Where the Name of Harlingen, Texas Derives

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Some years after it occurred, city founder Lon C. Hill in providing the background for the naming of the town may have slightly slanted the story. That is, when he provided information to Harlingen Postmaster J. F. Rodgers in August 1927 Hill may have taken the opportunity to promote the establishment of a port for the city. At that time he attributed the name selection to two coincidental factors. Like many of us, Hill was not above embellishing a story, nor seizing an opportunistic moment. When asked once again, this time by postmaster Rodgers, why he gave the name Harlingen to his new entity, he replied in a written letter. In it he stated that because the area was crossed by canals and would one day be served by a port connected to the ocean by a canal he had thought of Holland and its cities with canals. He found Van Harlingen with its canals on a map and finding no other town with that name in the state dropped the Van and went with Harlingen. He went on to add that the railroad builder to the Valley, Uriah Lott, was of Dutch ancestry and, when asked by Hill about the proposed name, indicated that his ancestors from that city were Van Harlingens, so the use of the name would be suitable. Lott’s ties to Harlingen, Holland may have been very tentative in that in 1904 they would have gone back about 230 or more years. Here is a more plausible explanation of the naming of Harlingen.

It is highly unlikely, though not impossible, that Hill would have located or had access to a small scale map showing little Harlingen, The Netherlands, let alone its relatively tiny canal system. It is a small port and city in the Freisland region of that country. It was never Van Harlingen according to its available history. Van, in fact, means "of" or "from" in the Dutch language.

Many early Valley cities were named by and for railroad–connected people, their relatives, and various founding fathers. Some of these early names were later dropped for newer ones. Hill himself had selected Lonsboro as the name of the railroad station on his newly acquired land west of La Feria. When he sold it shortly thereafter, the site nearby eventually was named Mercedes. In 1890 after he had put a railroad through the area, Lott had already had a town named after him in Falls County. This would eliminate it for consideration for the small community growing on the north bank of the Arroyo Colorado in 1904 when the railroad arrived.

There exists in the United States an earlier Harlingen. It is to be found in central New Jersey. Bill Woodall, “an amateur dabbler in history” in that state was kind enough to furnish information on the first Harlingen in North America. Seems like the original Harlingen, now in Somerset County, New Jersey, was settled about 1675 onwards when the region was called “The Province of New Jersey.” One recorded birth was that of Johannes Gulick in 1695. There were settlements throughout this area by this time, according to Woodall. The “Harlingen Tract” was sold to Dutch investors in 1710. Woodall relates that the Harlingen Dutch Reformed Church (in the town of Belle Mead a little north of Harlingen’s location) was established around 1685 as indicated by baptismal records of entire families as would be expected at the formation of a church.
At present Harlingen, New Jersey remains a semi-rural community. It lies on the crossroad between the two historic hamlets of Dutchtown and Bridgeport. It sits on Harlingen Road just to the west of Federal Highway 206, which is also named Van Horne Road in this vicinity. At present there are a couple of stores and perhaps a dozen houses in the district. Based on architecture, at least two of the extant buildings appear to have been taverns, which would have been common at crossroads in New Jersey. Records indicate that Harlingen, NJ had a post office as early as 1895 when its population was 109. It was also served by a railroad. One New Jerseyite has communicated that he believes Harlingen's post office existed into the mid-50s at which time it was closed. The foregoing reminds us that the Dutch were active explorers and settlers of the continent, every bit as much as the British who were to overwhelm them in numbers. Our Uriah Lott is connected to this Harlingen. His grandfather, also Uriah Lott, was born there 2/12/1782. His grandmother, Elizabeth Van Harlingen Lott was born in this community on 2/2/1783. This couple was married there 9/22/1805. It is through genealogy information compiled by Sandra M. Lott-Burns that we learn this. It is not known by genealogists where Elizabeth’s ancestors derived from in the Netherlands though her maiden surname is strongly indicative. We do know that Lott’s paternal ancestor who immigrated to the New World was Peter Lott born 1626 in Reynerwout in Drenten, The Netherlands. Peter's wife was born in New York.

It is thus logically evident that Harlingen, Texas, through the information provided by Lott to Hill, has its name derived either from Harlingen, New Jersey, home to Lott's grandparents, or from the maiden surname of that of his grandmother Elizabeth Van Harlingen Lott or perhaps both. What we now know is that there is but a distant and round-a-bout connection between the Texas city's name and that of Harlingen, Holland. Hill, almost certainly, had taken his naming cue from a suggestion made by his friend and associate, Uriah Lott, otherwise how would the proposition "Van" enter the story at all. Over the years the origin of the name Harlingen was likely somewhat distorted with the retelling and the true details of the matter overlooked or forgotten with the passage of time.