

New Castle - Area B

The present sharp contrast between the cultural and aesthetic values of the central town and the non-descript character and unsightliness of raw sf its adjacent and outlying areas, is disturbing to anyone capable of appreciating the full importance of what is left of old New Castle. The setting of so fine and rare a survival of the life and work of past centuries should be worthy of the jewel; and the approaches to the town should not cause distress to the visitor whose expectancy of enjoyment has been stirred by what he has heard or read of New Castle. Rather, the whole environment should be a pleasing foretaste and the traffic ways through it should be interesting because of a successful harmonizing of old and new in landscape, buildings, and immediate roadside rare and planting.

Historically, the town of New Castle and its environment, within a radius of several miles, are inseparably connected; economically also, the early town could not have survived without the surrounding plantations, the open meadows and woodlands. Some hundreds of acres of farmland continuously in use to the present as a common for the benefit of the inhabitants, still contribute to the support of the town. This common, established by the Dutch in 1666, surveyed and confirmed by William Penn in 1701 is one of the most unusual features of American colonial history. So long as the Trustees of the common retain the present policy for its use and development, this land will be a protection against the despoiling of a large outlying area; and now that the Trustees of the common are constituted also a Board of Park Commissioners for the town, the city council and the people have a fortunate start and agency if they adopt a policy of acquiring and developing more parkland and other recreation areas.

The early town was dependent also upon the river for its life and protection, and for this reason many of the earliest inhabitants lived at least part of the year in their town houses near the Strand and the Square, houses that had gardens and fruit trees behind them. The townspeople cultivated their plantations by their own labor and such farm help as was available. Some of these farms and estates were held by many generations of the same early families and a few are still owned by descendants of early owners.

Both the land environment and the river shore form a historic and scenic extension of New Castle town, as well as a continuing economic one.

The Battery Park on the south reserves that part of the shore for the people. In the Dutch and early English period, a foot dyke at the north end of Second Street (then Land Street) led across the marsh to the fast-land, 8 mile above the central town where the Dutch village of Swanwyck was laid out in plots facing the river, as they did on New Castle Strand - the houses with gardens and orchards behind them. These plots bordered on the land side by the common and the woods where their cattle pastured. A few Swedes had been the original settlers in this village site and they, with the Dutch, sold butter and other produce to the people of New Castle.

should be
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In the Duke of York's period there was a Dutch Lutheran church at Swanwyck, and in addition to the footway up along the river to "the street before the houses", there was also a "Swanwyck road" branching off the King's road to Christina and turning directly east to the river, entering the street before the houses through what was later the Buttonwood estate of the Rogers family. Swanwyck extended up through what is now Lukens Steel Company land within New Castle boundaries. The site of the early houses is still not built on, and their foundations have been discovered under the rail. This is one of the scenic advantage points along the Delaware, and while it is still possible, a walk or drive should be planned from New Castle through the site of Swanwyck as part of a plan to reserve, or at least keep open, this historically interesting and originally extremely beautiful stretch of river territory for the enjoyment of the people. The Lukens Company several years ago was much interested in the historical background of the site.

Efforts to keep the river margin open to the people should be stimulated by the fate of Wilmington and of all the communities along the upper river in Delaware - where the whole river-front is commercially appropriated or otherwise shut off, with not even a pier upon which the people may go to enjoy the beauty of the river and the pageant of shipping on it.

In the rural districts about New Castle, the number of mansion and tenant houses, barns, and other buildings that survive from the very early periods is believed to be greater for the size of the area than anywhere else in the eastern states. These buildings are mostly of brick, a few of frame construction, and in some cases early log, plank or brick small houses are incorporated into the larger later-built houses. At least a few of the early frame buildings, clapboarded on the outside, had walls filled with brick nogging.*

Some of the best known places and buildings are the following:

Old Eves Place "River Bank", north of the Buttonwoods, one and one half miles northeast of New Castle. House built between 1700 and 1750 - brick walls - mottled brown on the front, masonry cellar, low attic - some modern additions.

Buttonwoods - House: kirk with basement near ground level, 2nd story in gambrel roof, four chimney stacks - earliest part about 1700 - several later additions - excellent brick barn about 1831.

Mank Barns - The Janvier place opposite the Glebe property, two and one half story house, three stories in front. Tenant house - oldest part, early 1700's - two later additions, well worth restoring and preserving.

Stonum - West of the Fibre Works - house built between 1750 and 1800 - two and one half stories and basement - stone foundations, brick above - room "improvements" out of keeping with the original.

Hermitage - West of New Castle where the William Penn School is on part of plot. Early 18th century - two and one half story brick dwelling with later additions. The latest part was built 1818 by Senator Nicolas VanDyke, a lawyer in New Castle, who used this place with its farm land as a summer home - only a half mile from his town house. This whole estate, now for sale, well worth buying and restoring - ideal site for offices, repair shops, hotel, and parking.

Grantham - House south of New Castle on Lighthouse Lane, built between 1700 and 1750 - two stories and low attic - brick (with stucco) - has interesting architectural features and so well reflects the feeling and life of the period in the mansion house of a plantation that it should be restored and preserved.

Brynnyrk (Regency House) - see part IV of this report.

The Historical American Buildings' Survey of this area was never finished, but its work gives details about the foregoing and a number of others.

* my father made alterations to a house (that I think was near Newport) which had a large frame kitchen (the whole of the original house) with a huge stone fireplace and chimney, in which he found all four walls to be filled with small field stones. J.E.

The early territory of which New Castle was the capital extended from the Christina to Bombay Hook. This area was bought from the Indians by Peter Stuyvesant when he built Fort Casimir in 1651, and was acquired by the city of Amsterdam as payment of a debt by the Dutch East India Company which continued to hold the land above the Christina and the trade on the river. Besides Swanwyck, the New Amstel territory and later that of New Castle, included the site of several other early settlements, notably Crane Hook nearer the Christina, whose sites are the object of frequent interest among tourists whose ancestors lived in this county or who for other reasons are interested in its history. Also, as New Castle continued to be the county-seat until 1881, its historical importance appeals to the county as a whole and these facts provide the basis for cooperation with county agencies in the protection, restoration, or restricted development of the New Castle environment.

New Castle County has a county building code created by legislature act of 1943, and may soon have zoning power. The latter may now be granted to incorporated towns under the state Constitution; the proposal to amend the Constitution to include counties, which passed the 1945 session, is expected to receive the required ratification by the 1947 session. A bill is being introduced to implement zoning power for New Castle County as soon as the amendment is ratified.

The New Castle County Regional Planning Commission has as its purposes under the law "promoting health, safety, prosperity and general welfare, as well as securing co-ordinated plans for roads, streets, highways, thoroughfares, railways, public buildings, parks, parkways, playgrounds, civic centers, water supplies, sewerage and storage disposal, drainage and other improvements and utilities--" preventing the unnecessary duplication of such utilities and improvements. Its jurisdiction is all of New Castle county outside of incorporated municipal areas. It has power to go upon any land private or public for survey purposes - and violations of its regulations are punishable in the courts.

The town of New Castle could readily secure legislative approval to strengthen its building code and could enact zoning ordinances. With these it could work out in cooperation with the county authorities a plan for coordinating the elements of a town-and-country plan for all future developments.

Educational publicity on the historic past of areas about New Castle as well as of the town plots and buildings, should enlist interest of owners and tenants and the people generally in active cooperation with such a plan.

The New Castle Garden Club and the State Natural History Society might provide the information for restoring the rich and varied flora of the virgin land, to available areas.

The New Castle Historical Society might publish a new edition of New Castle on the Delaware, to include research and developments since the last edition was printed.

The Delaware Swedish Colonial Society and the Tri-State Regional Planning Commission could assist in their respective fields.

Changes in traffic, effect upon tourist volume, and other aspects and results of (a) the building of the Delaware River Bridge at Pigeon Point, with approaches to be relocated somewhere between State Road and Lauders Lane, through New Castle environs, should be studied - (b) also the same in connection with the expected granting of use of the New Castle Air Base as a service passenger airport with scheduled flights by several big commercial air lines, national and international, that have applied.

Logically, Area B should embrace a county-wide program in the spirit of the historian, George Macaulay Trevelyan's plea for England, "Must England's Beauty Perish?" - with old New Castle, the early capital, as its center.

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