

## A Closer Look at the Eastchester Covenant

### Article # 4 on the Founding of Eastchester

By

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Regina Baio "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214)*

Just over three hundred and fifty years ago the male heads of households in the newly created Puritan town of Eastchester began signing a document known as the Eastchester or 'Ten Farms' Covenant'. This covenant, the town's most precious, oldest, and still not fully understood document, was a framework for a good society, a mission statement or blueprint on what type of community our 17<sup>th</sup> century forefathers wanted their community to be.

In seventeenth century New England the establishment of towns based on signed covenants was the rule. These covenants expressed a community life based on love, order for the blessings of all, and the glory of God. Long before American democracy was achieved, Eastchester's founding families created for themselves this unusual document to govern their relations with each other and outsiders. The Eastchester Covenant was unique, a reflection of spiritual beliefs and unique parochial circumstances experienced by the town's founders.<sup>1</sup>

The Covenant gave structure to the lives that they wanted to build together. First and foremost, the Eastchester Covenant stated that the community would be based on sound moral and Christian principles. There was no separation of church and state; the sacred and secular were one. Family, church, town—all were covenanted with God.<sup>2</sup> The Covenant states "That we endeavor to keep and maintain Christian love and civil honesty." In more secular language the 26 men who signed the Covenant were stating that the principles upon which this town would be based were love, compassion, integrity, generosity, and cooperation.

The men and women who founded the town of Eastchester were active in demanding that their century's old rights as Englishmen be protected. The path from Magna Carta to the Declaration of Independence culminating in the United States Constitution in which authority flows from the people was an evolutionary struggle that had been going on for centuries. As part of this process, the Eastchester Covenant is an early example of government by the people.<sup>3</sup>

The Eastchester Covenant in addition to being both a religious and political statement it is also a detailed account of how the people of the town would conduct their daily affairs. The men and women who began settling Eastchester in 1664 were moving into an area of uncharted dangers. Surviving in the wilderness, building shelter, establishing productive farms, and the imminent dangers of attack by Native Americans, rattlesnakes, wolves, and bears were a few of the imposing challenges that these pioneers had to deal with.

To what extent is the Eastchester Covenant unique? Over 300 Puritan towns in New England, New York, and New Jersey had either church or civil covenants. The first civil covenant in New England was the famous Mayflower Compact. The Eastchester Covenant is the only surviving covenant in New York State,

a copy of which is situated in the lobby of Eastchester Town Hall. The Eastchester Covenant is one of New York State's more important founding documents.<sup>4</sup>

Up until a few years ago the significance of the Eastchester Covenant had not been fully appreciated. Eastchester was founded by Puritans who up to a few decades ago were not always pictured favorably. Recent scholarship has placed our Puritan forefathers in a more benevolent light. The Puritans believed that they had been charged by God to save humanity by founding a new society, divinely inspired; a beacon on a hill, a community of saints for all mankind to see. Sometimes Puritanism led to excesses. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and for a good deal of the twentieth century the Puritans were viewed by historians and writers as joyless, petty, dark minded, firm believers in human depravity, witch hunters, and theocrats. Yet intellectuals, historians, philosophers, and political pundits starting in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century realized that Puritan settlements were much more complex, exhibited variety, diversity, and vitality than initially believed.<sup>5</sup> The nascent community of Eastchester is an example of how courageous people could create a workable community based on moral and religious principles in which compassion, integrity, order, generosity, and cooperation were guiding principles.

In the next few articles it will be explained in more detail how the founding families conquered the wilderness, attempted to preserve the spiritual condition of their lives, engaged in the struggle to continue their commitment to government by the people, and last how the spirit of the Eastchester Covenant has endured throughout the last three and a half centuries.

Please contact us at [historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org) about any comments or questions you might have about this column. Also any questions about sources of information will be addressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Schechter *Roots of the Republic: American Founding Documents Interpreted*, ed. Stephen L. Schechter (Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: A Madison House Book, 1990), 36, 41-42; Regina Baio "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214)* 54.

<sup>2</sup> David Weir *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005) 2, 5 and 6; Regina Baio "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214)* 65.

<sup>3</sup> Regina Baio "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214)* 70.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Schechter *Roots of the Republic: American Founding Documents Interpreted* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan and Littlefield Publishing, 1990) 36-46.

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* .(Grand Rapid Michigan: William Pulitzer Prize Winning Historian Edmund S. M Be Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005) 430 (End note); Historians Perry Miller, Daniel Bushman, and Pulitzer Prize Winner Edmund S. Morgan, Journalists David Brooks and E. J. Dionne, and philosophers Amitai Etzioni and Wilson Carey McWilliams all have asked their readers to cast aside prior stereotypes of Puritan New England