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History Sketch of:
Transportation Changes,
Trade Cycles, Housing, and
Travelers Descriptions of the Town

New Castle's present individuality and distinction among towns of colonial origin comes in part from the natural features of its setting and environment, as well as from the streets, houses, and public buildings of the central town, that survive from early periods.

These assets, natural and man-made, were not swallowed up by the crudities of American industrial development and material "progress" that followed the Civil War, and that ruined so many pleasant towns of the original states.

Up to the present, the physical character and contours of the colonial town have not been so modified as to prevent a reading from them of something of the lives of the people through the succeeding regimes and periods, from the building of Port Casimir in 1661 to the problems of 1947. This perceptible continuity of life and about the site is in fact its most cherishable feature.

But the rigorous civic spirit and cultural leadership of the late colonial and early state periods did not last long enough to insure a continuously harmonious and progressive mode in the expansion of the physical town, in its governmental and cultural institutions, and in its social life. A nucleus of the best has always been there, however, and traditions from these periods still live among a few at least of New Castle's inhabitants and those of the county and state - in a more vital and intelligent sense than mere wistful appreciation of distinguished lives lived in the past and of charming old houses that meet the eye today.

The future of the little village of wooden houses in the 1650's was to be affected by the changing means and routes of transportation, perhaps more than by any other of the many influences upon it from that day to this. The great river was a major-highway - with feeder streams, navigable for contemporary craft far inland - which, if supplemented by good dirt roads, promised a thriving commercial future, once this and the neighboring colonies were producing ample goods for trade.

As the population grew and the inhabitants spread further from the shore, roads became increasingly essential to carry people and produce to and from the port. But governors and law makers, although recognizing this fact, never arrived at the methods and means of making and keeping the roads good - roads that would have brought a much greater flow of goods and people into the town, and so, more ships to the wharves.

However ill-served by stage coach and market-cart, lumbering over the "execrable mads^m", the ships on the river and the sloops and shallops along the creeks kept alive the vision of a flourishing port throughout the eighteenth century; and kept New Castle merchants and other citizens in touch with the Atlantic seaboard colonies, with the West Indies and the countries of Europe.

In 1746, the Reverend George Ross of Immanuel Church, writing to London to the Secretary of the Church of England Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, describes New Castle as "a ruinous village which declines from bad to worse every year." In 1750, he wrote that "the town of New Castle consisting of about four score houses, waxes poorer and poorer.....having several houses without inhabitants and some not fit for habitation.....this dying condition is partly owing to an upstart villaga (Wilmington) lying on a neighboring creek, which yields a convenient port to the adjacent country."

Before the end of the century trade had revived and commissioners had been appointed (1797) to survey the town, lay out and regulate streets and establish land marks.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Joseph Scott wrote in his geography, published 1807, that trade in New Castle had begun to revive "about fifteen years ago; since then it has increased considerably. Almost all the vessels bound from Philadelphia to foreign ports, stop here and supply themselves with livestock. A great line of packets and stages passes through it from Philadelphia to Baltimore by way of Frenchtown. Vast quantities of merchandise are sent by this route from Philadelphia to the Western country. It is at present one of the greatest thoroughfares for traveling in the United States. There are seven large and well-accommodated packets which sail constantly between this port and Philadelphia. There are from 10 to 15 heavy wagons for the transfer of goods and passengers across the peninsula to Frenchtown, besides four land stages."

It was in this era of the private turnpike companies and a few years later of the first steamboats, that the land and water routes were co-ordinated to New Castle's advantage. The Delaware and Chesapeake canal, opened in 1829 took some of the cross-peninsula traffic from the New Castle route. But the opening of the New Castle and Frenchtown Railroad in 1832 gave New Castle a fresh impetus toward growth and development.

Soon, however, Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore were connected by all-rail through-routes; the Delaware division of the Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad absorbed the New Castle end of the New Castle and Frenchtown Railroad, and New Castle was no longer the lively transportation center it had become following the first good turnpike that its citizens had made and operated. It kept some of its passenger and freight traffic by rail, ship and ferry; acquired a few new industries, and grew quietly and slowly in population and homes.

When the Dutch began the first houses near Fort Casimir in 1651, the Swedes had been settled on the river since 1638. They had log houses, strong, tight and dry, from timber cut and notched by the use of only an ax and a few days labor. Bricks and stones were used for chimneys, or if those were lacking, sticks and mud. The Dutch preferred bricks for building and the brickmaker was among the earliest craftsmen. But of necessity they built at first of wood, using planks or clapboards nailed to upright studs, and chimneys of stone or brick. But they soon adopted the Swedish log construction for both public and commercial buildings and for houses. Plank or board roofs were covered with tile when they could be secured from Manhattan.

In 1678, the Dutch labadists, Dankers and Slyter, in their journal, said of New Castle that it had been much larger and more populous under the Dutch, but since the country had belonged to the English and ships must first declare and unload their cargoes at New York, "this had caused the little place to fall off very much, and even retarded the settlement of plantations. What remains consists of about fifty houses, most all of wood. The fort is demolished, but there is a good blockhouse...."

By the end of the century and in the early 1700's, New Castle was becoming a brick town; throughout the surrounding countryside, brick mansion houses, tenant houses, barns and outbuildings were becoming general.

By 1744, Dr. Alexander Hamilton, English traveler, writing of a stop in New Castle, describes the town as standing "just upon the water, there being from thence a large prospect eastward toward the Bay of Delaware and Province of the Jerseys. The houses are chiefly brick, built after the Dutch model, the town having been originally founded and inhabited by the Dutch when it belonged to the New York government. It consists chiefly of one great street, which makes an elbow at right angles. A great many of the houses are old and crazy. There are in the town two public buildings, a court-house and church."

The revival of trade at the port of New Castle about 1790, and the increasing prosperity of the large-estate owners up and down the river, accelerated the building of five colonial houses, of which there were already examples, built by the wall-to-do as early as the 1720's and throughout the century.

A traveler's description of New Castle, upon a visit in 1829, near the peak of the turnpike and river-travel era then centered there, gives an enjoyable and vivid picture. (Attached in full at the end of these pages.)

At the beginning of the era of hard-surfaced roads in the early twentieth century, the route of the state road from Wilmington south ran several miles west of New Castle. When hard roads were finally built into New Castle, enough traffic began to veer from the state road to the New Castle ferry, and to the Industries about the town, as well as because of tourist interest, to cause the spread of appreciation of the central town as a treasure from the past. And since then, New Castle has been thought of by many people as an attractive residence town, for the few now, and potentially for the many, if its expansion can be zoned, and building activity regulated and restricted, so that the modern may be as suitable and pleasing as the old.

For, in 1947, the routes and means of transportation are again changing as they affect New Castle. The Delaware River bridge at Pigeon Point will take away the ferry traffic; the scheduled air service from the county air port at Hare's Corner will bring to the edge of New Castle another exchange section, this time from motor vehicle to air ship, instead of from land stage to sailing vessel.

And in this age, if New Castle will meet the challenge to keep abreast of the times, there is a rich variety of blue prints for the ideal town, that with New Castle's existing advantages, New Castle can become - when its town plan, zoning ordinances, building code, and general improvement program are in effect, and are co-ordinated with farsighted similar protection and development of its river shore and the surrounding country.