

BRIDGETON FORERUNNER, 1694

By Ed & Jean Siskin

The excellent articles on the Bridgeton Post Office and its postmasters by Doug D'Avino started with its first United States post office in 1792. As a prequel to those articles, it is worth discussing a letter from the Bridgeton area a century earlier.

The first European settlers to the Bridgeton area arrived about 1686. At that time it was called Cohanzy or Conhansey, after the river. As was the norm, the Proprietors, who owned the land, attempted to establish a religious structure for the community. They enticed Rev. Thomas Bridge to immigrate to the area and set up a church. Bridge was born in Hackney, England in 1657, emigrated to Massachusetts, graduated from Harvard, returned to England to be ordained a minister and then settled in Bermuda. At the urging of the West Jersey Society of England, he arrived in the Cohanzy area on May 17, 1692. As part of his enticement, he came with a deed for "a 1,000 acres of land wherever he should please to take up the same."



Fig. 1: Stampless folded letter from Thomas Bridge in Cohanzy to London in 1694.¹

BRIDGETON FORERUNNER, 1694 ~ Ed & Jean Siskin

Figure 1 shows the cover sheet of a folded letter Reverend Thomas Bridge sent to England, the dateline of which is "Octobr 2n 1694." The letter traveled to England by a merchant ship captain, probably leaving from Philadelphia and entered the English postal system on its arrival at a port more than 80 miles from London. It was charged one penny for ship fee and three pence for postage. For many years, this cover was believed to be the earliest cover originating in America which received postal markings. It no longer has this distinction since a 1691 letter from Boston is now known with postal markings.

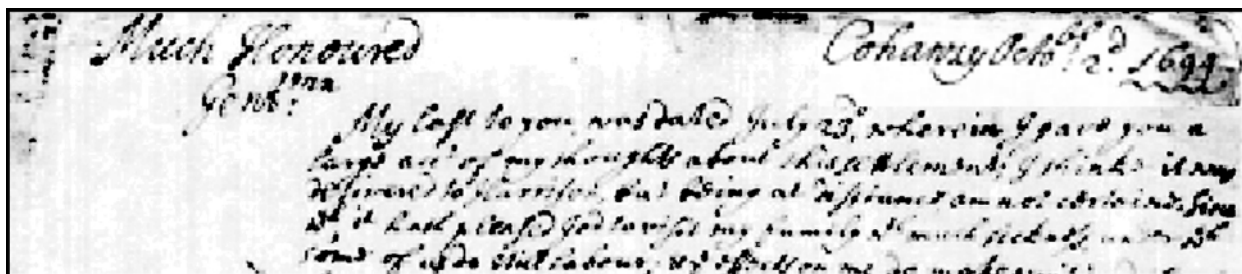


Fig. 2A. The salutation on the enclosed letter.

A transcript of this letter is as follows (the meaning of common abbreviations are indicated in parentheses, and spellings have not been altered):

Cohanzy October 2d. 1694

Much Honored
Gentmnn:

My last to you, was dated July 23d, wherein I gave you a large acct of my thoughts about this settlement; I thinke it was delivered to Harrison, but being at disstance, am not certain. Since which it hath pleased god to visit my family with much sickness, under which some of us do still labour, & those effects on me, do make writing difficult; however I think it necessary to give a short, & imperfect account of what hath happened since; I say imperfect, because I have seen neither of yr Agents since, nor have had from them acct of their proceedings; yet what I write is beyond disspute, though your goods being arrived at Yorke, were conveighed safe to Burlington, whose being devided between those Agents, Mr. Basse immediately sold his half, excepting glass, iron work, & I thinke some Cordage to two merchants of Philadelphia, & one of Burlington, to the value of more than a 1000 lb, under pretence of paying for the ship, which is now launched. Mr. Westland hath sold most, if not all his part, I think to Philadelphia, & Burlington; sure I am that neither Cape May, nor this part of the cuntry, hath any benefit thereby, to their great dissatisfaction; saying Philadelphia is made rich, and they kept poor, they being still forced to go higher with theis commodities, which is both chargeable, & hazardous, besides loss of time, & a double advance on those goods they buy; this being contrary to the good of this Province, & we judge to your intentions, I cannot let it pass wh-out (without) expressing a discomfort of it. This doth also tend to the overthrow of what I proposed, viz that you might have the produce of this cuntry, & the people a supply from your cargo, wh-out (without) which they will not respect you as they ought; In short I cannot approve the mannagemt of affairs. I hear you ordered Mr. Westland to this River, designing this to be the chief seat of your factory; his reasons of refusal I know not, but if he insists on there not being a house to entertain him, I think he is so far excusable, for I being with my family at Mr. Basse's, this house being but 30 feet long, a story, & halfe high, with a small cooke room, cannot entertain both, with any tollerable conveniency; if wt (what) they propose last winter, had been effectually mannaged, yet excuse had been invalid. Gentlemen I wrote two letters to you from Bermuda, and since from this place,

& have no answer, wch (which) doth not a little offend me. I only hear that you recd one from me, wh-out (without) any further notice of what was therein contained, yet am I not so disscouraged, but am willing to hope I may hear in a little time, sure I am yet I hope to promote this interest, & the good of the people, wch (which) if not regarded I might think of other measures, for my present condition is very undesirable, I am useless, & uncomfortable in tending to the raise of my family. But I still pray that you may be directed to such measures, as may render you a blessing to the province, & that you may have wife, & faithfull person to act under you, that the people may rejoyce under your shaddow, & the the father of mercies may abundantly bless you, wch (which) wld (would) a sender of respects, & service is all at present from

Gentlmm

Your Hunble, Ready Servant

Tho Bridge

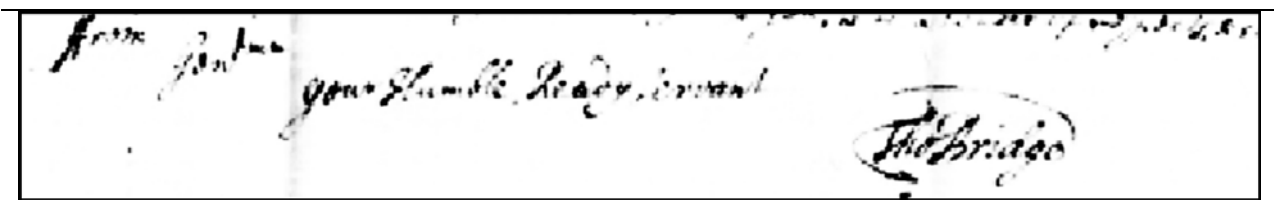
A photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "your Hunble, Ready, servant" followed by "Tho Bridge" in a circular flourish. The signature is written on a piece of paper that appears to be a folded letter.

Fig. 2B: Signature of Thomas Bridge on this folded letter.

The persons mentioned in the letter are:

1. Sir John Moore: one of the proprietors of both East and West Jersey. He was a major force in encouraging settlement in what are now Salem, Cumberland, and Gloucester Counties.
2. Edmond Harrison Esq., Vice President of the West Jersey Society.
3. Jeremiah Basse, Agent for the West Jersey Proprietors and Governor of both Jerseys from April 1698 to November 1699. Basse was a controversial character caught in disputes between the Proprietors and the British Government. He was also involved in religious disputes.
4. Nathaniel Westland was a member of the Governor's Council.

In 1694 this area was known as Cohanzey and consisted of about a dozen farms. In 1716 a bridge was built across the Cohanzey River and for many years thereafter the town was called Cohanzey Bridge. This was the first bridge in New Jersey and became a key point in the trail between Philadelphia and the southern Pinelands and Cape May. About 1765, the name of the town was changed to Bridgetown, although the name Cohanzey Bridge lingered for many years.

The map below shows the location of Cohanzy (now Bridgeton).



Fig. 3: *A New Mapp of East and West New Jarsey (sic), survey by John Worlidge, published by John Thornton, Hydrographer.*²

When the authors were researching this cover about fifteen years ago, Scott D. Peters and John Fea were of considerable help. Their assistance is gratefully, although tardily, acknowledged.

ENDNOTES:

¹ This cover was sold in the Matthew Bennett, Siskin Collection Sale 290, October 7, 2005, Lot #6.

² Library of Congress http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/map_item.pl (Feb. 19, 2014).