

Eastchester's Unknown Freedom Trail

By

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On a warm Saturday with fortunately low humidity in late June of this year Tom Casey, a local historian and an officer in the East Bronx History Forum, conducted one of the most fascinating tours I have been fortunate to participate in. My initial reason for attending was to find out where the Puritan rebel Anne Hutchinson and her party settled before they were massacred by Native Americans almost four centuries ago. To my amazement I realized that Tom had us trekking over places that some of our most famous founding fathers had either stopped, worked, or even lived.

The tour began at the Dyre Avenue Subway station in the north Bronx, once a terminal for the now defunct Boston Westchester Railroad, originally financed by JP Morgan in 1912. This section of the Bronx and southern Mount Vernon consists of mostly Hispanic, African American, Caribbean, and African people who have arrived here in the last few decades. This section of the Bronx is found between the west bank of the Hutchinson River and Interstate 95, separating this section from Co-Op City.

Up until the end of the 19th century this area had been part of the town of historic Eastchester. At one time the town of Eastchester was two and a half times the size of what it is today. It included all of the present city of Mount Vernon and parts of the Bronx between the Hutchinson and Bronx River. For four decades Mount Vernon was a village in the town of Eastchester but once it reached a population of 14,000 it voted to become a city.

As we walked among the strip malls, store front churches, auto body shops, convenience stores, and small but relatively well kept residential homes on side blocks an epiphany came to me. Tom Casey on his tour was describing a place that was one of the most historic in America. He was telling us about an area that was much more than the approximate location of the place where the Anne Hutchinson, her children, and party had live

George Washington twice stopped here at the former Guion tavern on the Boston Post Road. The first time was on his way to Boston to take over troops after Bunker Hill. The second time was after his election as President on his way to take a tour of the New England states. Benjamin Franklin, the first postmaster for the American colonies, laid the mile markers for the Boston Post and Albany Post Road (today White Plains Road or Route 22) as he passed through historic Eastchester. Tom Casey mentioned that Paul Revere four times passed through town when he carried letters on the Boston Post Road.

The Reverend Samuel Seabury who wrote *Letters from A Westchester Farmer* was the rector at nearby Saint Paul's Church, now located in Mount Vernon. Alexander Hamilton in anonymous letters responded in the press to Seabury, an ardent Loyalist. In the popular Broadway play *Hamilton* one of the songs in the first act of the play is devoted to the conflicting opinions between Hamilton and Seabury. Aaron Burr argued cases at Saint Paul's Church when it was also served as the court house. There is good reason to believe that Hamilton also did.

During the small pox epidemic of 1797 two thirds of the population of Philadelphia was forced to leave the nation's capital. For a few weeks during that fall President John Adams and his wife Abigail lived in Eastchester with their daughter Abigail and four grandchildren. Unfortunately Abigail found Eastchester incredibly dull. She worried about her daughter living there and urged her to come to Philadelphia. In a letter Abigail Adams wrote, "I cannot leave her (*her daughter*) here this winter with not a single creature within twenty miles of her to speak a word to..."

A son of President John Quincy Adams drowned in the Long Island Sound and was interned at Saint Paul's Church. One other President passed through this area in 1839. Martin Van Buren stayed in Pelham and made his way to Eastchester in 1839 to visit the Tuckahoe marble quarries and stayed overnight in a tavern on White Plains Post Road. This was at the same time when Africans seized a slave ship, killed the Captain and the cook, and ordered the ship to sail to Africa. Their ship was found adrift in the Long Island Sound and the chase of the *Amistad* went all the way to the Supreme Court. Former President John Quincy Adams successfully argued for their acquittal.

And there is more. Twenty one years after the massacre of the Hutchinson Party ten Puritan farm families signed a deed purchasing from Thomas Pell the land that they would name Eastchester. In the *Eastchester Covenant* of 1665 it was stated that they would start a settlement "down on the track of land lying between Hutchinson brook..." The *Eastchester Covenant* became the blueprint or mission statement for the Puritan settlers who founded the town. The document states that the basic principle upon which this community would be based was "Christian love and civil honesty." In twenty first century language the people of Eastchester would display compassion, generosity, co-operation, and integrity. This is the only surviving covenant in New York State. It ranks importance between the Mayflower Compact and the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut

How many other places in America can boast that they are connected with four of our early Presidents, two other Founding Fathers, and a priceless document like the Eastchester Covenant?