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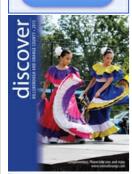Home ▸ News

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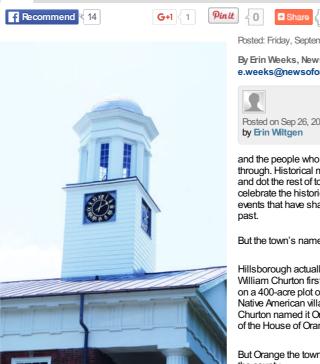
Hillsborough, Hillsboro change a conundrum

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Submitted photo

Town of Hillsborough

The clock tower on the Old Orange County Courthouse rises above Hillsborough.

What's in a name?

1754

William Churton lays out the town of Orange,

Posted: Friday, September 26, 2014 7:45 am

By Erin Weeks, News of Orange editor
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Posted on Sep 26, 2014
by **Erin Wiltgen**

Hillsborough has long been known for the history that happened within the town limits and the people who lived there or passed through. Historical markers line the main drag and dot the rest of town while residents celebrate the historic district and mark the many events that have shaped the local and national past.

But the town's name has its own story, as well.

Hillsborough actually began as Orange. William Churton first laid out the town in 1754 on a 400-acre plot on the Eno River near the Native American village called Achoneecy. Churton named it Orange in honor of William III of the House of Orange.
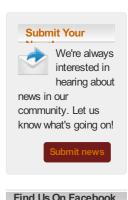
But Orange the town sat in the center of Orange the county.

"In the middle of the 1700s, the state grew, and, as it did, settlers started pouring into the state, and they made this county out here because there were a lot of people," local historian Scotty Washington said. "It became the largest county in North Carolina in the middle of the 18th century. … Then there was confusion; there's Orange County and the city of Orange."

So the powers that be decided to change the name to clarify things. The town became Corbin Town to commemorate Francis Corbin, a member of the Governor's Council and the Earl of Granville's land agent. It quickly changed to Childsburg in 1759, however, by an Act of the Assembly in New Bern. That name honored

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named in honor of William III of the House of Orange.

1759

The town is renamed Childsberg by an Act of the Assembly in New Bern. Childsberg came from Thomas Child, a land agent of the Earl of Granville and North Carolina's attorney general at the time. Before this, at a date unknown, it was called Corbin Town for Francis Corbin, a member of the Governor's Council and another land agent for the Earl of Granville.

1766

An Act of Assembly in New Bern changed the town's name to Hillsborough after Wills Hill, the earl of Hillsborough and secretary of state for the colonies.

1770

Britain recognized the town as an offical English pocket borough.

1800s

Hillsborough coloquially became known as Hillsboro, a nickname seen on buildings and official documents.

1962

The Hillsborough Historical Society formed.

1965

An act of the N.C. General Assembly officially affirmed the spelling of the town's name as Hillsborough.

Compiled by Scotty Washington / Special to the news of Orange

another of the Earl of Granville's land agents, Dr. Thomas Child, who also served as North Carolina's attorney general from 1751 to 1760.

In 1766, another Act of the Assembly in New Bern officially changed the town's name to Hillsborough after Irishman Wills Hill, the earl of Hillsborough and later the secretary of state for the colonies.

Britain recognized the town as an official English pocket borough in 1770, giving it a vote in the N.C. Colonial House of Commons.

"So it had that spelling, Hillsborough with the ugh," Washington said. "And then that persists, and it's fine until sometime in the 1800s. Now, we're not exactly sure, but there begins to be this change, and it's probably the 1830s, 1840s, and you begin to see the shift to going towards Hillsboro without the ugh."

No official act of the legislature shortened the name, but Hillsboro turned up on buildings, in school names and even official legal documents. Though Washington said he didn't know quite when or how the change occurred, he guessed increased travel and trade had something to do with it.

"There are other places in the United States named Hillsboro that had that boro, not with the other spelling, and that probably circulated," he said. "And as people communicated, they said, 'Oh, it's Hillsboro,' and just wrote it. And of course here in North Carolina, we had Pittsboro and Greensboro, so that was something that was more normal, and that persists."

"What's amazing is there is no official change anywhere of the name. This is just informally, and then it becomes on legal documents."

Hillsboro High School took on the unofficial spelling, as did the post office.

In 1962, the Hillsborough Historical Society formed and—looking back over the town's past—clung to the original spelling of the town's name. The group led the charge of turning the tide on the ugh. Others began to take up the mantle, including the Hillsborough Lions Club.

On May 4, 1965, a special bill by the N.C. General Assembly returned Hillsboro to Hillsborough. Since several documents and bonds bore the shortened name, the legislature said that spelling would continue to refer to the town, though any future mentions should take on the English spelling.

"It never changed," Washington said. "They looked back and said that was the name; it never legally changed. So this is what it's going to be, and in part it's because of the Hillsborough Historical Society. … As people got all excited about history here—as they do about every 50 years—and at that point they were the driving force to say, wait a minute, there is a disconnect.

"Here's how it was; when did it officially change? It didn't officially change; it's just an informal change. You might call the Hillsboro, the boro, as the nickname of Hillsborough. … It's really to the credit of the people who formed the historical society who really take this active interest, and, really, helping to preserve the way the historic Hillsborough looks today is in large part due to these people who had such a passion, and we're walking in their footsteps."

Posted in News, Local News on *Friday, September 26, 2014 7:45 am.*

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