

*Tierney Cannon*

**The Tale of Lewes, Delaware**

*April 10, 2023*

*From Swans to Tulips:*

**Z**waanendael, or “Valley of Swans,” was the first European settlement in what is today known as the first state: Delaware. (Clemons et al., p1). Comprised of thirty-two Dutch men, the Zwaanendael settlers were determined to set up a whaling business on the shore when they arrived in Delaware in the spring of 1631 (Clemons et al. p1). However, due to the dangerous nature of the work, the whaling business never took off, so the settlers of Zwaanendael instead made their living off of farming and trading with local Indian tribes (Morgan, p8). Life in Zwaanendael was similar to that of many other early European settlements, where they survived off of what they could make, as well as they relied on supplies to come from their home country. Even though this was a flourishing settlement, they still needed some assistance from their home country, the Netherlands. On December 5, 1632, Davids Perterzen de Vries arrived at the settlement with supplies, hoping to find a flourishing and successful settlement (Morgan, p8). Upon his arrival, his hopes were shattered when he found “the bleached bones of the Dutch settlers,” “scattered about the deserted stockade” (Morgan, p8). Zwaanendael had been destroyed, a little less than two years after having been established. While it is unfortunate that this first settlement did not make it, this was not the end for Delaware. Today, the site of Zwaanendael has blossomed into what is now the historic town of Lewes, Delaware. If Delaware were to be flipped 90° to the left, it would look a little like a shoe. The historic beach town of Lewes is located where the “tongue” of this shoe would be. Lewes today is worlds away from what Zwaanendael was, almost 400 years ago. Though this town has changed significantly over time, the people here still deeply appreciate their Dutch ancestry. The Zwaanendael Museum, built in 1931, has architecture “inspired by the town hall in Hoorn, the Netherlands” which “commemorates the founding of Delaware’s first European settlement” (Where Dutch & Maritime History Unite). The Zwaanendael Museum also offers programs that “showcase how the Lewes area’s Dutch and maritime histories unite,” (Where Dutch & Maritime History Unite). In April, Lewes has its Annual Tulip Celebration, where the grounds of the Zwaanendael Museum and the park surrounding it are bursting with tulips of every color in the rainbow, arranged in intricate patterns. Even though Zwaanendael was destroyed less than two years after being built, the memory of this settlement has never faded away, playing a vital role in the areas culture, even today.

In 2023, Lewes has become one of the quieter beach towns on the Eastern Shore, in comparison to other popular tourist spots in the area, like Ocean City or Rehobeth Beach. Being the home of small shops, boutiques, used bookstores, and restaurants, Lewes is a calm place to spend a nice afternoon in town, or spend the entire day on the beach. The town is walking distance from Savannah Beach, which is located just past the Dairy Queen, a popular spot in the middle of summer. To get to the beach, I had to cross a drawbridge that overlooks a canal. On the western side of the

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drawbridge, an invasive species called wisteria was climbing up the trees, spotting the green leaves with fragrant purple flowers. Inside the drawbridge, there was a mural made of tile, depicting ocean creatures such as stingrays and sheepshead fish. I continued east down this street, noticing a marsh on the right, and small stores on the left. Walking through the area of the canal and marsh, the smell of ocean air, sand, tulips, and wisteria all came together in a unique blend as I breathed in the wind that blew past me. Past the marsh on the right side of the road, there is a Dairy Queen behind the turn-off to go towards Cape Henlopen State Park and the Cape May-Lewes Ferry. I remember this Dairy Queen from when I was a kid, stopping here with my grandmother and my little brother to get burgers, fries, and dilly bars. It might not seem so important, a Dairy Queen on the beach. This specific Dairy Queen, however, is a vital piece of Lewes' more recent history. In her article, Shannon Marvel explains that "The Lewes Dairy Queen opened in 1954 as one of the first franchises in the Cape Region and, from the start, it became a community hub." This restaurant still serves as a wonderful place to grab some ice cream and then walk right out to the beach, even today. The Mihm's put the place up for sale back in 2015, and fortunately the new owners, the Diehl family, still aspire to be a part of the community the same way as the owners who came before them did (Marvel). According to Marvel, "They sponsor a Little League team and are planning future events to stay involved with the town and its citizens," indicating just how much this area means to the people who live there. The community here is full of welcoming, enthusiastic, and kind people, who have nothing but pride for the place they come from.

Once my brother and I completed our trek from the museum to Savannah Beach, we took a seat on a bench at the edge of the sand that overlooked the ocean. We sat observing the waves, which were relatively calm that day. Looking to the right of me, there were boats and a small lighthouse, and to the left, there were huge metal windmills in the distance. We argued for a while about what kind of seagull was on the beach. The gulls we were seeing had white underbellies, gray wings, black wingtips, and black heads. We suspected at first that they were black-headed gulls, but then my brother, after quickly looking it up on his phone, was convinced that they were laughing gulls. We were comparing pictures found online, arguing about what kind of seagull it was, until a man walked past who had apparently been listening to our conversation, and he informed us that they were indeed the laughing gull species. Honestly, I am no ornithologist. After taking in the scenery for a little while, I decided to get up and read a sign from the Lewes Maritime History Trail. The sign explained that "Menhaden, a small, bony, oily fish was pursued not to be eaten but to be pressed for its oil and ground into fertilizer." (Menhaden Fisheries). The fisheries that caught this fish would boom from 1883 to the early 1960's, until "technological improvements... led to overfishing. Nothing remains of the many fisheries-related businesses that were once located along Cape Henlopen Drive" (Menhaden Fisheries). As I turned to walk away from the sign, I tripped and fell over a small object. I bent down to pick it up, soon realizing that it was a vape. I held it in my hand, it was blue with red and black wires sticking out of it. I could not help but think why something like that ended up in the sand. Walking away from the beach, I thought it was strange how a place could make such drastic

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changes over time, from Zwaanendael, to a lively fishing port, to now a tourist hotspot and a popular place for older people to retire to.

My brother and I walked back into the town and went into the Zwaanendael Museum. The sun was beating down outside that day, and we were both sweating. The museum had rather good air conditioning, so that was a lifesaver for the both of us. We walked in, and I began grabbing brochures. A curator or worker of the museum stepped out from behind the counter and began explaining the tale of Zwaanendael to me, how it came to be and how it was destroyed. Then, he began informing me about the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse, which was used to guide people to shore, but because of rough weather, it fell in 1926 (Zwaanendael Employee). I asked him what he knew about Captain Kidd's visit to the Zwaanendael settlement, because every important event that occurs in Delaware has three different, yet loosely related stories about the events that truly transpired. He informed me that Captain Kidd did in fact visit the shores of Delaware when it was still known as Zwaanendael (Zwaanendael Employee). He informed me that at this point, Kidd had not yet even been charged with piracy, he was still a privateer in the eyes of the law (Zwaanendael Employee). Only three of the Dutch settlers went on Kidd's ship, where they were shown riches of gold and silver beyond their wildest imaginations (Zwaanendael Employee). The man at the museum then informed me that after Kidd was tried and sentenced to death for piracy, a rumor swept through the town about Kidd's lost treasure, claiming that it was buried somewhere on the beaches of Delaware (Zwaanendael Employee). I guess the man could sense my interest in the topic, because he immediately shut down my hopes about finding any lost treasure, informing me that Captain Kidd did not bury his treasure here, and that there was no treasure to be found at all (Zwaanendael Employee). Honestly, it sounded like something someone would say when they were hiding a bunch of buried treasure.

Leaving the museum, I thought about all the things I had seen that day. I thought about the mural on the drawbridge, the scent of wisteria in the air, the way the water flowed south. I thought about Zwaanendael, and how short lived the settlement was. I thought about the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse, which was erected to guide ships to shore, and how this great giant lighthouse fell too, eroded by the wheel of time. I thought of the Menhaden fisheries, how it was a booming business 70 years ago, now the only thing that remains in Lewes of these fisheries today is a plaque on the beach. I thought about the tulips arranged beautifully on the streets, how someone had put in the time and effort to make something beautiful, even though they will not last forever. One day the tulips could be there, and then they would be gone the next. One day, everything could be the way we are used to, with the water flowing south, and the tulips blooming. It is strange to think that tomorrow, everything could be different.

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### Works Cited

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