

What Does Arasapha Mean?

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June 2023*

We don't know why Arasapha Garden Club chose Arasapha as its name when the club was founded in 1934. All records from Arasapha's first ten years are lost, along with New Castle newspaper records from the early 1930s. We do know from Wilmington newspaper records that the club called itself the New Castle Garden Club at its organizational meeting in January 1934. By June 1934 it was calling itself Arasapha Garden Club.

We also know that, over the decades since then, Arasapha documents have frequently described Arasapha as a Native American word for "the bend in the river" where the Delaware River meets the Delaware Bay. So it's likely that's what the founding members thought Arasapha meant when they chose it as the club's name.

But is that what Arasapha really means? The short answer is no. The word Arasapha turns up in two places in the history of colonial America, and neither has anything to do with the Delaware River or indeed anything in the state of Delaware.

Arasapha was once the name of today's Kingston, New York.

Arasapha, New York, was captured by the English in 1664. The earliest document I found that mentions Arasapha is a book published in 1685 by Nathaniel Crouch, writing under the pen name R. B. Crouch described how the English took control over American colonies from the Dutch and Swedes about 20 years earlier. He included this statement, "Thirteen days after [August 29, 1664] Sir Robert Car took the Fort and Town of Aurania, now called Albany, and twelve days after that the Fort and Town of Arosapha, then Delaware [New] Castle man'd with Dutch and Swedes."¹

The capture of Arosapha (sometimes spelled Arasapha) is mentioned in several other books published in the 1700s:

- In 1702 Thomas Campanius Holm wrote in Swedish, "...in the year 1664, King Charles II of England, sent over troops with four commissioners to Virginia; for the purpose, as was said, of...ascertaining its divisions and boundaries; by which opportunity they expelled the Dutch from the territory, first taking possession of their principal city of New Amsterdam and then, of their town and fortress of Auriana and Arosapha. Then they took Delaware Castle, which was peopled by Swedes and Dutchmen..."² It's important to note that all territory between Florida and New England was called Virginia in those days. In the 1834 translation of this book, a footnote after "Auriana and Arosapha" says "Fort Orange, now Albany. Another footnote after "Delaware Castle" says "Newcastle on Delaware."
- In 1728 Robert Burton repeated Crouch's statement about Arosapha in the sixth edition of Crouch's book.³
- In 1744 Pierre Francois Xavier de Charlevoix, writing in French, told the same story in a different way: "...in this year [1664] the king of England, Charles II, having been informed that the Dutch were beginning to encroach on the English, sent four commissaries with good troops, who, without resistance, took possession of Manhatte, or New Amsterdam, which they called New York, of Orange, which they styled Albany, of the city of Arasapha, and of the Castle of Lavare."⁴

A footnote in a 1900 translation of this book notes, “Arasapha is probably Esopus. The Chateau de Lavare is De La Warre”—in other words, New Castle in Delaware. Note that Charlevoix spells the town as Arasapha rather than Arosapha. This is the earliest document I’ve found with this spelling.

- In 1759 Israel Acrelius, rector of Old Swedes Church in Wilmington, wrote (in Swedish), “...Thirteen days later Sir Robert Carr anchored before the town and Fort of Aurania (Oranien = Orange [now Albany]), then twelve days later before Arosapha (Esopus), and made himself master of them.”⁵
- In Spain in 1786, Antonio de Alcedo wrote (in Spanish) the following entry for Arasapha in *Geographical-Historical Dictionary of the West Indies or America, Volume I*: “City of the Province and Colony of New York, founded by the Dutch in 1608, has a good fortress: the English, commanded by Robert Car, took it in 1640 and have kept it ever since.”⁶

The New York town and fort of Arasapha have been mentioned in one more incident in colonial history. In 1759 Israel Acrelius shared the story of William Beekman, who was appointed vice governor of New Netherlands—the Dutch colony in North America—in 1658. Acrelius wrote, “Beekman was removed to Hudson’s river, and appointed Commissary or Schout at Arosapha, or Esopus, on the 4th of July, 1664.”⁵ This appointment didn’t last long, because the English captured Arosapha only a couple of months later. Later books confirm this story.

Arasapha, New York, was also called Esopus. You may have noticed that Acrelius mentioned that Arosapha or Arasapha was also known as Esopus. Arosapha/Arasapha/Esopus was about 55 miles south of Albany, along the Hudson River. It was first settled by Europeans in the 1650s and named Esopus after the local Lenape tribe. (I haven’t found any information on why it was initially named Arosapha or Arasapha.) Esopus was renamed Kingston when the English captured it, and it remains Kingston today. (Another town south of Kingston is named Esopus today, but it was founded much later, in 1811.)

Over 400 years ago, Arasapha was erroneously connected to Delaware.

A very early book called the Delaware River the “Zuid” (South) River. As we’ve seen, Crouch’s 1685 tale of the capture of Arasapha, New York, was confirmed in several books published in the 1700s. But it was misquoted in one book, creating an error that has continued—and expanded—for centuries.

In the 1600s, Peter Heylyn, an English historian, began writing books describing the world as known at that time. *Microcosmos*⁷ was first published in 1621. It was extremely popular, with eight editions published by 1639.

The success of *Microcosmos* inspired Heylyn to write a much larger and more detailed four-volume book. *Cosmographie*⁸ was first published in 1652. It was so popular that multiple editions were published, including some after his death in 1662.

Heylyn did not mention Arasapha in his books. In fact, none of the *Microcosmos* editions mentions any places between the Chesapeake Bay and New York. The editions of *Cosmographie* published during his lifetime do briefly mention the Delaware River, but not by that name. By the mid-1600s the Dutch called the Hudson River the Noordt (North) River and the Delaware River the Zuid (South) River. The 1657 edition of *Cosmographie* says only this about the Delaware River: “Zuid Rivier, so called because more

Southerly than the first; as fair as that, but hitherto not so well discovered.”⁸ No mention was made of Arasapha.

A popular 1703 book mistakenly combined Arasapha, New Castle, and Delaware. The trouble of mis-associating Arasapha with Delaware started with the posthumous 1703 edition of *Cosmography*, which featured “an historical continuation to the present times” by Edmund Bohun. Bohun, writing only 18 years after Crouch, shared Crouch’s story of Arasapha this way: “Sir Robert Carr took the Fort and Town of Aurania, now called Albany: Twelve days after that, Arasapha, now Delaware, by which the English became Masters of three handsome Towns, and as many Forts.”⁹

Compare Bohun’s statement with Crouch’s, which says, “Sir Robert Car took the Fort and Town of Aurania, now called Albany, and twelve days after that the Fort and Town of Arosapha, then Delaware [New] Castle.” Bohun made two errors. First, he said that Arasapha was an early name for Delaware, when Crouch made clear that Arasapha and Delaware were two separate places. Second, he dropped the reference to New Castle, suggesting that the town and fort of New Castle were named Delaware.

Bohun kept Heydyn’s statement calling the Delaware River the Zuid (South) River, but he added a new section calling it the Delaware River and mentioning New Castle: “Since our Author wrote, there has been a new Plantation by Charles II, in 1681, granted to Pen a Quaker, by the name of Pennsylvania, bounded on the East by the River Delaware, 12 Miles distance from Newcastle.” Bohun also mentioned that “East and West Jersey lye...between the River Delaware to the South, and Hudson to the North.”

The 1703 error grew and morphed. As I’ve noted, *Cosmography* was very popular. (Peter Heylyn, the original author, was buried in Westminster Abbey, which says something about the esteem in which he was held.) For centuries writers repeated and embellished statements in it. Bohun’s incorrect statement that Arasapha was an early name for “Delaware” (really New Castle) morphed into even more incorrect statements. Perhaps because Bohun’s mentions of the Delaware River were just a few paragraphs after the “Arasapha, now Delaware” line, writers began saying that Arasapha was an early name for the Delaware River. They also started saying that Arasapha was an *Indian* name for the Delaware River:

- In 1850 Samuel Hazard wrote, “The [Delaware] bay and river have been known by different names at different times... Heylin, in his *Cosmography*, calls it Arasapha.”¹⁰ As we know, this is wrong. In the 1703 edition of *Cosmography*, Bohun said that Arasapha was a town and fort, not the river.
- Also in 1850 John Watson wrote, “P. Heylin, in his *Cosmography*, says the Indians called this [Delaware] river Arasapha and the bay Poutaxat.”¹¹ As we know, *Cosmography* said no such thing.
- The 1870 Philadelphia *Public Ledger Almanac* wrote, “Heylin, in his *Microcosmos*, or description of the world, published in 1622, calls the river Arasapha, which seems to have been derived from Arasaphe, ‘it goes fine,’ meaning a river at all times navigable and useful.”¹² This definition was repeated in the 1889 book *Illustrated Philadelphia*¹³. As we know, Heylyn’s *Microcosmos* didn’t mention the Delaware River at all, and none of Heylyn’s works suggested any explanation of origin of the word Arasapha.

Over the decades many other books reiterated the erroneous idea that Arasapha was an Indian name for the Delaware River. In 1876, for example, Edward Wheeler wrote, “To eke out his supplies, [early Delaware explorer and settler Pieterzen] De Vries, in his yacht, the Squirrel, with seven men made a trip up the Poutaxit, as the Indians called Zuydt, South, Godyn’s, or Delaware Bay; and above into the Lenape-ittuck, Mackerish-kitton, or Arasapha, as the red men had named the Zuydt, South, Godyn’s,

Prince Hendrick's, or Delaware River."¹⁴ This list of names was soon repeated by other writers. Even today, websites such as anyplaceamerica.com list Arasapha as one of the names of the Delaware River.

Two Delaware historians tried to set the record straight. In 1950 Delaware historians A. R. Dunlap and C. A. Weslager offered a succinct summary of all this: "Arasapha, or Arosapha, was located on the Hudson River and not on the Delaware. Let us, as gracefully as possible, return the name to the state of New York, where it belongs."¹⁵ (Many thanks to Russ Smith, former superintendent of First State National Historical Park, for pointing me to this book.)

Unfortunately, it appears that Dunlap and Weslager's message has been largely drowned out by all the books and resources continuing to say, incorrectly, that Arasapha was an Indian name for the Delaware River.

A tribal chief named Arasapha played a key role in the history of Camden, New Jersey.

Arasapha lived at present-day Camden in the late 1600s and early 1700s. Between 1674 and 1702, New Jersey was split in two parts: East Jersey and West Jersey. West Jersey was owned and governed by a small group of men known as the West Jersey Proprietors. According to a 1909 book by Howard Cooper, when West Jersey was created, the only inhabitants of today's city of Camden were a tribe of Delaware Indians whose chief was Arasapha.¹⁶ In 1677, the West Jersey Proprietors bought the tribe's rights to Camden's territory from them.

Arasapha lived near William Cooper, one of Camden's founding settlers. For the next five years, Arasapha's tribe continued to live on Camden's lands. Then in 1682 the West Jersey Proprietors granted William Cooper three hundred acres, including the land occupied by the tribe. Cooper built a home there that he called Pyne Poynt. The tribe, still led by Arasapha, was friendly, and Cooper wanted to keep things that way. As George Prowell explained in 1886, William Cooper, "further to satisfy the tribe," "paid them for the right they still claimed" and "extinguished what rights they might possess at Pyne Point."¹⁷

Cooper and representatives of the tribe signed documents finalizing this agreement. It's not clear who signed on behalf of the tribe or indeed who was its chief at the time. In 1877 John Clement wrote that Arasapha conveyed the land to Cooper.¹⁸ In 1932, Frank Stewart agreed, saying Arasapha "sold Pine Point, Camden, to the Cooper settlers."¹⁹

But in 1896 Howard Cooper wrote that William Cooper "received from them [the tribe] a deed signed by Talacca, their resident chief and witnessed by several of their tribe."²⁰

And in 1886, George Prowell wrote that Arasapha and Tallacca both were tribal chiefs, and both were involved in the transaction. Specifically, he said Cooper received "a conveyance from the chief Arasapha" and "received from them a deed executed by Tallacca, their chief, and witnessed by several of their tribe."¹⁷

Arasapha attended a funeral in 1703. Regardless of who signed the deed, the tribe apparently continued to live in the area on friendly terms with William Cooper and his neighbors. Over twenty years later, in 1703, Esther Spicer, who lived just north of William Cooper, died from a lightning strike. The

funeral was the following night. John Clement painted an evocative picture of it, with “family and friends going in boats down Cooper’s creek [today’s Cooper River] to the [Delaware] river, and by the river to Newton creek, and thence to the Newton graveyard... Each boat being provided with torches, the scene upon the water must have been picturesque indeed... To the Indians, it was a grand and impressive sight. Arasapha, the king, and others of his people attended the solemn procession in their canoes, thus showing their respect for one, the cause of whose death struck them with awe and reverence.”¹⁸

The Cooper family named a ferry “Arasapha.” By 1715 the Cooper family was operating ferries across the Delaware River to Shackamoxon (present-day Kensington in Philadelphia). The business prospered, and by the mid-1800s the family was adding new ferries, including the *Arasapha*, which was built in 1861.¹⁷ It was apparently a final tribute to the tribal chief with whom William Cooper clearly had a cordial relationship.

Arasapha appeared in two other contexts in the early 20th century.

Arasapha was the name of a mill in Chester, Pennsylvania. Arasapha Manufacturing Company was founded in Chester in 1885 and operated Arasapha Textile Mill there until the 1950s. A 2007 webpage on the history of the company²¹ gives the “bend in the river” definition of Arasapha that is in the garden club’s records. It’s not clear whether Arasapha Manufacturing Company promoted this definition or if the 2007 webpage author found Arasapha Garden Club’s definition and added it to the webpage. I haven’t found any other resource saying that Arasapha meant “the bend in the river,” so it’s a mystery why this is repeated so often in the garden club’s records.

Arasapha was the name of some fraternal lodges. Arasapha was also a term used by the Improved Order of Red Men, a fraternal organization founded in 1834. Ironically, the order was open only to white men. Membership peaked in 1921 with over half a million members nationwide. Local lodges were called tribes, and there were two “tribes” named Arasapha, one in Atlantic City and one in Garrettford (Drexel Hill), Pennsylvania.²² Ironically, the organization wasn’t aware of the history of the word, writing, “This word [Arasapha] cannot be found among any of the books on Indian history. The nearest is that ‘Awasapoes,’ a family of the Arrapalatoes, and is spoken of by Drake in his work on the Indian Tribes.”²³

So What Does Arasapha Mean?

Arasapha was an early name of a fort and town that became Kingston, New York, and the name of a tribal leader who lived on land that became Camden, New Jersey. I’ve seen no evidence that Arasapha was a name for the Delaware River or had any other historic connection to New Castle or the state of Delaware.

But the research that went into this conclusion is far from complete. If you have any additional information on what Arasapha means or why the garden club chose Arasapha as its name, please contact Arasapha Garden Club at ArasaphaGarden@gmail.com.

Sources:

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- ¹¹ John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, in the Olden Time* (1850)
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- ²¹ *Old Chester, PA: Arasapha Textile Mill* (http://www.oldchesterpa.com/mills_arasapha_textile.htm) (2007)
- ²² *Record of the Great Council of the United States Improved Order of Red Men* (1900)
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