

# The Name “Red Hook”: Fact, Fiction Or Both? The Mystery Continues...

By Christopher and Claudine Klose, September 19, 2023

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History records events based on verifiable sources. Legend conveys stories handed down through oral tradition, often factual, or a mix of fact and fiction, sometimes out of whole cloth, (Archbishop Usher’s calculation from the Bible that Earth was created on 4004 BCE is an all-time favorite!).

For more than 400 years, Red Hook has been caught between the two, as people debate how the town got its name.



*The most popular explanation for the town’s name points to the bright red color of the Virginia creeper in autumn.*

Legend has long held that Red Hook was named by Henry Hudson and his crew, after they anchored the Half Moon off a small “hook” of land (the small peninsula today known as Cruger Island) north of the present-day hamlet of Annandale on September 15, 1609, when the sumac and Virginia creeper covering the island were ablaze in autumn red. They immediately called it ‘Roed Hoeck,’ goes the story.

In fact, Hudson’s first mate, fellow Englishman Robert Juet, kept a meticulous list in his journal of the dates, places and distances (north and south) between anchorages of the Half Moon. Sailing up the river on September 15 (read entry on page 593 here), they certainly must have passed Cruger Island ablaze in autumn color but the journal does not record anything about such a point of land in seasonal display, either on September 15 or on their return voyage. Alerted to the Half Moon’s scuttlebut, subsequent Dutch mariners may have coined the name “Roed Hoeck.” Commonsensical, yes. Confirmed history, no.

The Town of Red Hook’s “official” origin story on its website is an embellished mix of fact and tradition: “Prior to the European settlement of the Kingston region in the 1650s’s, the Red Hook area was inhabited by the Esopus and Sepasco Indians. It is said that early Dutch navigators charting the River came upon Cruger’s Island (actually a peninsula or “hoek”) when it was turning red with sumac and Virginia creeper in early autumn: hence the name “Red Hoek.” And without citation, Wikipedia blithely states: “The name is supposedly derived from the red foliage on trees on a small strip of land on the Hudson River.”



*Detail from a 1797 map of the Town of Rhinebeck surveyed by Alexander Thompson, showing the name "Red Hook" next to Tivoli. (original, New York State Archives)*

The New York Times of July 14, 2021, pontificates: "Rolling upland from the Hudson River to hills to the east, Red Hook is not named for tomato-colored fishing tackle, although an illustration showing that image appears on many signs. Instead, the name is derived from the Dutch phrase for "red point" — how the Hudson's Cruger Island peninsula looked to explorers one autumn day in the 17th century when its sumac leaves were ablaze, according to historical accounts."

More than 25 years earlier, Red Hook native, reporter, and author Clare O'Neill Carr had attested, without citation, in her Brief History of Red Hook that "the Half Moon (Halve Moen) anchored near 'Cruger's Island on the evening of September 15, 1609...the Half Moon lingered for a day and two nights. The island, really a peninsula at low tide, was turning autumn red from its dense growth of sumac and Virginia Creeper. Noting the shade and shape of the headland, the sailors called it 'Roed Hoeck,' the Dutch name for Red Hook."

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What's a body to do about "Red Hook," especially when faced with that upstart part of Brooklyn [which has long laid erroneous claim to our name], as related by the Brooklyn Library in its blog post of September 10, 2019: "To start by saying Red Hook was founded by the Dutch in 1636 would be an erasure of the Lenape people who lived along the marshy waterfront before any Europeans arrived and claimed land that wasn't theirs. The Lenape called it Sassian, but the Dutch gave it a name that stuck, Roode Hoek, famously because of the color of the soil and the shape of the landmass."

Or the Brooklyn Waterfront Museum testimony that "The Dutch established the village of Red Hook (Roode Hoek) in 1636. Red Hook was one of the earliest areas in Brooklyn to be settled. The area was named for its red clay soil and the hook shape of its peninsular corner of Brooklyn that projects into the East River."

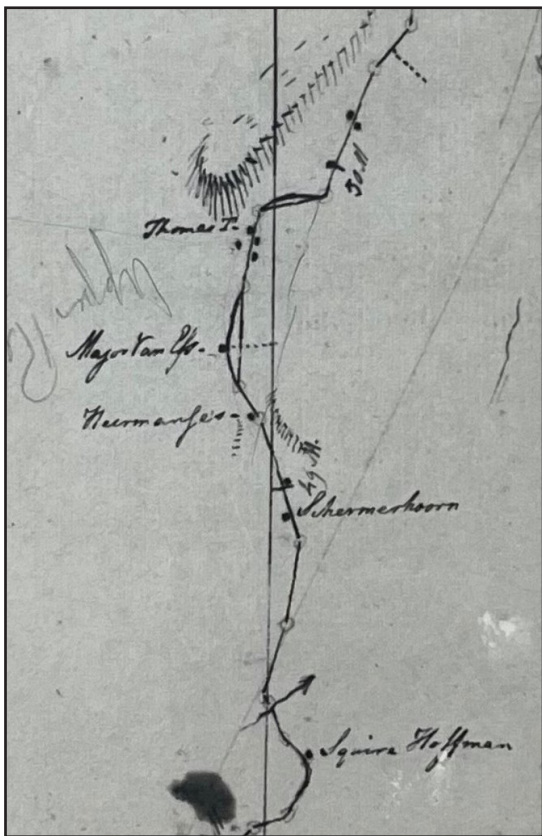
That may be true for Brooklyn. But as far as our Red Hook goes, Town Historian Emily Majer points out that the "clay along the north (Tivoli) bay is blue. And farther inland up the creek, it is white."

So the answer to our "Red Hook" lies in more, not less, research. Over many, many decades various respected writers and historians have gone on record about our name. For example, Edward M. Smith in



his 1881 Documentary History of Rhinebeck theorized that the name came from red barns. The Hoffman family operated a mill near Tivoli bay early in the eighteenth century and red was the cheapest paint color to make (from iron oxide). Smith asserts “the Hoffmans were an important people, and we have no doubt their corner was, in its day, an important one to the neighborhood...when the Hoffmans painted they used red, as most everybody else did.” He concludes, “we have no doubt the corner occupied by Hoffman’s Mill had its buildings painted red and that this was the origin of Red Hook.”

One year later, another Smith – James H. – writing about Red Hook in his History of Dutchess County refutes the red barn theory, saying “If nearly all who painted in those days used red, then each of a possible half-dozen points in the



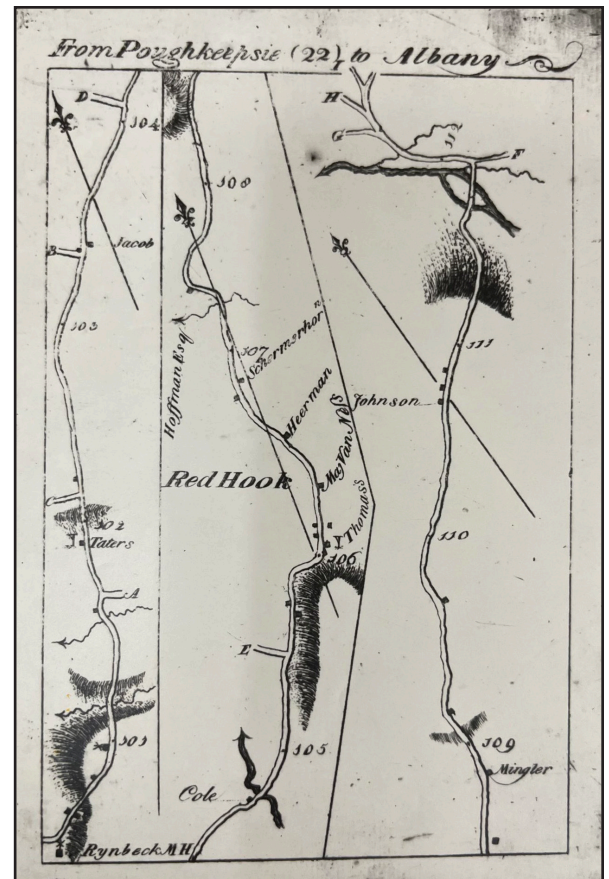
Detail of map prepared by Robert Erskine and Simeon DeWitt at the order of George Washington, c 1778-1783, with a label for the Thomas House in Upper Red Hook as “Tomas T[avern]” (original, New York Historical Society).

town could as appropriately claim to be the source of the town’s name.” He points to Upper Red Hook as the source of the

name, using a different interpretation of the word ‘hoek.’ “It derives its name from the fact that a noted tavern, built of red brick, stood at the cross roads, which in Dutch is styled a “hoek,” a term generally supposed to be restricted to a hook or point of land projecting into the water,” he writes, referring to what generations have long called the Thomas House, in Upper Red Hook, marked near the words ‘Red Hook’ on a 1789 survey of the Albany Post Road.

In his 1887 General History of Dutchess County 1609-1876, Phillip H. Smith attributes the name to “a marsh near Tivoli, which, when first seen (when and by whom he does not cite), was covered with ripe cranberries...”

In a paper presented to the Upper Red Hook Historical Soci-



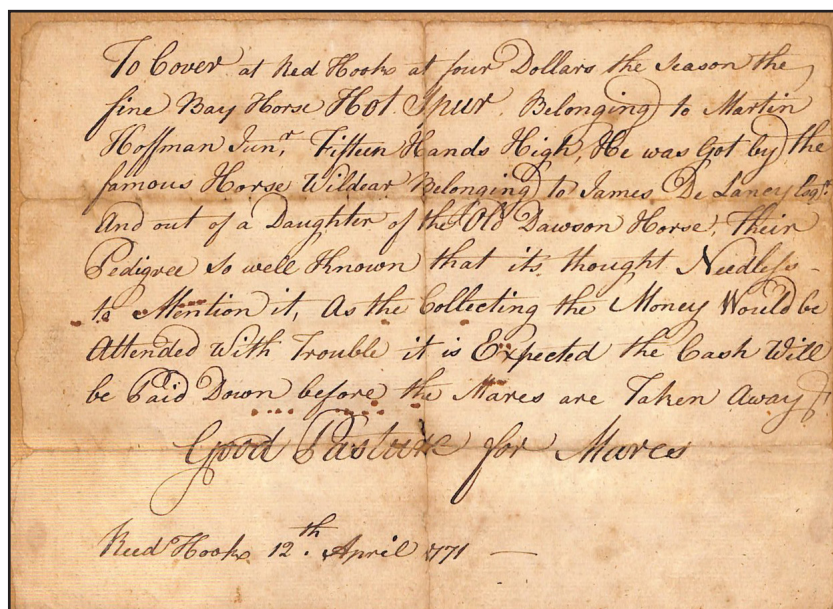
1789 map of the Albany Post Road from Poughkeepsie to Albany by Christopher Colles, from his book, *A Survey of the Roads of the United States of America*, called ‘America’s first road book.’ The name “Red Hook” appears near Thomas’s Inn (original, Library of Congress).

ety in 1949, Rev. Charles S. Champlin, argued “there have been several explanations or accounts as to the origin of the name Red Hook, but only one of them has any reliability to it, and that is, a Scott by the name of Red (spelled Reade and Redd) bought of Chancellor Livingston a tract of land on the river which included the estate, or a part of the estate now owned by Mrs. William Osborn, formerly Mrs. Johnson Livingston Redmond. On that property, and below the Tivoli R.R. station ran a narrow strip southwards, and shaped somewhat like a hook, and on it he built a landing for river traffic, and in a map of Rhinebeck made in 1798, it was called Red Hook Landing.

Perhaps. But in the biography of John Reade (1745-1808) accompanying his Family Papers held in the University of Delaware Library Special Collections, “Red Hook” remains absent, although Reade was known as a successful Red Hook and Poughkeepsie land speculator. He had purchased the point at present-day Tivoli and established a freight business there, but not until about 1790, well after the name Red Hook first appears.

To wit, Historic Red Hook recently acquired an original 1771 advertising flyer announcing a horse breeding opportunity: “To Cover at Red Hook at four Dollars the season the fine Bay Horse HotSpur.”

There you have it as far as we know for now, dear reader. But don’t despair, courtesy of Wint Aldrich, former longtime Town Historian, we are in contact with the New Netherland Institute, in Albany, to re-search the latest “olde” news they might have uncovered that finally will secure our Red Hook as first among equals... to Brooklyn’s great chagrin!



Flyer, dated April 12, 1771, advertising the breeding services in “Red Hook” of a stallion owned by Martin Hoffman. (Original, Historic Red Hook).