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Go: "We are not Williamsburg" - Historic New Castle, Del. is a gem of a breathing historic village

By MICHAEL SCHUMAN
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A few hundred years ago squires in powdered wigs and knee-breeches went about their daily routines on the street where I am standing. In front of me is a British style courthouse dating to 1732. Behind it is a spacious town green, dominated by a statue of William Penn. The street is made of rust red brick, and a side street around the corner is constructed of basic cobblestone, tricky to drive on and tough to walk on.

So where am I? Philadelphia? Colonial Williamsburg?

How about New Castle, Delaware?

Make that Historic New Castle, Delaware.

FOR THE RECORD

Much of New Castle is an unspectacular suburb of Wilmington. But Historic New Castle is a 20-odd-square block of historic buildings, including Georgian, Federal and Victorian architecture. But, Brian Cannon, lead interpreter at the New Castle Courthouse Museum, advises, "We are not a Williamsburg." Some buildings are open as house museums; others are restaurants and galleries, but private citizens live in the majority of the sidewalk-hugging homes.

To be honest, Historic New Castle is a little heard-of place in a little heard-from state. New Castle was Delaware's first capital, so it is well-known by Delaware schoolchildren. But it's not a stretch to say that many residents of the country's East Coast know Delaware for the 15-minute-long drive through its northern corner that takes one to Philadelphia and New York. That is a shame because Historic New Castle is a gem of a breathing historic village that doesn't really look like its better-known colonial neighbors.

Historic New Castle was a place where things didn't change much from year to year. However, that changed in 2013 when the National Park Service entered the picture. Today the courthouse is a partner with First State National Historical Park, founded to preserve the places that commemorate the settlement of the first state to ratify the United States Constitution. But First State National Historical Park is not like most National Park Service properties that consist of a single building or battlefield. There are seven units, scattered throughout the state from Wilmington in the north to Lewes in the south.

While the only parts of Historic New Castle that are also in the National Park Service site are The Green and the buildings on it (most notable the courthouse), there is enough intrigue in the old town to occupy visitors' time for the better part of a day. For one thing, it is fun just to wander the streets not knowing what you will come across on the next block.

The best place to begin a visit is the town visitor center, located in a former arsenal on Market Street. Exhibits and a viewing area for a short introductory film today occupy the

Editor's note Go is an occasional travel feature spotlighting places to go and things to within an eight-hour's drive of Hampton Roads.

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space where ammunition used in the War of 1812 was stored.

Just around the corner is the courthouse, the heart and soul of Historic New Castle. Two tables, one for the attorney, the other for the court clerk, are topped with items such as spectacles, quill pens; handcuffs; a jail key; and a thick, old Bible. Kids love sitting in the defendant's box to play the — alleged — bad guy. They can also play the good guy by taking a seat behind the judge's bench and calling the court to order with a bang of a gavel.

The wooden staff on view, officially called a tipstaff, was used by a court official whose position was similar to a bailiff today. It was a sign of his authority. At the top of the tipstaff is a triangle painted red on one side and white on the other. It stood in a

sideways position until the jury reached a verdict. If a defendant was guilty, the red side was turned to face the courtroom. White indicated not guilty.

Until 1776, there was no such colony of Delaware. What is now Delaware were the lower three counties of the colony of Pennsylvania; hence, a stately statue of William Penn overlooks Market Square. It was in this courthouse on June 15, 1776 that Delaware declared its independence from Great Britain and at the same time waved goodbye to Pennsylvania.

A few visitor center galleries put Delaware's odd history into context. The colony was first settled by Sweden, and the Old Swedes Church, which depending on the source, is either the oldest or one of the oldest churches continually in use in the country. It is roughly five miles away in the city of Wilmington (More on that later.)

The Swedes and the Dutch settled different parts of what would become Delaware, but ultimately the British ruled the colony. Second floor exhibits also explore the African-American experience in Delaware, which wasn't a pleasant one. Slavery was legal here until the Civil War's end. Then in 1875 when the first of several pro-discrimination laws was passed, Jim Crow ruled with an iron fist for decades. On the flip side, Delaware played a major part in the Underground Railroad.

To experience what life was like outside the confines of the courthouse, step inside any of three historic homes open to the public. Each is distinctly different from the others. The green paneling in the Georgian-style Amstel House, built in 1738, was a sign of a wealthy family in these parts. George Washington came to this house to celebrate the wedding of the daughter of then resident Governor Nicholas Van Dyke in 1784. Two original swatches of her wedding ensemble — one solid rusty brown, the other rusty brown with cream stripes — displayed in the front parlor; the tradition of brides wearing white did not begin until the reign of Queen Victoria in the next century.

The cozy Dutch House, brick with red door and shutters and a massively sloping roof, is the oldest house in New Castle and the second oldest in the state. Constructed between 1690 and 1700, it was initially home to a colonial artisan. Period furniture includes a pouting chair, crafted for crabby toddlers to spend a time out while having a bad day. It's fun to spend a few moments trying to guess the purposes of the Dutch-colonial cooking utensils in the kitchen.

Down by the Delaware River is the aristocratic Read House and Gardens. The 14,000-square foot, 22-room house reflects the styles of the three families who lived there: the Reads and Coupers in the 19th century and the Lairds, relatives of the famed Dupont family, in the early 20th century. The range of décor is wide, with trompe-l'oeil designs, gilded fanlights, and gardens dating to 1847.

It's roughly a 20-minute drive from New Castle to inner-city Wilmington where remnants of Delaware's earliest days, and part of First State National Historical Park, exist. The site of Fort Christina, where Swedes and Finns settled in 1638 is today marked with a monument. But Old Swedes Church still stands like a stone sentinel guarding its old burial ground. Built in 1698 and 1699, it is one of the few surviving remnants of the original New Sweden Colony.

Even though the church has witnessed centuries of history, officials discovered not long ago that is never too late to learn something new. In the 1990s craftsmen refurbishing the house of worship peeled away dozens of layers of paint on a wooden door — only to

and graffiti dating back centuries. The earliest scribble was etched here in 1711. It was ultimately decided not to repaint the door and the graffiti of ghosts past is displayed for visitors to see.

Before leaving, be sure to spend some time in the Hendrickson House, built between 1722 and 1730 as a private residence. Today it offers a look at the time when the colonial Swedes and Dutch were in power. For example, flax was the fabric of choice in this time and place. It wasn't as flammable as cotton and it kept moisture off one's skin. Children as young as four learned how to spin flax into thread and in order to bleach flax white it was soaked in urine and set out in the sun to dry.

And that's one detail you likely remember long after you have forgotten who was married in the Amstel House.

if you go

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New Castle, Delaware is about 240 miles north of Norfolk,
Va. <https://www.nps.gov/frst/index.htm>

Dining suggestion: A few steps from the courthouse in Historic New Castle is Jessop's Tavern & Colonial Restaurant where the décor and menu are delightfully colonial. Entrees include: New Sweden meatloaf; shepherd's pie, and Hutspot Dutch pot roast, all priced at \$17. www.jessops-tavern.com

Lodging

Terry House Bed and Breakfast, 130 Delaware St. in Historic New Castle (302) 322-2505, rooms: \$100-\$125/night with full breakfast. www.terryhouse.com

Sheraton Wilmington South New Castle, 365 Airport Road, (302) 328-6200, rates for doubles: \$119-\$189. www.marriott.com

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