

The Case for Barndegat

A Journey from Barendegat to a Burning Hole

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Barende-What?

When you search the history of Barnegat Township and the Ocean County waterfront, you can not find a book or document that does not reference the fact that Barnegat was derived from the word “Barendegat” which is alleged to mean “breakers inlet,” or “an inlet with breakers,” or some variation thereof.

The more you search for the etymology of Barnegat, the more conflicting information you uncover. The most common story goes that Barendegat (in one form or another) further morphed into Barndegat before finally being corrupted to Barnegat.

A List of the Maps and Charts of New Netherland, published by G.M. Asher in 1855, lists all three variants: Barendegat, Barndegat, and Barnegat. *A History of Monmouth and Ocean Counties*, written by Edwin Salter and published in 1890 tells us that It was first written Bar-ende-gat, then Barndegat, then finally Barnegat.

As of November 2020, Barnegat Township’s own website tells us that, “around 1609 Henry Hudson sailed along the coast of New Jersey coming to an inlet which he named Barendegat, a Dutch word meaning an inlet with breakers. This name was replaced by Barndegat by early mapmakers and later evolved into the present day spelling of Barnegat.”

This is supported by a book titled, *The Origin of Certain Place Names* by Henry Gannett published in 1905 which tells us that Barnegat is a Dutch name given by Henry Hudson that means breakers inlet. On the surface, it seems settled history that Barnegat was originally Barendegat, then transitioned to Barndegat before finally becoming Barnegat. If you dive just below the surface of the conventional wisdom, however, we find that the settled history of “Barendegat” might not be so settled.

The Halve Maen

Long before our area of New Jersey was inhabited by the English, the area was settled by the Dutch. Henry Hudson, selected by the Dutch East India Company to find a passage to Asia, sailed his ship the Halve Maen (Half Moon) towards North America in an attempt to find a Western passage.

It was during that 1609 voyage that Hudson's ship dropped anchor off of the present-day Barnegat Inlet and Long Beach Island. Robert Juet, first mate to Hudson, described the area in his logbook of the 1609 voyage (Purchas, 1625):

September 2, 1609: Then the sunne arose and wee steered away north againe and saw the land from the west by north to the north west by north all like broken islands and our soundings were eleven and ten fathoms. Then wee looft in for the shoare and faire by the shoare we had seven fathoms. The course along the land we found to be north east by north. From the land which we had first sight of untill we came to a great lake of water as wee could judge it to bee being drowned land which made it to rise like islands which was in length ten leagues. The mouth of that land hath many shoalds and the sea breaketh on them as it is cast out of the mouth of it. And from that lake or bay the land lyeth north by east and wee had a great streame out of the bay and from thence our sounding was ten fathoms two leagues from the land. At five of the clocke we anchored being little winde and rode in eight fathoms water the night was faire. This night I found the land to hall the compasse 8 degrees. For to the northward off us we saw high hils. For the day before we found not above 2 degrees of variation. This is a very good land to fall with and a pleasant land to see.

When we think of the present-day Barnegat Inlet, Barnegat Bay, and the Long Beach Island area, you can visualize that which Juet describes. Pay particular attention to his description of the Barnegat Bay being a, "great lake of water..." "being drowned land..." That description becomes a critical linguistic puzzle piece as the picture of meaning comes more into focus later.

While the logbook provides an important clue, one thing is conspicuously missing from Juet's logbook as well as any other historical record of the 1609 voyage-- namely,

any evidence to show that Hudson named the area Barendegat. It turns out this conspicuous omission is easily explained by digging a little deeper.

Captain Cornelius Jacobsen Mey

Captain Cornelius Jacobsen Mey, while not well known to many today, certainly left his mark on our area. Captain Mey set out from Hoorn, Netherlands in 1614 aboard the ship *Fortyun*, a ship owned by the New Netherlands Company. (Heston, 1904)

After resupplying in New Amsterdam (present-day New York City) he set off in the *Fortyun* to explore the coast of the New Jersey region- then known as New Netherland. Several of today's geographic locations still bear his name including Cape May and Mays Landing.

It was Mey it turns out-- not Hudson-- who is responsible for the naming of Barnegat. As described in Alfred Heston's 1924 book *South Jersey-- A History*:

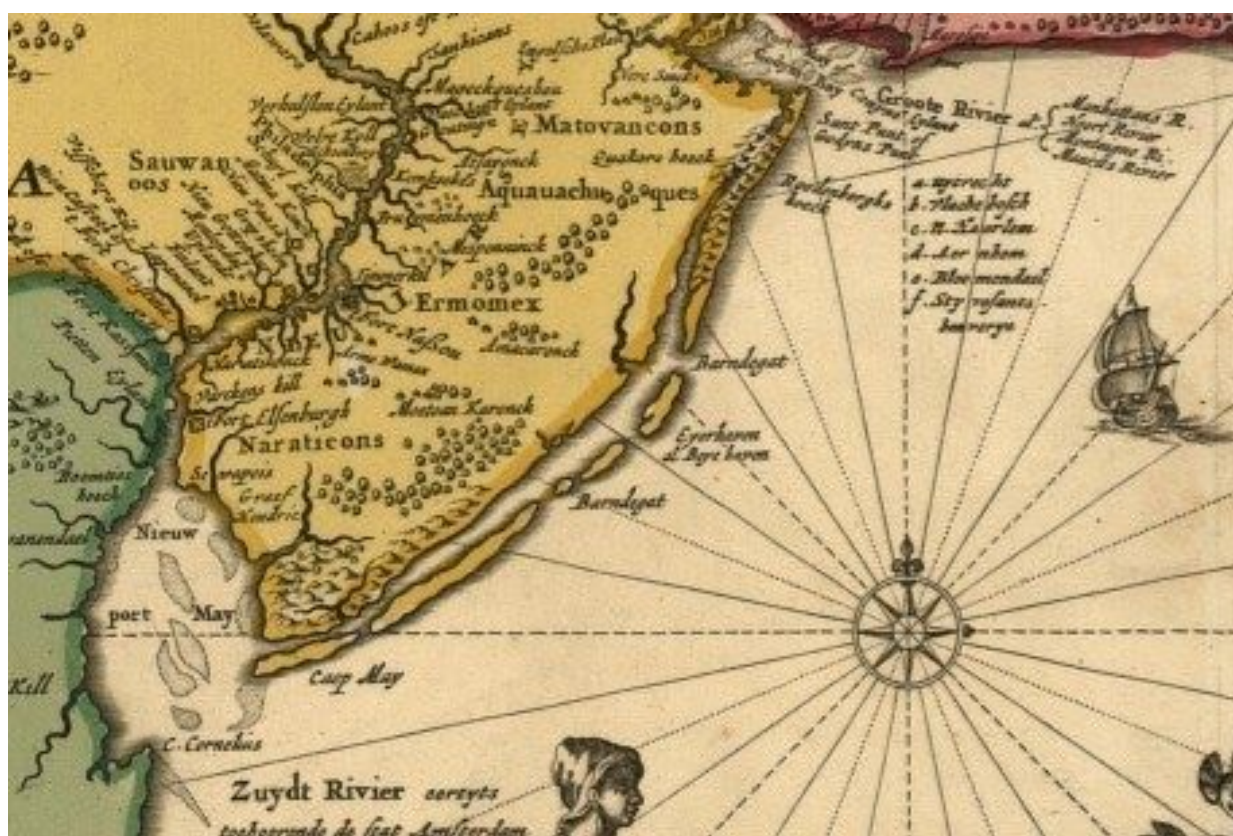
(Mey) called the inlet now known as Barnegat by the Dutch name of Barendegat, meaning "breaker's inlet" or, as it is in English, "the inlet with breakers."

Numerous other sources credit Mey with coining the name which would eventually evolve to be Barnegat as well. That, though, does not stop the erroneous claim that Hudson named Barnegat from circling about the internet and non-scholarly publications.

In all of the material that references Mey, however, we still see this reference to Barendegat and an, "inlet of breakers." Digging deeper into the etymology of Barendegat does not offer corroboration for this translation, but instead further clouds the issue.

The Maps Tell a Tale

When we look at the 17th century Dutch maps of New Netherlands, we find that the first “mutation” of the supposed Barendegat had already occurred. The first reference to Barndegat appears on the 1650 Jansson-Visscher map published by Adriaen Cornelissen van der Donck. On this map, both the present-day Barnegat Inlet and Absecon Inlet are labeled as Barndegat. Many Dutch maps for the rest of the 17th century continue to label the area as Barndegat. There does not appear to be a single Dutch map-- or any map for that matter-- that uses Barendegat.



1650 Jansson-Visscher map

No Such Animal

Looking at the Dutch language and etymology of Barendegat uncovers an interesting, if-not-inconvenient fact: there is not now, nor has there ever been the word “Barendegat” in the Dutch language. It simply does not exist.

Virtually every book that references the early Dutch history and settlement of New Netherlands matter-of-factly states that the area of Barnegat was originally named Barendegat-- but it is difficult to find any supporting reference or documentation.

Still others say that Mey did not use Barendegat as a name, but instead, used Barendegat as a description. Heston states that Mey also used Barendegat to describe Absecon Inlet. He asserts that the word was used as a description and later was corrupted to Barnegat. Heston may have unwittingly been on to something. It turns out that a description was likely exactly what Mey had in mind-- just not the description that Heston imagined.

Just as there is no Barendegat in the Dutch language, neither is there the word “Barendegat.” Interestingly, though, there is a gat.

Gat-- The Hole Story

While neither Barendegat nor Barendegat exist in the Dutch language, “gat” does. And it means hole, gap, channel, or harbor (Wilcocke & Sewell, 1798). This seemingly insignificant detail might be a clue to clarifying the etymology of Barnegat.

David Gold’s 2009 book, *Studies in Etymology and Etymology*, gives us another key clue in a footnote on page 127:

While on the subject of Dutch “gat”, we may note that several American sources interpret the New Jersey place Barnegat as being Dutch for “inlet breakers”, but

Rob Rentenaar (an expert in the field of Dutch entymology) gives us the right explanation: “Barnegat, soms Barndegat treffen wij een aantal keren aan als naam voor een poel ontstaan door een dijkdoorbraak. Het is een samenstelling van gat met her participium praesens van het werkwoord barnen branden, woest bewegen.”

Translated to English: “Barnegat, sometimes Barndegat we find a number of times as a name for a pool created by a dike breach. It is a compound of hole with the present participle of the verb meaning burning, fierce movement.”

Speaking with a Dutch colleague of mine and discussing Rentenaar’s translation shed more light on the translation. In the Netherlands, dikes were used to protect the low lying lands from the sea. Dike failures in the Netherlands have been frighteningly common throughout history, with well over 1,500 dike failures between 1134 and 2006 (Van Baars, 2009).

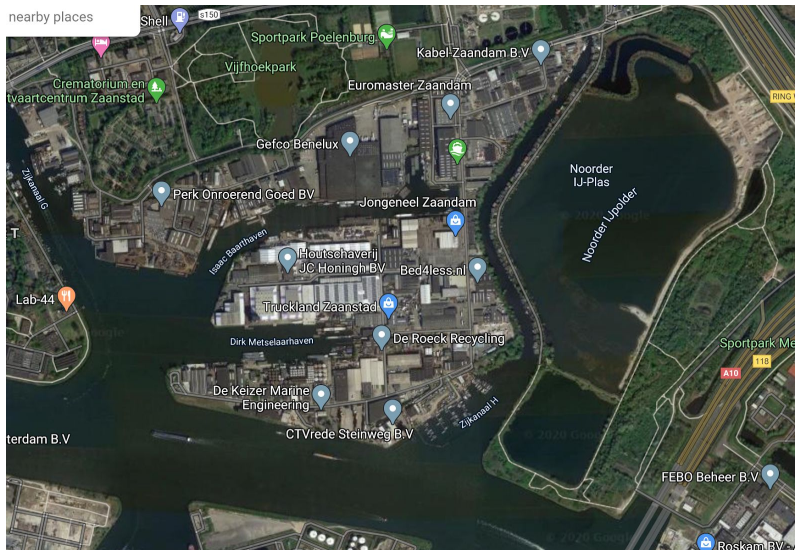
Dike failures are often accompanied by a fierce rushing of water through the breach that then floods the low lying land behind the dike. In some cases, this causes massive and sometimes deep pools of water.

Barnegat Bay. Barnegat Inlet. A pool created by a dike breach. Surely the swift moving waters of Barnegat Inlet-- remember, Juet described it as a “great stream out of the bay--” might have reminded Mey of a dike breach back home-- something of a common occurrence in the Netherlands of his time. Remember, also, that Juet described the bay as a great lake of water composed of drowned or flooded land.

Could it be that Mey used the word Barndegat, and not Barendegat, to describe the Barnegat Bay? Might Mey have had a geographic reference back home?

The Original Barndegat

While Barendegat has never existed as a word nor (with any proof) a location, there was and remains a body of water in the Netherlands called Barndegat. Today, it is a canal that borders Amsterdam and Zaanstad and connects via Zijkanaal H to the North Sea Canal.



2019 aerial imagery of the North Sea Canal, Zijkanaal H, and Barndegat Canal (Credit: Google Maps)

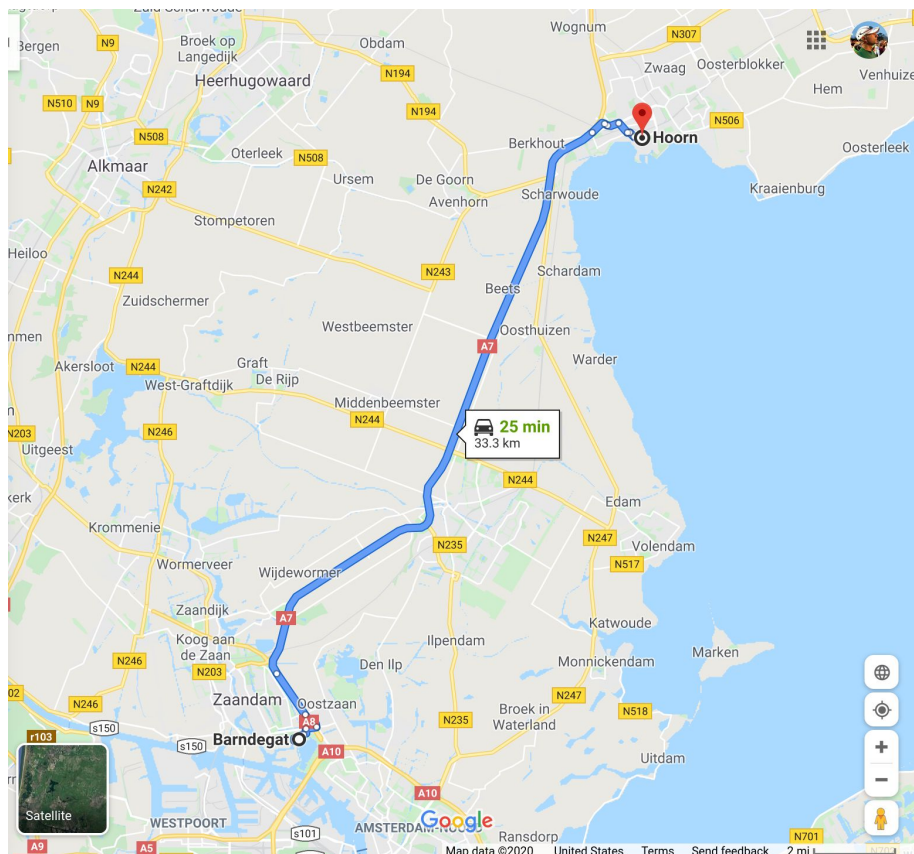
Prior to that, Barndegat was a lake. But would Mey have known this? And would it have influenced his naming of a body of water on the opposite side of the Atlantic?

Mey's Early Days

Cornelius Jacobsen Mey was born in 1580 in either Hoorn, Netherland, or the small village of Schellinkhout, Netherland (just east of Hoorn) and is said to have grown up there. In 1614, he sailed for North America on the ship *Fortyun* from his home port of Hoorn (De Lancey, 1886).

It is not an unreasonable stretch to think that Mey would have been familiar with the Hoorn area after being born and raised there. Interestingly enough, the Dutch body of water Barndegat lake sat just 20 miles from where Mey was born and raised.

The Case for Barndegat



A map showing the current driving route and distance from Hoorn to Barndegat Canal

Did Mey name the area of the Barndegat Inlet after the body of water, Barndegat, that was near his home?

What About the Burning Hole?

In a few places, in addition to finding references to Barendegat and Barndegat, you will find occasional reference to the root of the word(s) being the old Dutch word *Barnen*. This is said to be an old form of a word that means, “burning.”

At first, this reference to burning might steer you down a different path. In Juet’s log that he kept during the 1609 journey of the Half Moon, there was reference made to a great fire that was burning just beyond the horizon as they sailed near present-day Long Beach Island. While they could not see the flames, they could see great columns of smoke.

The Case for Barndegat

This was likely one of the wildfires that regularly occur in the fire-dependent ecosystem of the Pine Barrens. Absent Rob Rentaar's reference to barnen meaning a burning, fierce movement, one could wrongly interpret that Barndegat was a reference to the fire.

Coincidentally, it seems that the English mapmakers and historians who inherited the New Netherlands in the 18th century (and did not have the benefit of a Rob Rentaar or the internet) mistranslated Barndegat in just this way-- focusing on the "burning" interpretation of Barndegat.

If you went by the literal translation of "gat" meaning hole, and the root of Barndegat being barnen (ostensibly meaning "burning") you would be left with our area being called "Burning Hole."

It just so happens that if you look at the *New Map of East and West Jersey* published by John Thornton in 1706, you will see that Burning Hole is exactly what present day Barnegat was named on that map. The Barnegat Bay is listed as Baringate Bay-- an alternate name for Barnegat Bay.



New Map of East and West Jersey published by John Thornton in 1706

Goodbye to Barendegat and the Inlet of Breakers

Did Mey name the Barnegat area Barndegat to describe the bay and inlet as a “pool created by a dike breach”, or because it reminded him of the body of water named Barndegat near where he grew up (or a combination of both)?

The final clue might be in that nearly 400 year-old Jansson-Visscher map. The fact that Barndegat was used to label both Barnegat and Absecon inlets lends weight to the argument that Barndegat was used as a description of water flooding through the dike breach (inlets) to flood the land behind it (Barnegat Bay).

Rob Rentaar’s expert etymological analysis clearly shows that whether you believe Mey originally used Barndegat as a description, or as a namesake for a body of water back home, it was never Barendegat and never meant an inlet of breakers. It would seem that our seafaring town owes its name in one way or another to a Dutch seafaring area an ocean away.



The tranquil waters of Barnegat Bay just southwest of Barnegat Inlet.

A very good land to fall in with, and a pleasant land to see.

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The Case for Barndegat

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