

HOW DID TRAPPE, MD. GET ITS NAME? by James Dawson

On June 3, 1881, the unknown author of an article about Trappe, Md. in the "Baltimore [Md.] Herald" faced up to the fact that nothing definite was known about the origin of the town's name, "As many other Eastern Shore towns, Trappe is quite an old place, dating its beginning considerably over a century back. Having grown by slow degrees, there are no fully authentic accounts of its early history nor is there certainty as to where it procured its name."

What would become the town of Trappe probably got its start in the 1770s. In 1976, the Trappe Bicentennial Committee chose July 10, 1776 as the town's birth, but that date is completely arbitrary.

The name first appeared in the records in the 1783 property assessment as "Trap". It was also called "Trapp", "the Trap", "the Trappe", or "the place called the Trap". Dennis Griffith first showed it on a map in 1794 as "Trap". Spelling was not standardized in the 18th century and few people had dictionaries. The name officially became "Trappe" when the town was incorporated in 1856.

There are several theories about the origin of the name, the main ones being: (1) that it got its name from a tavern (2) that it was a good trapping area or (3) it got its name from a local monastery of Trappist monks who came here from France.

A Tavern?

The first history of the town in the April 15, 1874 issue of Trappe's first newspaper "The Index" stated, "Tradition tells us that a widow lady of French notoriety, many years ago, kept a tavern in the only house in our town, for the accommodation of travelers going down and returning to the end of the Peninsula, and, as this was in the line of thoroughfare in those days, many of them were trapped, and induced to spend their money with the good woman." In the 1881 article, the story was that it was a room in the tavern that was called the trap.

In 1923, the 89 year old Trappe native Robert Mullikin said that it was at this tavern that "the married men would congregate to play cards and drink whiskey. Anxious wives in quest of their husbands would inquire for the missing companion only to be told he was at "The Trap." Very likely the town acquired its name from this store." [*Easton Star Democrat* March 17, 1923].

But Trappe, Md. is not the only Trappe with such a story. Rev. Judith A. Meier, historian for the Trappe [Pa.] Historical Society wrote that the Pennsylvania Trappe also got its name from a tavern called the Trap. Henry Muhlenberg recorded in his journal on Nov. 11, 1780 that Christian Schrak came to this country in 1717 and settled in the New Providence area. They built a makeshift hut and dug a cave beside it where they did their cooking and then established a small shop and inn for travelers. "Once, when an English inhabitant stayed too long in the cave, came home late, and had a row with his wife, he made excuses and said that he had been in the Trap. From that time on the section was called Trapp.)" [email to the author dated Sept. 25, 2008]

This story is virtually identical to what Robert Mullikin said about the origin of Trappe, Md. Since these two Trappes are over 150 miles apart and have had no connection with each other, their two stories developed independently and thus validate each other.

The Partridge Trap?

Some think that Trappe got its name because this tavern was shaped like a partridge trap. Presumably, a partridge trap was a wooden box tipped up on one edge

by a stick which was tripped when the bird went inside to get bait. In the tavern's case, the bait would have been alcohol. The first account of this was recently discovered in an 1885 deed which noted that "This lot located in center of the town of Trappe: and legend has it: That it was upon this lot the first house ever built here was erected. it was a log-house, used as a groggery & gambling house- built in the shape of a Partridge Trap, and here many of the older residents were trapped on their way to & from the shire town "Easton": and hence the name "Trappe". [Philemon Mullikin et al to James M. Leonard et al, July 1, 1885]

This lot is shown on the 1877 Lake, Griffing and Stevenson map of Trappe as belonging to "P. Mullikin". The modern address is approximately 29349 Maple Ave.

Although the story evolved that the town got its name from a tavern that looked like a partridge trap, which may be a 19th century elaboration, there is no evidence that the tavern was actually named The Partridge Trap, which is a twentieth century invention.

A Wolf Trap?

Another theory is that the town was not named for a partridge trap, but a wolf trap. In colonial days, wolves were common all over the state including Talbot County, where there was a Wolfe Trapp Bridge on the Wye River in 1724.

This name could have stayed with the area long after the pit was gone. And in support of this, some of the early references in old deeds were to "the place called the Trap" and not to the village called the Trap or the town called the Trap. Far enough back, a place called "the Trap" might not have been so much as a name as a warning there had been a wolf trap near the trail there.

A Good Trapping Area?

The local landscape was somewhat different in colonial days- creeks reached farther inland and there were more marshes. Trappe is said to have been an excellent site for the trapping, tanning and transportation of hides. Perhaps that's where the name came from.

A Trappist Monastery?

The spelling "Trappe" looks like it had a French origin and some claimed it was because there was once a monastery of Trappist monks here.

The monk story first appeared in an 1923 article which boldly stated that "The town of Trappe, or La Trappe, as it was formerly called, probably originated from the landing of Trappist Fathers in that section of the county", despite quoting Trappe authority Robert Mullikin in the same article who stated that the name probably came from a tavern. Mullikin said that "some French monks settled in the town" was only one of the theories, and never mentioned a monastery. [*Easton Star Democrat* March 17, 1923]. It was the unknown author of this somewhat inaccurate article who played up the monks, and also got the name of the town wrong, it had never been La Trappe.

That Trappe not only had some French monks, but a monastery as well first appeared in a 1940 article by Rev. W. W. Webster who wrote, "One of the most interesting legends of the manner in which the early settlement obtained its name is that, some two hundred years ago, there was located adjacent to where the town now lies a monastery of French Monks, called Trappists... With the arrival of the first white settlers in the year 1663, there was a small remnant of this order of Monks still extant and performing their devotional offices in this monastic retreat, and the early settlers acquired the beautiful name of La Trappe for the designation of their future habitation". Rev. Webster even thought he saw monk's cells in the cellar of the former monastery. [*Easton Star Democrat* June 21, 1940]

Trappe's 1976 bicentennial brochure carried this one step further and even provided a name for the so called cloister house: Monkton, which was still standing in a field just off of south Main St. at the end of Slaughter Lane. And as recently as 2005, in his biography of Trappe's "Home Run" Baker, Barry Sparks stated as fact that "The town derived its name from a band of Trappist monks who established a monastery in a farmhouse just beyond the town. They had come from La Trappe, France, and were part of a colony of trappists who had come to Maryland through the nearby seaport town of Oxford." [Sparks. Frank "Home Run" Baker. Jefferson, North Carolina: MacFarland & Co, Inc. Publishers, 2005, p. 5.]

There are numerous problems with the Trappe Trappist monk theory, the main one being that there could not have been a small remnant of extant monks who came to Talbot Co. years before 1663 as Rev. Webster wrote. The order wasn't established in France until 1664, and the first Trappist monastery in the United States, the Abbey of Gethsimani in Kentucky, wasn't established until 1866, long after Trappe, Md. had gotten its name. There were no Trappist monks here in the 1600s, the 1700s or at any other time. Also, Trappe's so called cloister house "Monkton" is a circa 1800 farmhouse and not a 1600s monastery. The so called monks cells in the basement were likely used for storage and not prayer.

The name Monkton did not exist here until the late 20th century. In 1792, the property was named Alexander's Chance from Henry Alexander who had gotten it as a land grant in 1684. The name Monkton appears nowhere in Talbot County land records from 1662 through 1790. Nor are there any records that Trappist monks bought, sold or leased land anywhere in Talbot Co., ever. None of Trappe's historians including James Mullikin or Dickson Preston who wrote "Trappe the Story of An Old Fashioned Town" in 1976 believed there were ever any monks in Trappe.

Unfortunately, Rev. Webster's account was more fantasy than fact, probably because some residents preferred the monks to the drunks as a more respectable origin for the town. In fact, Rev. Webster said as much in his article, "it is not quite so pleasant to believe that the town grew and developed from such worldly environments [i.e. a den for drinking and gambling]. We like better to accept the Monkish tradition." [*Easton Star Democrat* June 21, 1940]

Later writers, unaware that in the 18th century "Trappe" was a perfectly acceptable alternate spelling of "Trap", assumed that the name came from a French connection, but there is absolutely no evidence to support this.

A Trappe is a Trap

But if Trappe wasn't French, where did the extra "pe" come from? In 1856, "the Trap" was incorporated as a town with the spelling "Trappe". But why this happened was already a mystery only twenty five years later to the writer of the article in the June 3, 1881 *Baltimore Herald*, "How the extra "pe" was added is not conjectured, unless some refined resident afterwards thought it would add somewhat a tony [i.e. stylish] appearance to the name."

Years later, Trappe historian James C. Mullikin echoed those thoughts, "How then was the town's original name of Trap transmuted into the modern designation Trappe? Once again there is no definite information, but it is to be noted that the word Trap is short, abrupt, and not particularly pleasing. The word Trappe, on the other hand, has a certain elegance- a bit of the Foreign, the exotic, the unknown." [from Mullikin's history of Trappe circa 1953].

La Trappe

The name La Trappe didn't appear on the landscape until 1886, when the nearby creek, which had been named Dividing Creek since 1662, had its name changed to La Trappe River. Apparently this was part of an effort to increase trade by getting it dredged to make it navigable to larger boats and barges: the reasoning being that a great river with a fancy name would be more likely to get a government appropriation than a smallish creek.

The name La Trappe has no historical significance here. Trappe was never named La Trappe. Doubtless, the "La" was added to the "Trappe" in a further effort to link the town with the imaginary monks from La Trappe, France, and then create the grand sounding La Trappe River. But "the Trap" came years before "La Trappe" and not the other way 'round.

Many Traps

In the early 1800s, there were six places named "Trap" in Maryland, five of them on the Eastern Shore. There was also a Trap in Delaware and a Trap in Montgomery Co., Pa.

Regarding this curious concentration of Trappes: a triangular area with a 125 mile base line running from Trappe Bridge in Charles Co., Md. to Berlin in Worcester Co. Md. and from the base line 165 miles up to the apex at Trappe in Montgomery Co., Pa. would have contained eight Traps. It is a mystery why there should be so many places with this odd name within this area, but apparently nowhere else in the country.

This was just too many Traps for them not to have something in common with each other. There were not enough Trappist monasteries to go around, but there could have been enough taverns where the trappers or anyone else could have spent their money. Perhaps some of the settlers came from same area in England and remembered a tavern of that name back home.

By the mid 19th century, all but one of the Traps which survived had changed the spelling to Trappe. This change is probably nothing more mysterious than the fact that 18th century colonials used the blunt spelling "Trap", while 19th century Victorians preferred the somewhat more elegant "Trappe".

Conclusion

Trappe, Md. probably got its name because of a tavern: people who went there were said to be at "the Trap". This tavern was the nucleus around which the town grew. The fact that another Trappe in another state also got its name this way gives credence to this. It is thought that this tavern was the one owned by John Stevens as early as 1777, but there is no evidence that this tavern was actually named The Partridge Trap, which is a 20th century invention. Other theories that the name came from some sort of trapping activity are less likely, but not impossible. However, one thing is definite: Trappe did NOT get its name from a Trappist monastery!