed March 2 and 3, 1781, below the present stone bridge. It certainly requires some imagination to picture 1500 men disembarking from what is today a shallow, narrow little creek, and subsequently establishing their temporary headquarters in the little village. Undoubtedly Christiana was "all confusion and hurry," as Col. Samuel Patterson then wrote to Caesar Rodney.

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23Cooch, Delaware Historic Events, p. 130.
After the Revolution

It was after the Revolution that Christiana began to play such a distinct and important role in the early commercial life of this State. Soon after the Revolution, Christiana became a leading market center for New Castle County.

Christiana served as a departure point for grain harvested in northeastern Maryland, southeastern Pennsylvania, as well as western New Castle County, Delaware. Farmers would bring their grain to mills near Head of Elk to be ground, then would transport that grain by conestoga wagon for shipment by water to other points. At this time, boats of shallow draft regularly plded the Christiana. By 1785, Levi, Henry and Jacob Hollingsworth constructed wharves and storehouse at Christiana, and started a packet boat service from Christiana directly to Philadelphia.

In 1808, 20,000 barrels of flour, 250,000 bushels of wheat, 1,000 hogheads of meal and 2,000 hogheads of tobacco were shipped from Christiana. This is a measure of the commercial activity in Christiana at the time. By this time, Christiana had its own post office. The hotels in Christiana did a thriving business. In 1813, the "Elk and Christiana Turnpike Company" was chartered by the General Assembly to improve what is now the Old Baltimore Pike, from Christiana Bridge to the Maryland line. Christiana in the first two decades of the nineteenth century was in its prime.

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Christiana at this time was also a frequent meeting spot for political parties, and other political gatherings. In 1809, there was a short-lived movement to make Christiana the county seat for New Castle County.26 In 1795, shortly after the signing of the Jay Treaty with Great Britain, a large and boisterous group of anti-federalists met at Christiana Bridge. There (as reported in the August 15, 1795, issue of the Delaware Gazette), they burned an effigy of John Jay, as well as effigies of Delaware's two senators, John Vining and Henry Latimer, who had supported the treaty.27 On August 29, 1812, the Federalists of New Castle County held their annual pre-campaign meeting at Christiana, and there chose a committee of five leading Federalist lawyers - James M. Broom, James Booth, Kensey Johns, Nicholas Van Dyke and Louis McLane - to draft resolutions condemning policies of President Madison.28 On March 3, 1821, a group that met near Christiana Bridge resolved to withhold payment of taxes that might go to help the proposed Delaware College in Newark; on September 22 of that year, a "very large" meeting of New Castle County Federalists took place at Christiana: the Federalists at that meeting took a position against recent acts of the General Assembly favoring the proposed Delaware College.29

A combination of social and economic forces, however, began to operate and to bring about Christiana's decline. The business interests of Christiana resisted any possible threats to their economic well-being. They vehemently opposed efforts in the early part of the nineteenth century to construct drawbridges at Newport and Wilmington, claiming that navigation upstream to Christiana would be impeded.30

The present Chesapeake and Delaware Canal was not opened until 1829, which then drew off much of the trade and commerce from northeastern Maryland. It is interesting to note that on an early map, dated about 1801, showing the various proposed routes for the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, the northernmost proposed route ran from the Elk River to Christiana. A "feeder canal" running from the east and south sides of Iron Hill to connect to that route can also be seen on the map. A reservoir to hold enough water to fill the locks was to be constructed near Glasgow. Excavation on a "feeder canal" from the Elk River, as well on the reservoir at Glasgow, was begun under the direction of Benjamin Latrobe, but the project was abandoned in 1806. In 1812, the work resumed but soon came to a halt because of the outbreak of war with Great Britain.31

It has been suggested that Delaware was opposed to plans for a canal between the Chesapeake Bay and Delaware Bay "because a great number of horses belonging to the inhabitants" were constantly employed "carrying corn from Elk-town to Christiana Bridge."32

27Woolger, Delaware's Forgotten River: The Story of the Christina, p. 162.
28Munroe, Federalist Delaware, p. 201.
30Willa G. Crompton and Norman W. Moore, Jr., A Forerunner to Delaware College and Its Popular Rejection, Delaware History, Volume XII (1963), pp. 133, 139.
The construction of the New Castle-Frenchtown Railroad in 1832, and of the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad in 1837, hurt Christiana considerably. Thus, in the mid-nineteenth century, Christiana gradually began to decline in importance. By 1870, the towns of Newark, Wilmington, Newport and New Castle outdistanced Christiana in importance. Today, Christiana has been completely outrivalled in size and importance by her sister towns and cities in Delaware.

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