

I.

THE STRAND

The "Burnt Lot"

Site of #2 ~~at~~ The Strand

The Farmers Bank Building - which became the residence of the late Francis deHaes Janvier, and is now divided into apartments - owned by - John J. Rogers
(See Photo #13 65 and 66)

Original Plot - 1

The earliest Dutch owner of this plot, originally about 50' wide and extending from Strand to Green, cannot be determined with certainty from available indentures. These indentures indicate that after the English took New Amstel in 1664, Martin Gerritsen, a Dutchman, and Sergeant John Erskin, an English soldier, each owned a house and parts or ail of this land, which adjoined another plot of Erskin's to the north. John Erskin (spelled also Arskīn and Askew) acquired several other town sites and several plantations near New Castle, some in his individual right, others jointly with Martin Gerritsen and *others*. Judging from the willingness of the Governor, the Commandant, Capt. John Carr, and the Justices of the Court to grant him whatever he asked for, he was well thought of personally and for his military services. He left a valuable estate to his wife Jane and his son Jonas.

Martin Gerritsen was in New Amstel in the early Dutch period. The first Gerritsen mentioned in the records in connection with Fort Casimir was Wessel Gerritsen, who was chosen as a pilot for Director Stuyvesant's ships on the expedition to the Delaware in 1655, because "he hsd sailed to and from there for a long tide". Martin may have been Wessel's son, or other kin.

-2-
(Burnt Lot, continued)

The south part of the lot was granted to James Crawford, an English soldier, in 1667. In 1688, Robert Evans* acquired the whole plot containing two small houses, one on the north and one on the south part of the plot. James Miller, who acquired the whole plot in 1703, acquired also in 1708 the bank lot "fronting his house and lot in the Front Street." Whether this was a new house or one of the two that had been there since the earliest mention, cannot be determined. William Houston, furrier, of London, and Houston's son and grandson owned the house and lot from 1713 until 1726, when Anthony Houston sold to Col. John French for 100 pounds "all that messuage or house and lot of land and the water lot thereunto belonging."

It is difficult to reconcile the date of sale in this indenture (which is the same month and year for both sale and recording), February, 1726, with the traditional date, 1722, for the destruction by fire of Col. French's house on this site. The first original mention of the fire so far found is in an indenture of 1730 (J-1-424-1730) for the adjoining lot to the north which is bounded "with the lot which lately belonged to John French, Esq., deceased, known by the name of the burnt lot."

Col. John French, one of the outstanding figures in Colonial history, held the office of high sheriff of New Castle County in

*A secondary source mentions a Robert Evans as connected with the Admiralty service customs inspection at New Castle; other Evans's are later connected with Welsh Tract, The Robert Evans of this deed has not yet been identified within the-scope of the New Castle search,

(Burnt Lot, continued)

1703 and **from** that time until his death in 1728, held high office continuously in **Delaware** and Pennsylvania. **He** was a **judge** of the Supreme **Court**, the trusted and successful representative of these colonies with the Indians, and in 1724 when Governor Keith incorporated New Castle as the nucleus of **what** was intended to be a great **commercial** center, Col. John French was appointed **Mayor**.* In 1725, Col. French bought at sheriff sale for 300 pounds, the large brick Sylvester Garland house (Hotel Louise) at Third and Delaware Streets, which may have been his residence after the fire on the Strand. **He** also **owned** "a little brick house" on the south side of Harmony Street, 40 feet west of the Strand.

Kin of Col. John French, David French and his heirs, owned the "burnt lot" from 1729 to 1762, when the latter sold it to **James** Hamilton of Philadelphia. James Hamilton was governor of Pennsylvania and Delaware from 1748 to 1754 when he resigned; he served again 1759 to 1763, so he **was** the governor at the time he bought the property. It **was** in his possession for the next ten years when he sold it to George Read Sr. Governor Hamilton's father, Andrew Hamilton, the distinguished attorney of Philadelphia, **owned** property in New Castle before his son **became** governor, notably the **former** house of **Roeloff** and Johannes **deHaes** at the north-west corner of the Strand and Harmony.

*For the best account of Col. John French, see paper by Judge Richard S. Rodney: (1) A Colonial Leader. Colonel John French of New Castle, (2) Early Delaware Judges (MS), and Carl Van Doran's Benjamin Franklin.

(Burnt Lot, continued)

George Read sold the "burnt lot" in 1775 to John Van Gezell who lived next door in what became the Bedford house, #6 The Strand. In his will, 1783, John Van Gezell describes his "present dwelling house" as bounded southwest "by my lot purchased of George Read, formerly belonging to Hon. James Hamilton."

There is no certain indication in any of the surviving indentures that a house was built on the "burnt lot" after the fire. There was a house in the sale of this lot and the water lot opposite to Governor James Hamilton, but subsequent indentures indicate that it was on the water lot. The "burnt lot" was an attractive location for investment, especially for the river lot opposite which went with it, where the Jefferson house now is and where a wharf was built by one of the early owners.

A branch of the Farmers Bank, organized in 1807, used first the old George Road Sr. house up the Strand, then in 1816, the Bedford house with this lot adjoining were bought for the bank, The "burnt lot" remained a garden with a great willow tree in the southeast corner. This is shown on the 1804 survey map, and at one time the garden was enclosed by a stone wall.

In 1845, plans for the erection of the present building were begun. The architect was "J. McArthur"; the carpenters, John M. and Thomas Turner, who completed their contract in March, 1851, Contract price \$5,000; extras, \$384.51.*

• Alexander B. Cooper's manuscript history of New Castle, at the Delaware Historical Society.

The house as it stands today, although of not too poor design for its period, is out of character with its neighbors on the Strand, and for the purposes of this report has been classified with buildings to be removed at such time when earlier buildings on the site can be definitely determined. If the definite character of such building or buildings cannot be determined, the lot could be developed as a garden as it undoubtedly was at the time of the 1804 survey.