

The Original Pronunciation of the name “Knickerbocker”

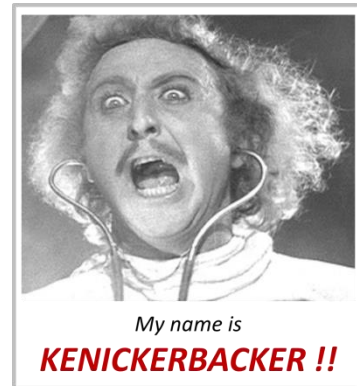
Bryan Knickerbocker, December, 2017

This report discusses the pronunciation of the name of Harmen Janse Knickerbocker.

Our ancestor almost certainly pronounced his name Ke-Nickerbacker, with a hard K sound.

This might seem like a silly topic. (Remember the Mel Brooks movie where Victor von Frankenstein changed his name to Frankenstein?)

Actually, though, pronunciation might matter. Anyone wanting to explain the origin of the name must explain why the name started with a hard K.



With apologies to Gene Wilder and Mel Brooks

Background

Over time, we have changed the spelling of the name Knickerbocker. Today, the name is Knickerbocker, with an O in the second-to-last syllable.

1820

The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

Found among the papers of the late
Diedrich Knickerbocker

In the bosom of one of those spacious coves which indent the eastern shore of the Hudson, at the broad expanse of the river denominated by the ancient Dutch navigators the Tappan Zee, and where they always prudently shortened sail, and implored the protection of St. Nicholas when they



The spelling change was thanks to the books of Washington Irving. His pen name was Diedrich Knickerbocker, spelled with an O.

This eventually became the standard spelling of the name.

This spelling change is well known, and well documented.

Less well known is that we appear to have also changed the pronunciation our name. It used to be pronounced Ke-Nickerbacker.

The next three pages describe the logic behind this statement, and show a few historic records.

The Kernickerbacker Tombstone

This study was sparked because of the odd spelling on a Knickerbocker tombstone.

Shown here is a sketch of the tombstone of John Knickerbocker (1710-1786) in Salisbury Connecticut. This sketch is from CT Magazine in 1904. (The tombstone is still there, but it is now harder to read, especially in photographs.)



The name on the tombstone is Kernickerbacker. We'll never know exactly how the tombstone came about, but it is clear that somebody thought that the name started with a hard K sound.

The rest of this report is a discussion of this hard K.

Etymology of the hard K vs. the silent K

At the hotel check-in desk, we Knickerbockers always say "reservation for nickerbocker?" as if our name started with an N. We always immediately follow with "it starts with k-n-i-c-k." This is an easy conversation in English, because we all know the rule about the silent K in words starting with KN.

Numerous textbooks are available that discuss the origins of the silent K in English words. Every textbook points out that the K was not silent in older languages like Dutch. The Dutch use a hard K.

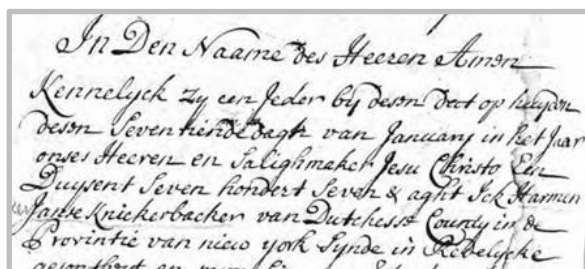
Spelling		Pronunciation	
Dutch	English	Dutch	English
Knijf	knife	kenife	nife
knokker	knocker	kenocker	nocker

There are many examples of Dutch words that start with KN. This table shows two, for words with obvious English analogues, knife and knocker.

To an American ear, the Dutch word knokker sounds like ke-nocker or ker-nocker, with a hard K. If we change one letter, we get knicker, which would sound like ke-nicker or ker-nicker.

The Will of Harmen Janse Knickerbacker

The will of Harmen Janse Knickerbacker was written in Dutch, and was recorded in county probate records in Dutch.

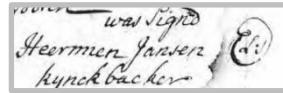


In the name of the Lord, Amen.
 Know all men by these presents that on this seventeenth day of January in the year of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ one thousand seven hundred and seven and eight I, **Harmen Janse Knickerbacker** of Dutchess county in the province of New York, being in reasonable (etc)

As shown in the will, our ancestor described himself “Harmen Janse Knickerbacker van Dutchess County.” By then, he or his scribe had settled on the spelling Knickerbacker.

Since Dutch never had a silent K, he would have pronounced the name Ke-nickerbacker. Of course, we weren’t there when he dictated his will, so we can’t prove that he said Ke-nicker.

However, it is interesting to look at probate records to see how Harmen Janse’ signature was recorded.



Was signed
Heerman Jansen
Kynckbacker (LS)

As with all probate records, this is not the actual signature of Harmen Jansen. The executors typically provide a paper copy of the will to the court clerk, who transcribes it in the official probate book. The clerk then tries to read the signature of the deceased person, and to replicate it under “was signed.” In this case, the court clerk’s interpretation of Harmen’s signature was “kynckbacker.” This spelling is odd, possibly because Harmen Jansen’s original handwriting was poor. In any case, though, this confirms that there was a hard K in the name.

Court Records for Harmen Janse Van Bommel (Knickerbacker)

The hard K also shows up in court records related to a dispute between Bartholomeus Hogoboom and Harmen Janse.

This court case spanned two of the monthly sessions in Albany. In the first session, the court reporter referred to Harm Janse kinnekerbacker. In the second session, the court reporter referred to Harmen Janse, Harm Bommel, and Harme van Bommel. There is no doubt that this is the same person.

May 6, 1684: Court Session in Albany

*Mews Hoogeboom, plaintiff, against **Harme Janse kinnekerbacker**, defendant. The plaintiff says that 5 years ago he boarded a cow with the defendant, which the defendant in the spring drove out, without notifying the plaintiff, and which thus perished. The defendant says that about 5 years ago he boarded a heifer of the plaintiff’s, the defendant in April drove out into the woods together with which the defendant’s cows, but which got stuck in a morass and was eaten by the wolves. He therefore thinks he is not liable. He further offers to prove that the heifer was fat and sleek and that it was driven out at a suitable time. The honorable court put over the case to the next court day for further evidence by the defendant.*

June 6, 1684 Court Session in Albany

Case according to the preceding minutes. Harme Janse produces Andries Hanse as a witness. Andries Hanse being sworn, deposes and says that Harme Bommel drove out the cow together with his own and that she was strong and that it was a suitable time, when there was already plenty of grass, and that among other things he said: “Mees’ young cow is strong and will not be affected by calving or anything else.”

The jury, returning their verdict, find Harme van Bommel not liable for the loss of the cow.

(See Court Minutes of Albany, Rennselaerwyck, and Schenectady, 1680-1685, Volume 3.)

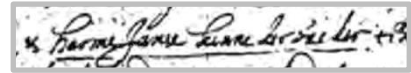
This record again demonstrates the presence of the hard K sound in our ancestor’s name. In this case, it was shown as kinnekerbacker. This is very close to how we would expect a Dutchman to pronounce Knickerbacker, with the hard K.

The 1682 Deed with Anthony Van Schaick

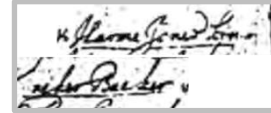
We see more examples of the hard K in the 1916 book by Kathlyne Knickerbacker Viele, *Sketches Of Allied Families Knickerbacker – Viele, Historical and Genealogical*.

Ms. Viele shows a 1682 deed that involved Anthony Van Schaick and our ancestor. The deed shows our ancestor's name four times. Ms. Viele's book shows a grainy copy of the deed. Unfortunately, the copy is poor.

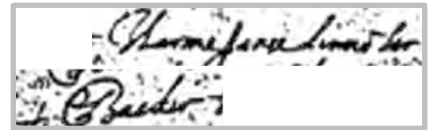
First, our ancestor was first called Harme Janse Kinnkerbacker.



Second, he was called Harme Janse kinnekerbacker. The name started on the far right hand side of the page, and had to be wrapped around to the start of the next line.

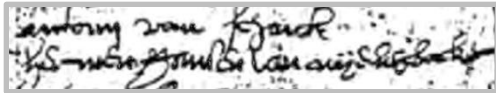


Third, he was called Harme Janse kinnekebacker. The name again had to be wrapped around to the start of the next line.



In each of these three cases it appears the county clerk was writing the name phonetically, and that our ancestor may have been saying Kenickerbacker, with a hard K. It is interesting that this document was written entirely in Dutch. The hard K at the beginning of the name must have been very pronounced. Even this Dutch-speaking county clerk didn't write the name as if started with a simple KN.

Shown below is the fourth time our ancestor is named in this deed. This is impossible to read in this copy-of-a-copy of Ms Viele's book, so are completely reliant on her transcription.



Ms. Viele stated that this says Herman Jansen van Wykycback(e).

A few Knickerbocker genealogists have placed a lot of emphasis on the fourth entry. This faction believes our ancestor was actually Harmen Janse Van Wye. We will briefly discuss the "Van Wye" theory in the next section.

Regardless about the uncertainty of the meaning of Van Wye, the above deed shows, once again, the presence of the hard K.

Van Wye and the Hard K

Kathlyne Knickerbacker Viele's *Sketches Of Allied Families Knickerbacker* – Viele should be required reading for all Knickerbocker genealogists. It is an outstanding piece of work. The full book is available on knic.com, Familysearch, and Ancestry.

Unfortunately, though, Ms. Viele appears to have overlooked the existence of the hard K in the Dutch language. We will illustrate this using examples from page 30 of her book.

The clerk in the first document, that of 1682, writes the name kinne ker backer.

Ms. Viele seemed surprised that our ancestor's name had been written as kinnekerbacker. If Ms. Viele was aware of the hard K in the Dutch language, she would have immediately recognized this as a phonetic spelling of Knickerbacker.

The kinnekerbacker example is almost trivial, but it sets the stage for a discussion of Harmen Jansen Van Wye.

Ms. Viele believed our ancestor was probably descended from the Van Wye family in the Netherlands. Her enthusiasm for the Van Wye theory led her to try to explain how the name Van Wye could have morphed into the name Knickerbacker. This has been quoted by more recent genealogists to support the Van Wye theory. Unfortunately, there is a gaping hole in the logic.

Part 1 of Ms. Viele's logic involves a chain of events that might have led our ancestor to be called Harmen Jansen van Wye-Kijk-Back. This part of the story seems fairly convoluted, but it cannot be ruled out.

The family tradition says that Harmen Jansen was in the Dutch navy, and although this has not been proven there is nothing to prevent its having been true. He is said to have been with De Ruyter's fleet in the Battle of Solebay, fought June 7, 1672, and to have been there wounded. I doubt if an unwritten tradition would have done more than have handed down the facts of his fighting and of his wound. Therefore when I found that in the next year (1673) there had been a still more fierce and sanguinary battle fought by the same fleet under the same commanders off the Dutch dunes at a place called Kijk, I could not but note its similarity to the "Kye" in the ancestor's name, especially when "back" (cheek) gave such an easy reading as—Harmen Jansen van Wye-Kijk-back—Kijk cheek—or cheek marked at Kijk!

In the effort to read the name, the "Wye," which might easily be mistaken for "Nye" (it has been read in both ways by different clerks), was so interpreted and the name became Niekicbacker-Niekerbacker, from which the transition was easy to the final form of Knickerbacker.

Part 2 of the logic is that the W in Wyekijback was mistaken for an N. The accidental switch of W to N seems very reasonable.

The problem comes in part 3 of the logic. Ms. Viele claimed that it is "easy" to get from Nykerbacker to Knickerbacker .

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Ms. Viele's use of the word "easy" makes it very clear that she was thinking in English. This entire explanation assumes that our name has always been pronounced Nickerbacker, with an N, the way an Englishman would pronounce it.

The theory of Van Wye to Nickerbacker fails to recognize the presence of a Dutch hard K in Kenickerbacker, and therefore doesn't hold water.

(This doesn't prove whether our ancestor was Harmen Janse van Wye. It only proves that the transition of the name was not "easy" as claimed by Ms. Viele. We will discuss other aspects of the "Harmen Jansen Van Wye" hypothesis in a future report.)

Summary

In this brief report, we have discussed the fact that the “silent K” rule does not exist within the Dutch language.

In Dutch, KNOKKER is pronounced Ke-Nocker. Thus, KNICKER would be Ke-Nicker.

Harmen Janse spelled his last name Knickerbacker, but he would have pronounced it as KeNickerbacker.

There are multiple instances where the name or our ancestors were spelled as KeNickerbacker or something similar. This is not surprising. County clerks and others tended to use phonetic spelling.

We suspect that the hard K is an important consideration for anyone seeking the origins of the name. Since “Knickerbocker” was never a real word or a real name, it must have started as a combination of other words. Any explanation of that process must recognize the presence of the hard K sound.
