When Dutch and English Had a Boundary Line Problem Too

FROM IRVING S. KULL

NUTLEY, in its infancy, was involved in a border war as bitter as those other historic disputes over “Fifty-four Forty or Fight” and the 38th parallel in Korea.

A pile of stones on the highest point of Watchung Mountain at the upper end of Montclair and a yellowed piece of parchment known as the “Indian Bill of Sale” were the implements of the dispute which lasted for three-quarters of a century until it was settled in colonial court in 1795. Had the verdict been reversed, Nutley would find itself today in Passaic County instead of Essex.

The piece of parchment dates back to 1677 when during the rule in East Jersey of Governor Philip Carteret, the Lenni Lenape Indians sold their land here to the “Newark men.” Carteret immediately had the tract surveyed and its northern boundary is picturesquely described in the document as follows: “The bounds northerly, viz: Pasayack River reaches to the Third River above the town, ye river is called Yountacah, and from thence upon a northwest line to aforesaid (Watchung) mountain.”

The Dutch, who made their purchase from the Indians in 1679, took the area north of Newark, which includes all of Passaic and Paterson. In 1684-5 they received from the Lords Proprietors confirmation of the purchase in a document called the Acquackanonck Grant which described the Dutch colony’s southern boundary as “the northernmost bound of the town of Newark.”

There is a third existing document, Newark’s Patent or Town Charter, issued in 1713, which defined the northern border separating Newark from the Acquackanonck Grant in reverse, as follows:

“A heap of stones … thence on a South East course to ye brook or Rivollet, called by Third River, where it falls into the Pasayack River.”

When the yellowed old documents are spread out today, it is clear that the boundary was meant to run from a high point on Watchung Mountain, about where the Montclair State Teachers College stands today, in a southeast direction to the sandbar at the mouth of the Third River. That is the present boundary between Passaic and Essex counties.

In those days when the Dutch and the English colonists were squatting on the Indians’ lands there were no well-defined markers to separate the two grants. The Dutch took the wording to mean that they owned everything south to the Third River, and that would give them most of the western half of present-day Nutley.

Five English planters are named in the oldest records for the Nutley area, the Newark “Schedules” of warrants of land. They were: Plum, Ogden and Dodd

(1679) and Harrison (1694) and Rogers (1696). The earliest surveys, of about the same time, show both sides of the Passaic River from Nutley down to Newark marked out as “hayfields,” consequently “taken up” by some of the pioneers.

There are no records from the Dutch “penetration” but the Dutch left their mark more clearly than did the English. Without historical evidence it is hard to dispute the Newark claim of priority of occupation of the Nutley area, but there are Dutch records showing a trading post used by “travelling salesmen” from Nieuw Amsterdam on the banks of the Third River.

The first Dutch here were traders, but planters came with them. Nutley at the time was heavily wooded, except along the Passaic River and while the earliest English settled along the Passaic, the Dutch went inland and cut their farms out of the forests.

The stamp of the Dutch planters is evidenced by the names which have come down to today: Spring Gardens (Franklin Avenue, below Harrison Street); Stone House Plains (Brookdale); Speertown (Allwood); Houtteyn (the Dutch for “high town”) which was the present Ridge Road section and Povershon (the top of Centre Street hill).

Whether the Dutch or the English came first, the Swedes had been here before them but kept moving westward and left no trace of their passing.

There was plenty of room here for both the Dutch and the English who farmed side by side, meanwhile bitterly disputing possession. Ownership of the northwestern and western sections of Nutley, down to the looping curve of the Third River, was a standing grievance here for three-quarters of a century until there was a settlement about 1795.

Newark town records of 1792 refer to a survey and a map of the disputed lands “lying on the north side of the line between New-Ark and Acquackanonck.” During the years right after the survey of 1792, the Newark town records report a series of suits against the Dutch “squatters” and, finally, without any bloodshed, Newark won its dispute.

That was not the end of the Dutch penetration, however, and even before 1776, the records show that only one English planter, identified only as King, shared the Passaic River front here with four Dutch planters, Van Riper, Vreeland, Speer and Joralemon. The Plums, Ogdens, Dodds, Harrisons and Rogers had all disappeared. There still are plenty of descendants of the Van Ripers, Vreelands and Speers here today.

Family records do allow contemporary historians to trace the coming of one of those families, the Vreelands, and it is possible that the others came here by the same route.

The Vreeland estate is the only Dutch-owned property recognized in the Newark “Schedules of land in Newark and surveys of lands and to whom

conveyed.” It was owned, according to the “Schedules” by Jacob Vreeland in 1702 which was about the time that East Jersey passed from the hands of the Proprietors and became a Royal Province.

In subsequent “Schedules” it is fully identified as “182 ⅘ acres to the Eastward of the Third River on the right of Johnson and Alexander” - apparently two other early English planters here. The acreage lay between the Third River and the Passaic and included part of the Yountakah golf course and the site of the former Satterthwaite estate, Nutley Manor, which was the spot Jacob Vreeland had chosen for his own home.

Jacob and all the Vreelands of this region were descended from Michael Jensen who came to America from Braeckhuysen, in North Brabant, in 1636, and settled near Albany. To identify himself he took the name Michael Jansen van Vreelandt, the latter being the hamlet near Braeckhuysen from which he came. Later the “t” was dropped and the name was shortened to “Vreeland.”One branch of the family worked southward from Albany and in time reached Acquackanonck shortly after the Dutch obtained their grant. The first mention of the family was the naming of Jacob Vreeland in the Newark “Schedules” in 1702 and again in 1719.

Many Dutch came in at that same time and contemporary records show mention of the names of Van Winkle, Van Giesen, Pake, Devosny, Cadmus and Powelsson attached to farms or woods as owners. Thus from many sources it is possible now to name ten Dutch and seven English planters who lived in the disputed border area and along the waterfront of the Third River and the Passaic River.

Three of those names figure again in one of the historic episodes of the American Revolution when Abraham Van Giesen fled across General Schuyler’s corduroy road to take refuge in New York with the British troops.

The land of Nutley’s only “Tory” fugitive during the war was confiscated by the Committee of Safety and when hostilities ended, Captain Abram Speer, demobilized, took it over as his own. He sold it to John M. Vreeland, a grandson of Jacob, in 1783. The vast farm, north of Chestnut Street and west of the Third River contains today banks, printing houses and post office, and the Van Giesen home is today’s Woman’s Club.

The whole area, long before the Dutch and English came, was mapped crudely by the Indians and unlike the Colonial planters, the Indians respected each other’s territory. In this area were the Ackinken-Hackys, a sub-tribe of the Lenni Lenape or Delaware Indians. To the Dutch the name sounded like Hackensacks and that is the way the name went down in colonial history.

Many names, in this region, suffered the same phonetic contortion. The word Yantacaw appears in the old records as Yountekah or Yountacah or Yantakah and there is a diversion of opinion as to its meaning. To the Lenni Lenape, the ceremonial Thanksgiving dances which the tribe held every year along the

banks of the Third River, in a sort of sacred grove about where the Federal Tower now rises, were called Kante Kaey and today's word may have derived phonetically from that, or it may be a translation of the Indian term for "extending to the tidal river." Acquackanonck, the original name of Passaic, meant in the Indian language, "sluice dam" and the word Passaic meant "where it divides" apparently referring to an island in the river. Between the Hackensack and the Raritan Indians whose domain was towards Elizabeth, the dividing line was a creek which they called Weequahic, or "the headwaters of a creek."

The Dutch traders did a brisk business with the Hackensacks, the Raritans and the Tappans, whose lands lay to the north of the Hackensacks, with potent "fire water." There are records showing that although the Dutch grew rich from selling alcohol to the tribes in this area, it was the English planters who suffered when the red men went on their drunken rampages.

Nutley had no recorded massacres or troubles with the Indians. The Raritans were more inclined to fight when they got drunk and their brawls resulted in a punitive expedition coming out of Staten Island to kill off a few Raritans. The latter retaliated with a raid on Staten Island marked with all the fury of the aborigines.

Some of the Hackensacks and the Tappans also got into a feud with the Dutch following a bit of treachery on the part of William Kieft, then Director-General of New Netherland. The Mohawks and Iroquois, from upper New York State, were the deadly enemies of the Lenni Lenape who were richer and far less inclined to fight. After several raids on the Hackensack territory by the Mohawks and their allies from the seven tribes, the Hackensacks asked permission to move their camp, for protection, closer to the Dutch community of Pavonia, now a part of Jersey City.

With Dutch consent, they moved across the meadows to take shelter and protection. Kieft, however, laid a treacherous trap. During a February night of 1643, he moved 80 Dutch soldiers across the Hudson and attacked the Lenni Lenape in their sleep, killing 80 of about 100.

That opened an era of border war. The Lenni Lenape forgot about the Mohawks and the Iroquois and put on their war paint. Eleven tribes joined in the war of revenge and raided Dutch settlements up and down the Jersey side of the Hudson, killing Dutchmen and taking the women and children off. It took several months before the fighting ended, and meanwhile the Dutch colonists scampered back to Manhattan.

A second war between the Hackensacks and the planters broke out 12 years later in 1655 and was, by far, the more terrible of the two. It broke out when a Dutchman, annoyed because Indians stole fruit from his orchard near Hoboken, lay in wait and killed an Indian girl.

The Hackensacks lit beacon fires and swarmed to the Hudson. They filled 64

canoes with warriors and attacked Manhattan. Before the Dutch could rally their troops, the Indians set fire to outlying homes and recrossed the Hudson. As they retreated towards their base camp at Acquackanonck they burned all the Dutch settlements from Weehawken to Staten Island. One hundred whites were killed and 150 taken prisoner in that war.

The price the Dutch had to pay to buy back their women and children captives put the planters on their good behavior - 78 pounds of gunpowder and 40 staves of lead for the return of 28 captives. When the transfer was accomplished a peace pipe was smoked by the Dutch with the Hackensack chief, our earliest neighbor, Oratamin or Oratam.

That grand old sachem of the Hackensacks, who lived in the woods just north of where the Third River flows into the Passaic, became the first American prohibitionist. Possessed of a feeling of kindliness far exceeding that of the Dutch, he hunted out the cause of trouble and put his blame on the “fire-water” that the Dutch traders used in dealing with the Indians.

Oratam went on several trips to Manhattan, crossing the Hudson with a fleet of war canoes, to plead with the colonial leaders to order the Dutch traders and planters to stop trading or giving liquor to the Indians. He was not very successful in that first temperance crusade and the traffic went on.

In following years, there was comparative peace throughout the Third River valley and the planters got along much better with the mild-mannered Hackensacks than did the traders or the Manhattan tax collectors who came out here and tried to exact tributes of maize, wampum and furs. Whenever the tax collectors came, the Indians disappeared deeper into the woods and their resentment was shown by tribute taken from the farms of our ancestors.

If a Dutch farmer let his cattle or horses stray, the Indians killed and ate them or took them far back into the woods. They were not good farmers and lacked the elementary instincts of breeders, so rather than bother with the cattle, they generally killed them.

For a century, the whites and red men lived side by side here in these lush valleys. Finally, in 1758, a council was called by Governor Bernard of New Jersey, with Oratam and the other chiefs of the eight Lenni Lenape tribes which resulted in the colony buying up all the Indian rights except fishing and hunting in unenclosed areas.

The Indians were provided with a reservation, the first anywhere in the United States, in Burlington County along the Delaware. Three thousand acres were set aside there for the tribes and the community was called Brotherton.

The tribe slowly died out and lived a quiet, comparatively easy life. A few of the younger males enlisted in the Revolutionary Army and fought with Washington against the British, but there was no warfare in those valleys. Finally, in 1802, the few remaining survivors of the Lenni Lenape moved to

Oneida Lake, in New York state, where they joined with another Indian race with which the Lenni Lenape had been on friendly relations for many years.

A few years later, the two groups moved again to Wisconsin, at Fox River. Unsettled, the few survivors kept moving and the tribes split, some going to Canada and others to Oklahoma and the final act of separation came in 1832 when the last 40 survivors of the original 500 members of the Hackensacks sold back to New Jersey their hunting and fishing rights for $3,000.