

Delaware History

Delaware's history is long and proud. Early explorations of our coastline were made by the Spaniards and Portuguese in the sixteenth century, by Henry Hudson in 1609 under the auspices of the Dutch, by Samuel Argall in 1610, by Cornelius May in 1613, and by Cornelius Hendricksen in 1614.

During a storm, Argall was blown off course and sailed into a strange bay which he named in honor of his governor. It is doubtful that Lord De La Warr ever saw, or explored, the bay, river, and state which today bears his name. In 1631, 11 years after the landing of the English pilgrims at Plymouth, Massachusetts, the first European settlement was made on Delaware soil.

A group of Dutchmen formed a trading company headed by Captain David Pietersen de Vries for the purpose of enriching themselves from the New World. The expedition of about 30 individuals sailed from the town of Hoorn under the leadership of Captain Peter Heyes in the ship *De Walvis* (The Whale). Their settlement, called Zwaanendael, meaning valley of swans, was located near the present town of Lewes on the west bank of the Lewes Creek, today the Lewes and Rehoboth Canal.

Arriving in the New World in 1632 to visit the colony, Captain de Vries found the settlers had been killed and their buildings burned by the Indians.

This settlement is commemorated by the Zwaanendael Museum in Lewes.

No further attempts at colonization were made on Delaware soil until 1638, when the Swedes established their colony in present Wilmington, which was not only the first permanent settlement in Delaware, but in the whole Delaware River Valley and North America. The first expedition, consisting of two ships, *Kalmar Nyckel* (Key of Kalmar) and *Vogel Grip* (Griffen), under the leadership of Peter Minuit, landed about March 29. The location of the first Swedish settlement was at "The Rocks," on the Christina River, near the foot of Seventh Street. A fort was built called Fort Christina after the young queen of Sweden, and the river was likewise named for her.

The most important Swedish governor was Colonel Johan Printz, who ruled the colony under Swedish law for ten years, from 1643 to 1653. He was succeeded by Johan Rising, who upon his arrival in 1654, seized the Dutch post, Fort Casmir, which the governor of the Colony of New Netherlands had built in 1651, on the site of the present town of New Castle.

Rising governed the Swedish Colony from his headquarters at Fort Christina until the autumn of 1655, when Peter Stuyvesant came from New Amsterdam with a Dutch fleet, subjugated the Swedish forts, and established the authority of the Colony of New Netherlands throughout the area formerly controlled by the Colony of New Sweden. This marked the end of Swedish rule in Delaware, but the cultural, social, and religious influence of these Swedish settlers has had a lasting effect upon the cultural life of the people in this area and upon subsequent westward migrations of many generations. Old Swedes (Holy Trinity) Church built by the Swedes at Wilmington in 1698 was supplied by the Mother Church with missionaries until after the Revolution. It is one of the oldest Protestant Churches in North America.

Fort Christina State Park in Wilmington, with the fine monument created by the noted sculptor, Carl Milles, and presented by the people of Sweden, perpetuates the memory of these first settlers and preserves "The Rocks" where they first

landed.

Following the seizure of the colony of New Sweden, the Dutch restored the name of Fort Casmir and made it the principal settlement of the Zuidt or South River as contrasted with the North or Hudson River. In a short time the area within the fort was not large enough to accommodate all the settlers so that a town, named New Amstel (now New Castle), was laid out.

The year 1681 marked the granting of the Province of Pennsylvania to William Penn by King Charles II and the arrival of Penn's agents on the Delaware River. They soon reported to the proprietor that the new province would be landlocked if the colonies on either side of the Delaware River or Bay were hostile. As a result of Penn's petition to the Crown for the land on the west side of the Delaware River and Bay below his province, the Duke of York in March 1682 conveyed, by deeds and leases now exhibited by the Delaware State Archives in the Hall of Records at Dover, the land included in the Counties of New Castle, St. Jones, and Deale. On October 27 of the same year, William Penn landed in America first at New Castle and there took possession from the Duke of York's agents as Proprietor of the lower Counties. On this occasion, the colonists subscribed an oath of allegiance to the new proprietor, and the first general assembly was held in the colony. The following year the three Lower Counties were annexed to the Province of Pennsylvania as territories with full privileges under Penn's famous "Frame of Government."

Also in this year, the counties of St. Jones and Deale were renamed Kent and Sussex Counties respectively.

After 1682, a long dispute ensued between William Penn and Lord Baltimore of the Province of Maryland as to the exact dominion controlled by Penn on the lower Delaware.

The dispute continued between the heirs of Baltimore and Penn until almost the end of the colonial period. In 1776 at the time of the Declaration of Independence, Delaware not only declared itself free from the British Empire, but also established a state government entirely separate from Pennsylvania. Delaware's boundaries were surveyed in 1763-68 by the noted English scientists, Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon.

With the advent to the Revolution nearly 4,000 men enlisted for service from the small state. The colonial wars had built up the militia system and supplied a number of capable officers who led the troops of Delaware in all the principal engagements from the battle of Long Island to the siege of Yorktown. The only Revolutionary engagement fought on Delaware soil was the battle of Cooch's Bridge, near Newark, on September 3, 1777.

An important stimulus to the recovery of the state's economy after the war was the invention in 1785 by Oliver Evans of Newport, Delaware, of automatic flour milling machinery, revolutionizing the industry.

In the following year, John Dickinson of Delaware presided over the Annapolis Convention, which called for the Federal Constitutional Convention, that met in Philadelphia the next year. When the new Constitution was submitted to the states for ratification, Delaware was the first of the thirteen original states to ratify the Constitution of the United States. This unanimous ratification took place in a convention of Dover on December 7, 1787, whereby Delaware became "The First State" of the new Federal Union. Proud of this heritage, Delawareans continue to honor the traditions which made them the First State to ratify the United States Constitution, the document that continues to protect our nation's justice, strength, and liberty.

For more information on the history of Delaware, please contact the Government Information Center in Dover, Delaware:

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