

Why They Came

Article # 1 on the Founding of Eastchester

By

Richard Forliano, Eastchester Town Historian

Three hundred and fifty one years ago ten Puritan farm families would start a village near the western bank of the Hutchinson River a short distance north and west of present day Co-Op City in the Bronx. They named this village Eastchester. No one ever left a written account of why they left New England. But history does provide some fascinating clues about a few of the people who settled in the first village.

They had to be courageous people facing daunting challenges. Located as they were in disputed territory, less than twenty miles from the temptations of New Amsterdam, they were operating under extraordinary circumstances that required extraordinary precautions.¹ First a settlement had to be built in this barren wilderness filled with rattlesnakes, wolves, bears, and even panthers. At times they faced the danger of an Indian attack. And there was the question of what sovereign European nation, England or the Netherlands, would have control over their lives.

The men and women who founded Eastchester in August of 1664 arrived mostly likely by water from the town of Fairfield, Connecticut at the western edge of the Puritan wilderness. We can only speculate about what they brought with them. Eleven years later there were 135 head of cattle, 61 pigs, and 37 oxen.² They most likely brought some of that livestock with them. As they trudged their way to the site of the new settlement they might have brought plows, axes, shovels, nails, muskets, blankets, lumber, a forge for a blacksmith, and other utensils necessary to survive.

It is somewhat astonishing that town records show in its first decade document no deaths in the small settlement. The first person to die, John Godin, did not die of natural causes but was a casualty in King Phillip's War in far off New England. At the same time there were 9 recorded births.³ The early settlement of East Chester (spelled then with two words) apparently blessed with good health. Some had been born apparently in England while others had parents and even grandparents who had made the trek from England to Boston, and from Boston to Puritan settlements in Connecticut like New Haven, Hartford, or Windsor. Now they were on the move again. Why?

In 1664 the town of Fairfield was experiencing some difficulties. Like other New England towns there were more town residents than town members and more town members than church members. One historian stated that only twenty per cent of the people in New England owned land.⁴ Dissension became so intense in Fairfield that a fine had to be imposed for disorderly conduct at town meetings.⁵ While the exact issue that caused so much tension is not known, Thomas Pell was able to convince ten families to leave Fairfield and start a settlement in disputed Dutch territory, just north of the settlement of Westchester, now under allegiance to the Netherlands.

Large numbers of people had come to New England because they were either unhappy with their financial situation or the spiritual conditions of their churches. Most likely the people who settled in Eastchester came because they felt that there were more opportunities while still being able to practice their faith. The early settlements in both Fairfield and Eastchester were similar to villages in England or other New England towns. Homes were clustered together around a village green and town center, with the farm and pasture land nearby. This was also the case in Fairfield where they had two and a half to three acre

home lots in the town squares. But in Eastchester home lots were at least five times as large and available farm and pasture land plentiful.⁶

But the ownership of land and improving their financial condition were not the only reasons they left. Many of the founders were principled people who were willing to take great risks for the sake of their religious beliefs.

A few weeks after their arrival on September 6, 1664, English gunboats sailed into the harbor of New Amsterdam and took over the entire area without firing a shot. Great Britain annexed New Netherlands from Connecticut to Delaware. Thomas Pell had finally achieved victory over his old adversary, Peter Stuyvesant. Not only had he established a second English village near New Amsterdam but both Westchester and Eastchester were now under English rule. Stuyvesant continued to live on his estate on Manhattan Island until his death in 1672, outliving Pell by three years. And the settlement of East Chester would begin to take shape.

But the takeover was not a done deal. Precisely nine years after the surrender of New Netherlands, a Dutch fleet retook Manhattan, and installed a new government. The whole colony changed hands. Fifteen months later the Dutch gave the colony back to the English.⁷

In the next article information about some of the early inhabitants of the settlement of Eastchester will reveal some insights about what the original town was like.

Please contact us at historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org about any comments or questions you might have about this column. Any questions about sources of information will be answered.

¹ Stephen Schechter, "Ten Farms Covenant", *Roots of the Republic. American Founding Documents interpreted.* (Landham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1990) 42.

² Regina Baio, "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville, NY, 1664-2014* (Eastchester 350th Anniversary, Inc. 2014, 64.

³ David A. Tompkins *Eastchester Village: Colonial New York: 1666-1698, Maps and Inhabitants* (Eastchester, New York: Eastchester Historical Society, 1997) 37.

⁴ Russell Shorto *The Island at the Center of the Earth: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony that shaped America* (New York: Random House, 2004) 268.

⁵ Stephen Schechter, "Ten Farms Covenant", *Roots of the Republic. American Founding Documents interpreted.* (Landham, Maryland: Madison Books, 1990) 39.

⁶ David A. Tompkins *Eastchester Village: Colonial New York: 1666-1698, Maps and Inhabitants* (Eastchester, New York: Eastchester Historical Society, 1997) i and 14. Home lots were 20 acres and available farm and pasture land as much as 78 acres.⁶

⁷ Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the Earth: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony that shaped America* (New York: Random House, 2004) 308.