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Fort New Gothenburg and the Printzhof: The First Center of Swedish Government in Pennsylvania

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THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF
New Netherland

A World Built on Trade

EDITED BY

CRAIG LUKEZIC AND JOHN P. MCCARTHY

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Fort New Gothenburg and the Printzhof

The First Center of Swedish Government in Pennsylvania

MARSHALL JOSEPH BECKER

Archaeological sites dating from the seventeenth century remain relatively rare in the mid-Atlantic region despite the documented rapid expansion of European settlements throughout that area during that time. Despite significant efforts to locate traces of the early Swedish colony, the Printzhof complex (36DE3) remains the only physically verified site known to date from that period. This Swedish intrusion into Dutch controlled territory began in 1638 with the construction of Fort Christina, now Wilmington, Delaware (Becker 1999). No physical evidence of that fort or from any of the contemporary buildings has been identified. The location of the Printzhof, erected in 1643 by the third Swedish colonial governor, Johann Printz, had been long known from oral traditions that were initially confirmed by archaeological excavations in the 1930s (Figure 11.1).

Three historical elements render this site of particular importance. First, the Printzhof complex became the *de facto* seat of government for the colony and thereby the first European capitol in what was to become Pennsylvania. Second, “America’s first international tribunal” was convened here in 1643 by Printz in response to criticism of his conduct in the trial of the pelt trader George Lambertson of New Haven (see Johnson 1930:206, 243–247; Underhill 1934:810). The third important point is that the “special day of Thanksgiving” celebrated there in October of 1646 was the first to be held in this part of the New World (Johnson 1911:36).

Archaeological investigations at the Printzhof complex were led by the author in 1976, and again in 1985 and 1986, revealing numerous features (Figure 11.1). The following review provides an update of earlier summaries

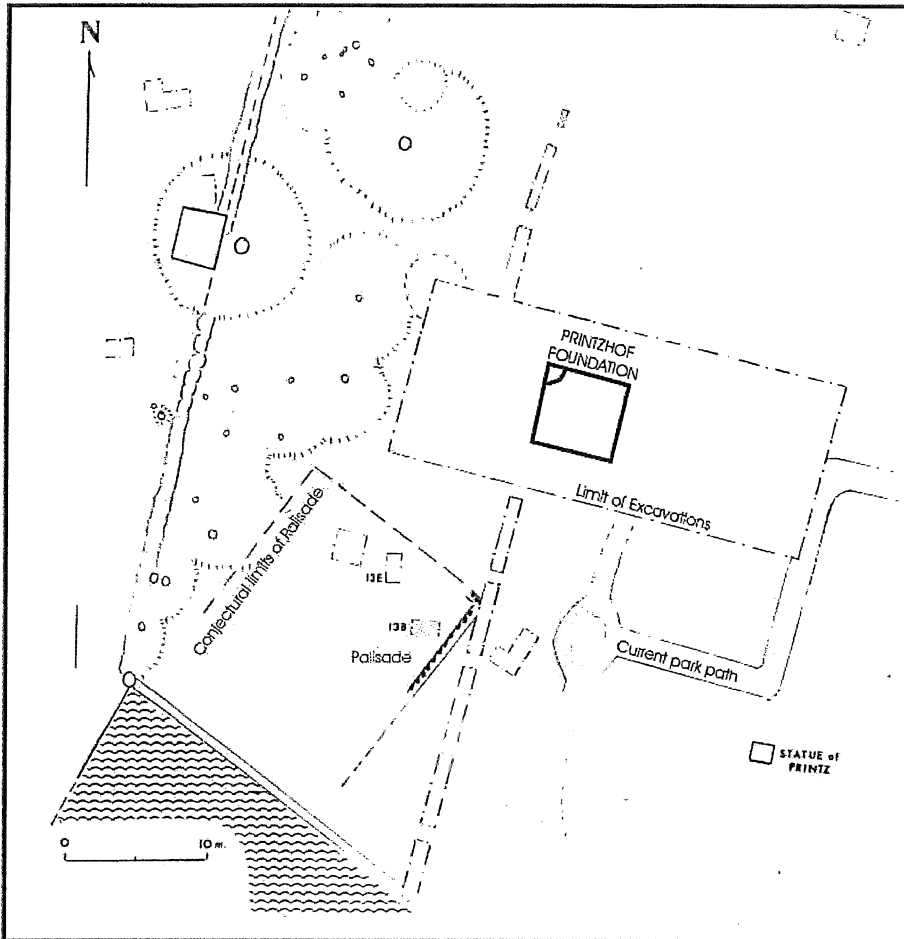


Figure 11.1. Plan of excavation of Fort New Gothenburg and the Printzhof (36DE3).

of what was known about this site (Becker 1999, 2011a), with emphasis given to what we now know about Fort New Gothenburg. Excavations in the 1980s conclusively demonstrate that a small (approximately 16 m square) palisaded fortification was erected at the waterside on the southwestern edge of Tinicum Island.

FORT NEW GOTHENBURG AND THE PRINTZHOF

When Lieutenant Colonel Johann Printz, arrived in the New World in 1643 to take up his post as the governor of the Swedish colony, he decided to establish his own home, which could be used as a trading post as well, on

Great Tinicum Island, situated some 30 km up the South (Delaware) River from Fort Christina and just downstream from the mouth of the Schuylkill River (Becker 1979, 1987, 2011a; Johnson 1911). The Schuylkill was used in the spring season by the Susquehannock to bring peltry from their home range ~~around~~ present Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to the trading stations on the South River.

west of

The Printzhof, as Printz's American residential complex is generally identified, included a small cluster of buildings constructed in a fashion that could be described as a *storgård*, the Swedish term for a substantial farm. Among the expected structures would be a large residence, barns, and other outbuildings. Various maps on which Fort Nya Göteborg (Fort New Gothenburg) appears and documentary references to Printz's estate leave the details of the complex somewhat poorly understood. Printz appears to refer, at times, to his property as Fort New Gothenburg, but this usage may reflect a wish to emphasize his role as a military governor. The ship *Fama*, which arrived from Sweden on March 11, 1644, carried a document giving Printz title to Tinicum Island. Johnson (1930:34) translates the relevant Swedish text as a "Capital donation of that place called Tinnaco or New Gothenburg for Printz and for his lawful heirs." This suggests that the island was characterized by the fortification, but not with Printz's residence and other structures. The report of Andries Hudde "Dated N[ew] Gothenburg, Sept. 30, 1646" indicates that the name of the fort and the name of Printz's holdings on Tinicum Island were used interchangeably. In a report to the Swedish West India Company "Dated at New Gothenb[urg], February 20, 1647," Printz himself demonstrates the equivalence. I suggest that the name of the fortification was used for official business that transpired on Tinicum Island, although the activities described must have taken place within the residence. However, Johnson's map (1930: fac. 44) depicts and labels "New Gothenburg" as separate from the Printzhof, to the northeast and another structure to the northwest. This suggests that a separate "fortification" had been erected, providing protection for the residential buildings or complex. The documentary sources for Johnson's interpretation are not known. Other maps suggest that only a single complex, perhaps a fortified farmstead, was present.

Printz's first log structure, built as a residence and trading post in 1643, burned during November of 1645, together with many of the outbuildings. Only the barn is recorded as having survived that event (Johnson 1930:130–131). The principal house was rebuilt at once, as a somewhat larger log construction that stood for 180 years. During the winter of 1645–1646,

the storehouse was repaired and a church built nearby. From other records we know that a separate brewhouse also formed part of the original complex (Baron 1962). Magnusson (2003:223–227, Fig. 2) provides important data from another Swedish outpost of the same period. The Swedish manorial estate of Kunda in Estonia (ca. 1647), with its log house and four log outbuildings, could be similar to the Printzhof complex on the South River. The two floors and tall attic of the Kunda house could be described as having a ground floor plus one and one-half floors *above* it. Of particular note are the three extremely tall chimneys on the Kunda house, which would explain the discovery of considerable numbers of small, yellow bricks used in the construction of the Printzhof (Becker 1977).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

In 1937 Donald Cadzow was chosen by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to direct an archaeological excavation at the Printzhof as part of the extensive Works Project Administration initiative of the federal government. A complex series of seventeenth-century and later foundations were revealed (Johnson 1938), the artifacts recovered in this process including many dating to the middle of the seventeenth century. Written records and artifact descriptions from these excavations were never published (see Craig 1992:3 for the Cadzow plan).

During the summer of 1976 the William Penn Memorial Museum, now the State Museum of Pennsylvania, provided funding to reexcavate the area of the 1937 project to confirm earlier findings and to conclusively demonstrate which of the foundations belonged to the Printzhof as distinct from those of later structures or additions. This project confirmed that the work of Donald Cadzow in the 1930s had indeed located the foundation of a large Swedish cabin. Correspondence between features of the foundation and Printz's reports, plus the associated artifacts confirmed that this was the structure built by Governor Printz in 1643 (Becker 1977, 1979). Of particular note was the identification of evidence for the rebuilding of that structure in the manner that Printz had described in his 1645 report to the Queen (see Johnson 1911).

The discovery of the palisades of the original fortification was an exceptionally important discovery. Furthermore, many artifacts recovered in the 1976 and later excavations duplicated those recovered by Cadzow that had been preserved at the American Swedish Museum. In fact, some of those

newly discovered pieces of European-made clay pipes could be matched with pieces of these artifacts that had been found 40 years before.

Valuable clues to Native American activities at this location both before and after the arrival of Printz were also revealed. Features reflecting Native occupation in this area attracted our interest as well, providing clear evidence that Natives were active at this colonial trading post, camping almost literally on Printz's doorstep (Becker 1993). Since much of what we excavated that first season had been disturbed by the 1937 project, we were eager to examine some of the undisturbed features revealed in our excavations.

The success of the first season of modern excavation at the Printzhof led us to return in 1985. Excavations in 1976 included a 1-m-wide test trench extending from the large excavation at the center of the principal area of interest, around the house, to the modern sea wall. This narrow test trench exposed a cluster of three features that appeared to be the margins of Native burial pits of a pre-contact date. Since Cadzow noted that he located some Native burials in 1937, we were not surprised to find that what seemed to be burial features had been stripped of any human remains and artifacts. Cadzow did not indicate what had been discovered within these features, but some of the finds that survived in storage suggested to us that a pre-contact Native cemetery might exist in this area near the Printzhof proper. After consultation with the appropriate Lenape representatives in Oklahoma during 1983 and 1984, the following year we arranged to test the specific area to the south of the Printzhof, where Cadzow had found what appeared to be at least two burials, and where we thought a cemetery might exist.

The 1985 season at the Printzhof began by locating the three features found earlier that we believed might reveal a cemetery. Testing the westernmost of them, a feature only partially exposed in 1976, indicated that the feature did not represent a pit for a flexed burial. What appeared to be a corner of a grave, turned out instead to be part of the exterior angle of a right-angle turn in a long ditch or trench for an historic period fortification. More significantly, this feature was revealed to have been a very well-dug feature that held a series of posts set into it all along the western side of the north-south leg. After following the north-south leg for several meters we found that it took a sharp turn to the west that we followed for about 1 m. The posts in this east-west leg were set on the north side of the trench, but three particularly large poles were found on the opposite side of the ditch.

The European-dug trench and the posts driven into its floor are clearly the remains of a palisade (Becker 1997). Wooden stake defensive walls are known from Dutch colonial sites along Delaware River and Bay both from excavations as well as from old drawings and maps (Bonine 1956:14–15). These defenses were primarily meant to deter attacks by other Europeans.

The palisade at the Printzhof is nowhere noted in the known contemporary literature. This apparent omission may be because the construction of a palisaded defensive wall was an automatic part of establishing any encampment at that period. Such basic features of these early outposts may not have been considered noteworthy. I interpret the evidence as the remains of a simple, square fortification. However, an alternative possibility is that the palisaded trench represents a large bastion at one end of an extremely large palisaded fort. Fortifications with only two bastions, built in the shape of a diamond (or square), are known from contemporary accounts of Dutch colonial sites on Delaware Bay (Becker 2001; Bonine 1956:Plates 1, 3; Bonine 1964). Some external posts or supports seen at Fort New Gothenburg may have served either to support a small tower or possibly a protected entryway.

During excavation of the palisade trench, each of the post molds was mapped in place, and sections were made through several examples to recover information about how they had been set and how this fortification had been constructed. The individual pales averaged only 10 to 12 cm in diameter. Those few pales that were formed from trees greater than 20 cm in diameter had been split before being added to the palisade line (Becker 1997). This suggests that an individual or a two-person team could rapidly fell and transport single pales for rapid construction. The ditch itself also is interesting since the construction began with the digging of a very regular trench, typical of European palisade construction, but quite different from any known Native American examples. Examination of the base of each sectioned post in the fortification palisade showed that the ends placed in the ground had been pointed with an ax or similar tool. The depths of these pointed tips extend slightly below the actual floor or bottom of the ditch. Quite clearly the poles were thrust into position in order to sink them well into the ground. The walls of the trench that had been dug for the palisade are still quite vertical, indicating that the earth packed into the ditch had been tightly tamped into place to hold the posts securely upright. The only historic artifact recovered from the excavations to reveal this trench was a brass button, supporting our conclusion that the feature was an early

European construction. No Native artifacts, not even stone chips, were recovered.

For pre-contact archaeological research in this region, the most important discovery in 1986 was the evidence for a Native *wikiup*, or simple shelter, often called a wigwam (Becker 1993). Far smaller than the well-known long houses of the Susquehannock and Five Nations (Iroquois), a *wikiup* leaves few traces for archaeologists to recover (see Custer et al. 1998: 18). The few small post holes left from these shelters, which probably were used for only one season, are easily obliterated by any kind of disturbance. The “Corinthian *wikiup*,” which actually includes portions of two sequentially built structures on the same location, is roughly circular, measuring about 4.0 to 4.2 m across, with each of the many poles used in the construction averaging about 4 cm in diameter. These structures appear remarkably similar to an example reported from site 7NC-E-60 in nearby New Castle County, Delaware (Custer et al. 1998:16–18). The Delaware site also lies within the realm of the historically known Lenape. Similarities are noted in the overall size of these structures, the intervals between posts and possible placements of fire pits close to the margins rather in the center as might be expected. Diagnostic artifacts are not available in either of these locations, but a sequence of superimposed *wikiup* patterns of oval shape, measuring 4 by 5 m, from Pig Point in Maryland have been 14C dated to 210, 520, and 1200 CE (Roylance 2010). The people at Pig Point, however, belonged to a culture quite distinct from that of the Lenape (Becker 2018).

An additional discovery during the 1986 season was a ditch a short distance to the west-northwest of the foundations of the house, that had been filled with an undisturbed deposit of charred remains apparently dumped there after the Printzhof fire in November of 1645. This find from the Printzhof reveals that this process of leveling the landscape had begun as soon as Europeans first settled in a forested land characterized by nature’s irregular terrain. Not only were the depressions and gullies of the normal landscape a problem to colonists who were interested in house construction and farming, but these hidden rills provided potential cover for attackers. The filling of these low places was an ongoing concern in the management of the colonial landscape.

It is interesting that the filling of this particular feature seems to have taken place quickly, with no effort seemingly expended to salvage metal spikes and nails for reuse or trade. The need to erect a new residence during this winter period apparently absorbed all the human resources available.

Modern excavation of this deposit recovered iron artifacts along with burned sherds of European pottery, clay tobacco pipes, drinking glasses, and yellow bricks. Of particular interest among the fragments of European material culture were the glass rim fragments and prunts (decorative knobs) from one or more roemer drinking glasses, all of a form typical of the 1640–1650 period (Theuerkauff 1968, 1969; see Figure 6).

In addition to the significant evidence for a colonial governor's lifestyle in the middle of the seventeenth century, the excavations at Fort New Gothenburg provide considerable evidence to support our belief that Printz was collecting examples of Native trophies and tools to send home. The practice of collecting "trophies" from the people native to places where military officers were stationed is documented throughout Europe. These collections provide us with some of the best documented and finest examples of early Native artifacts (Becker 1990a). Some examples are believed to be of Susquehannock origin (see Becker 1980, 1990b; Johnson 1930:117, 140), a subject elaborated in an earlier paper (Becker 2011a:16–21).

CONCLUSION

The importance of the excavations of the palisade of Fort New Gothenburg lies in much more than allowing a better understanding of the processes by which this site was formed in 1643. The development of the Swedish residential complex "behind" the fort helps us to interpret this early colonial defensive strategy and apply this information to our understanding sites elsewhere in North America (Becker 2000). Although other archaeological excavations at Dutch or suspected Swedish outposts in this region often mention, by inference, what we might suggest represents the presence of a palisade (e.g. Heite and Heite 1989:46), not one example of a fortification has been identified at any other early colonial site in the Delaware Valley. The archaeological record from the Printzhof excavations offers clues to colonial and Native lifestyles and the interactions of the several groups within each of these "cultural" spheres during the early period of European contact. What we describe here took place in the earliest period of trade, before English colonial expansion and significant Native interactions had compounded the already complex social dynamics from the Middle Atlantic region (see Becker 1998, 2011). This period covers a time when cultures were in contact along a fluid but very thin frontier situated directly along the Atlantic Ocean and along a few of the major waterways that flowed into it. We now have direct archaeological evidence to

complement an abundant documentary record dating from the important 40 years of Dutch and Swedish activities that preceded the English takeover of the Delaware drainage in 1664. The archaeological finds from the site on Tinicum Island identified as 36DE3 provide direct evidence for the Swedish presence on the Delaware River and their interactions with Native and Europeans along the river.