

THE ELIZABETHTOWN PURCHASE

October 28, 1664

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As we continue to observe the 350th anniversary of the establishment of the State of New Jersey and, in particular, the City of Elizabeth, it is well to recall the significance of a most important date: October 28, 1664. That date, exactly 350 years ago, marked the purchase of a huge tract of land, known in history as the Elizabethtown Purchase, that would become Elizabethtown and later, Union County.

The purchase was the culmination of a series of events extending back to 1609 when Henry Hudson, sailing for the Dutch East India Company in his famous ship, the Half Moon, first dropped anchor in Sandy Hook Bay on September 3rd and began exploring the region. The following Sunday, September 6th, John Coleman and four other crewmen sailed into Newark Bay in a small boat, becoming the first European explorers to visit the area. The first description of the future site of Elizabethtown is given in Coleman's report: "The lands were as pleasant with Grasse and Floweres, and goodly Trees, as ever they had seene, and very sweet smells came from them." This first impression proved to be correct, for the area was soon recognized as being one of the most desirable for settlement in all of New Netherland, the Dutch-controlled region extending from the Delaware Bay to Cape Cod.

As early as 1613, the Dutch had established a trading post at the tip of Manhattan Island. By 1624, settlers began to extend outward from that original location into the surrounding areas, including the western shores of Achter Kol, the Dutch name for Newark Bay. Actually, the name "Achter Kol" means "behind the bay" and has come down to us today as Arthur Kill, the narrow waterway between New Jersey and Staten Island.

Several early attempts to colonize the area were unsuccessful because of hostile relations with the native Indian inhabitants caused in large part by the mismanagement of the Dutch government in these matters.

Meanwhile, events unfolding in Europe would soon have an impact on this area. Charles II had been restored to the throne in England in 1660 and soon turned his attention to the establishment of English control over the desirable Dutch territories in the New World. The King gave his brother, James, the Duke of York, a large grant of land, which included the entire province of New Netherland. The English based their claims to the territory on John Cabot's discovery and exploration of the eastern coast of North America in 1498. To enforce this claim, the Duke, who, conveniently, was also Lord High Admiral, sent a naval force under the command of Col. Richard Nicholls, who received a commission to serve as deputy governor of the grant. The fleet arrived at New Amsterdam on August 19, 1664, and Col. Nicholls demanded the surrender of the town on the next day. Following a week of negotiations, the terms of surrender were agreed upon, and on August 29th the Dutch authorities surrendered. New Amsterdam became New York, and within a few weeks, the entire province of New Netherland from Maine to Carolina came under the control of England.

The change of government came as good news to certain of the English inhabitants on the western end of Long Island. For several years they had sought permission from the Dutch government to settle in the area of Achter Kol, but to no avail. Therefore, they lost no time in petitioning the new governor, Col. Nicholls, for permission to purchase land in the area. On September 26, 1664 a petition was sent to the governor requesting permission, "...to purchas and setle a parcel of land to Improve our labor upon the river before mentioned." It was signed by John Bailey, Daniel Denton, Thomas Benydict, Nathanel Denton, John Foster, and Luke Watson. The petition received a prompt reply from the governor: "Upon Perusal of this Peticon, I do Consent unto the proposals and Shall Give the undertakers all Due Encouragement in so Good a work. Given under my hand in fort James, this 30th of September 1664. Richard Nicholls."

The petitioners immediately set out to arrange a meeting with the local Indians who owned the land in question. The meeting was held on Staten Island with Capt. John Baker of New York serving as an English and Dutch interpreter

and one of the Indians serving as an Indian and Dutch interpreter. The discussions seemed to have progressed in a satisfactory manner, and on October 28, 1664 a tract of land was purchased. The deed was signed with the marks of the Lenape Chiefs Mattano, Sewak, and Warinaco. Under the terms of the purchase, John Bailey, Daniel Denton, and Luke Watson, and their Associates agreed to pay upon occupation of the land, "Twenty fathom of Trading Cloath, Two made Coats, Two Guns Two Kettles Ten Bars of Lead Twenty Handfuls of powder." They further promised to pay, within a year of occupying the land, "four hundred fathom of white wampum."

The Associates submitted the deed to Gov. Nicholls for his official confirmation of their title as was required by law. The Governor confirmed their purchase on December 1, 1664. Although there is no record of the actual date of the first occupation of the newly purchased land, it is probable that some small settlement occurred between October 28th and December 1st. Settlement on a larger scale would have had to wait until the following spring.

According to the terms of the deed, the boundaries of the land purchased from the Lenni Lenapi extended from the Raritan River northward along the shores of the Achter Kol and Newark Bay to a small stream at the mouth of the Passaic River. Between these two boundaries, the land extended westward for a distance of thirty-four miles. The territory included all of present-day Union County as well as large parts of Morris and Somerset counties—an area of almost 500,000 acres.

Governor Philip Carteret arrived at Achter Kol, as the new settlement was first known, in August of 1665 and found a tiny, but growing, town of several dozen families. Carteret had been appointed governor by his uncle, Sir George Carteret, who in turn, along with Lord Berkeley, had received Nova Caesarea (New Jersey) as a grant from the Duke of York. The new governor purchased a share in the enterprise and became an Associate.

It was likely that during this period the little settlement at Achter Kol received its formal name. The town, according to tradition, was named in honor

of Lady Elizabeth, the wife of Sir George Carteret, and thus became known as Elizabethtown. Although she never lived here, Lady Elizabeth Carteret is remembered as a woman of high moral principles, who frequently criticized the vices prevalent at the Royal Court in London. Her portrait hangs in the main branch of the Elizabeth Public Library.

It is well to remember, therefore, that the origins of the oldest English settlement in New Jersey, and the State's first capital, can be traced back three-and-a-half centuries to that peaceful agreement concluded between the native inhabitants and the English settlers in the wigwam of Mattano on Staten Island on October 28, 1664. And today one can easily imagine that those first intrepid pioneers would be pleased, but not surprised, to know that their tiny settlement would ultimately succeed and, 350 years later, become a thriving urban center still attracting new generations for the same reason: the desire to make a new life in a better place.