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## That Old Tale About S.I.? Hold On Now

By [SEWELL CHAN](#)

Like the sale of Manhattan to Dutch settlers for \$24, it is a historical legend that has been repeated time and again: Staten Island became part of New York rather than New Jersey, the story goes, because of a sailing contest in the 17th century.

The tale, long a part of local lore, gained currency yesterday at a news conference in Prospect Park, where the Brooklyn borough president, Marty Markowitz, playfully challenged Mayor [Michael R. Bloomberg](#) to a pedal-boat race “for the right to call Brooklyn a city again.”

Mr. Bloomberg, who firmly rejected the possibility that Brooklyn might again be its own city, as it was before 1898, said, “Staten Island is part of New York, rather than New Jersey, because of just such a race.”

The story, however, is almost certainly apocryphal.

One version of the legend, cited by the writer John Steele Gordon in a 1985 op-ed piece in The New York Times, had representatives of the two states competing against each other in a race around the island, with “the winner to take title.”

According to another version, cited by The Times in 2002, the Duke of York, who took control of the Dutch colony after the British conquest in 1664, granted land west of the Hudson River to New Jersey but left New York in control of some small islands.

To resolve a dispute over whether Staten Island was “small” and therefore part of New York, this version goes, the duke decreed that islands that could be circumnavigated in less than 24 hours were to be considered small. Christopher Billopp, a British naval captain living on Staten Island, took up the challenge, circling the island in just under 24 hours.

The legend is told to visitors to the Conference House, the house Captain Billopp built in Tottenville in the 1670s, according to George Michie, a volunteer at the house, which has been controlled by a nonprofit group since the 1920s.

A mayoral spokesman, Stu Loeser, said last night that the legend was “a story the mayor has heard many times from Staten Islanders, and one he recalls reading about for years and years.”

Mr. Loeser, after consulting with city researchers, noted that the tale was repeated by J. J. Clute’s “Annals of Staten Island” (1877) and Cornelius G. Kolff’s “A Short History of Staten Island” (second edition, 1926).

But in “The History of a Legend,” a 1948 scholarly essay, Roswell S. Coles of the Staten Island Institute of Arts and Sciences found “no real evidence to assume there is any truth in the circumnavigation story.” Mr. Coles wrote that the first written account of the story he had found was an 1873 newspaper article.

Barnett Shepherd, a former executive director of the Staten Island Historical Society, said last night that he had often heard the legend. But he added, “It’s not anything we’ve concerned ourselves about.”

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