

Tales of Arasapha's First 50 Years: Historic New Castle's Street Signs

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Arasapha Garden Club is known today for its support of the historic Amstel and Dutch House gardens, its annual May Market fundraiser, and its annual Holiday Greening project. As we celebrate Arasapha's 90th anniversary this year, we're looking back on other projects the club undertook in its first 50 years, including the delightful street signs throughout New Castle's historic district.

For hundreds of years, towns like New Castle had few street signs, and houses and businesses were rarely numbered. Street signs and numbers weren't really needed. Because travel was difficult, people generally traveled only when they knew where they were going. Businesses used eye-catching signs instead of street numbers to help people find them. Mail was delivered to the local post office, not to homes and businesses.

Large cities were the first to recognize the value of adding street signs and house numbers. In the 1850s, Philadelphia came up with a system of naming streets and assigning numbers that became a national model. The city numbered its north-south streets, which made it easy to find, say, 15th Street. It assigned street numbers by block, which made it easy to find, say, 1520 Locust Street on the block between 15th and 16th Streets. And it assigned even numbers on one side of the street and odd numbers on the other, sequentially, making it even easier to find a particular address.

But by the early 1890s New Castle, like many other small towns, still had no house numbers and virtually no street signs except on a few corner buildings.



One of New Castle's earliest street signs

But small towns like New Castle were beginning to see the need to add street signs and house numbers. Trolleys, bicycles, and automobiles were making travel easier and increasing the number of independent travelers who needed help finding where they wanted to go. City

directories (early versions of telephone books), censuses, tax assessors and tax collectors also needed clearer addresses.

So in 1893 New Castle's Mayor Frank Herbert proposed that New Castle follow Philadelphia's model of naming streets and numbering houses. He proposed changing the names of Water Street to Front, Market Street to Second, Orange and Pearl Streets to Third, Vine Street to Fourth and Union Street to Fifth. (The streets past Union were already named Sixth, Seventh, and so on. The Delaware General Assembly would change Front Street to The Strand in 1907). The mayor also proposed having street names put on street lamps.



Another early street sign, created before this block of Market Street was renamed Second Street in 1893

Mayor Herbert justified his proposal by explaining, "This is a progressive move. It has long been wanted. A stranger wants to find Mr. A, and on inquiry he is told to 'go two blocks this way, then turn to the left, keep on to the old tree on the corner, then go up that little street one square and turn to the right, and anyone will show you where Mr. A lives.' But before long, when Mr. A, of No. 27 North Third Street is asked for, then the person can be directed easily, and he can find his man without any trouble at all. The lamps will have the streets painted on them. And plenty of lamps will burn."

Mayor Herbert was doubtless thinking that numbered streets would help travelers, who would know to look for, say, 212 Delaware Street between 2nd and 3rd Streets. But finding addresses on streets with names rather than numbers is not as difficult in New Castle as in large cities such as Philadelphia or Wilmington. Over the years since his proposal, there have been periodic calls, including from Arasapha, to return prosaic Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Streets to their original, more charming names.

Mayor Herbert's proposal passed. (Fun fact: At the same meeting, City Council members agreed that oyster shells make the best and most durable roads and approved a purchase of 12,000 bushels of shells.) But three years later, in 1896, there were still no street signs. A newspaper editorial told of a New Castle visitor from Philadelphia looking for "No. 2 South Fifth Street... He was informed by a man on 2nd St. near Chestnut that all he had to do was go "down this street until you meet the school house, go across the green to the cigar store, where you will see a weighing machine and a chewing gum slot machine, pass the big clock, keep right on by the

barber shop until you come to a big hall on one corner and a marble yard on the other. Then turn to the left and the store No. 2 South Fifth street is at your hand.”

It's not clear if any street signs were installed before 1916, when the U. S. Post Office offered to begin home delivery of mail in New Castle...but only if street signs were installed and all properties were numbered. The City quickly complied, and home mail delivery began on April 1, 1916. I could not find any description or photos of these first street signs.

By the 1940s, time had taken its toll on the 1916 street signs. In 1947, it was “very difficult for visitors to New Castle to ascertain any directions from present markings, many of which either do not exist or are so faint as to be scarcely legible.” The new New Castle Hundred Lions Club and Arasapha Garden Club took on street signs as a project. The groups decided that street signs in “the old part of town” would be “in keeping with the character of early New Castle,” while other parts of the city would have “modern” street signs.

The Lions erected the modern street signs in 1948, using old iron lamp posts as poles. The first sign was erected at Ninth and Clayton Streets.

Lions Erect Street Signs



New Castle Hundred Lions Club members erecting their first street sign at Ninth and Clayton Streets in 1947

Arasapha, meanwhile, researched appropriate street signs for “old New Castle.” Members consulted Colonial Williamsburg and Albert Kruse, a local architect who advised on New Castle

historical restoration projects at that time. Kruse initially opposed street signs because modern street signs were not used in Colonial times. But he eventually agreed to signs on wooden boards mounted on unpainted wood posts. Arasapha donated \$150 towards 16 wooden signs, which the Lions installed in 1949.

The wooden signposts were not set in concrete, and after installation the signs were not maintained. So by 1957, the signs were already in poor condition. Arasapha asked City Council to repair or replace them, which the city did, but within a year the new signs had disappeared—presumably the work of vandals.

In 1959 Arasapha decided to propose new street signs that would be more durable yet fit with the historic district’s character. Under the leadership of Arasapha member Annette Bush, the project was truly a collaborative effort. Arasapha asked John Sweeny, assistant curator at Winterthur, to design new street signs. He suggested wooden ovals. Annette Bush suggested that the signs be topped with replicas of the Court House cupola. City Councilman Philip Susi also contributed ideas to the design. Architect Albert Kruse—apparently now much more amenable to the idea of street signs in the historic district—donated detailed drawings of the cupola and helped choose the overall design.



Mrs. J. Danforth Bush, Jr.

A 1953 photo of Annette Bush in the New Castle Gazette

Arasapha proposed to City Council that these signs cover the entire city, not just the historic district. The club offered to help pay for the new signs. City Councilman Philip Susi made a sample of the cupola, which was brought before City Council in December 1959 and displayed at a local bank in January 1960.



Staff Photographer.

New Street Signs for New Castle

New Castle's streets soon will be identified by signs like this. Admiring the new design are (left to right): Mrs. J. Danforth Bush, chairman of the community projects committee of the Arasapha-Garden Club; Philip F. Susa, New Castle Council street sign committee chairman, and William F. Tobin, council president.

Design is a replica of the cupola of old State House.

Photo in the January 8, 1960, Wilmington News Journal. It's not clear where this street sign was placed; today there is no intersection of Penn Street and Wilmington Avenue in New Castle.

The signs were installed by the New Castle Hundred Lions Club in May 1960.



In 1960 the Lions installed the first sign with a cupola at Delaware and Market, near where this sign is today

In the decades since then, the street signs have been subject to damage, wear and tear, and vandalism. (Apparently some vandals thought the cupolas made great souvenirs.) The street signs were replaced in 1974, 1984, and 1999. I couldn't find out exactly when the wooden ovals were replaced with the metal ovals we see today.

In 1970 some City Council members suggested replacing the street signs outside the historic district with modern signs that would be less expensive and less attractive to vandals. Today the historic district and Shawtown east of South and Young Streets have signs with cupolas. New Castle's other neighborhoods have modern street signs.



One of New Castle's modern street signs

In the 1960s through the 1980s, local residents were not always happy with the pace of street sign replacements. A 1973 newspaper editorial complained, "Almost every development, plus the city of New Castle, is in need of signs. Friends and travelers get lost every day of the week, business is lost because places simply cannot be found, and deliveries cost more because more time is involved than should be in the actual location of an address." At a 1984 City Council meeting, Arasapha member Mary Earle expressed concern that she might not live long enough to see new street signs put up!

One last change to the historic district's street signs was made in 2001. A city councilperson suggested that street signs for numbered streets should be labeled East or West. Today many of the signs for numbered streets in the historic district are so labeled.



A street sign with Third Street labeled an E for East



A street sign with East spelled out

For more information on Arasapha's history, visit Arasapha.org/history. There are many holes in club archives! If you have any documents, photos, or information related to Arasapha's history, please contact us at ArasaphaGarden@gmail.com.