

“Byoona” vs. “Bwayna” Vista

Some U.S. towns named Buena Vista, including ours, prefer not to use the Spanish pronunciation.

One hundred fifty years ago, Buena Vista Township was incorporated, but its history extends back much further than that. According to Mayor Chuck Chiarello in his online account, “A Brief History and Overview of Buena Vista Township,” the site of the township belonged to Cape May County in 1692 before being claimed by Gloucester County two years later and christened Great Egg Harbor Township in 1695.

Things would remain largely that way until after the Revolutionary War when, in 1798, the area became known as Weymouth Township. Name changes would become part of the 19th century as well with the 1813 rechristening of the area as Hamilton Township. All this time, Buena Vista’s location remained a part of Gloucester County. But in 1837, the formation of Atlantic County changed things, and Hamilton Township was accessed as part of the new creation. And the stage was set for yet another change that occurred on March 5, 1867, when Buena Vista Township was formed from portions of Hamilton Township.

It is reported that the new township took its name, like many other U.S. municipalities of the time, from a decisive battle in the Mexican-American War. The U.S. victory in the battle explains why the name would be adopted, but it does not provide any evidence of why some places named Buena Vista in the U.S., including ours, prefer not to use the Spanish pronunciation.

Myriad explanations have been put forth as to why “byoona” rather than the Spanish “bwayna” is preferred. Online sources indicate that a Colorado-based Buena Vista, which was founded after the local South Jersey township, credits the altered pronunciation to a German woman who chose to ignore the correct Spanish sound in favor of how Germans would say the word. She also, the website contends, saw a similarity between “byoona” and “beautiful.” There are some reports that claim the Colorado location had put the pronunciation issue to a vote and that the local government passed a resolution on it. The town also reports that it receives calls all the time about the pronunciation of its name.

New Jersey and Colorado aren’t the

only states with a Buena Vista municipality choosing not to follow the rules of the Spanish language. Towns in North Carolina and Virginia also answer to the name of “byoona.” But online sources identify that there are some that do conform to the Spanish language, including a town in California.

It’s difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons for the “byoona” pronunciation since the origins of these various towns occurred around 150 years ago and the linguistic preferences of their residents have been lost since the passing of the 19th century. It could be nothing more than a case of Americanizing a word and afterwards losing sight of its origins. South Jersey’s Buena Vista Township doesn’t have an explanation on its website, but there probably isn’t any longtime resident of Atlantic, Cumberland and Gloucester counties who refers to the municipality by its Spanish pronunciation.

The Buena Vista sesquicentennial book reports that the first township meeting was conducted at William Veal’s Inn and that the municipality’s first election was held March 13, 1867 at Veal’s hotel. The first committee consisted of Veal, Benejah Downs, John Morris, Jr., George Reick and David Brownson, who served as chairman.

The 1870 census reported a population of 950 with 221 families occupying a total of 270 houses. Farmers were in abundance, but there were others who plied their trade as teacher, carriage maker, mason, physician, and tailor as well as a number of other occupations.

In its early years, Buena Vista Township housed the town of Folsom, which had also been known as New Germany. According to the sesquicentennial book, the town seceded in 1906, “citing the hardship of traveling to the Buena Hotel...to vote.” Buena Borough would also assert its independence in the 20th century. In 1949, it too seceded, giving Landisville, founded by Charles K. Landis, and Minotola, established as a glass-factory town by George Jonas, new identities. There was also the addition of towns such as New Kuban that, according to the sesquicentennial book, “was founded in 1953 by Cossack immigrants fleeing Communist Russia.” ❧

Next Week: The Inn and the Mill