

Thomas Pell: Lost Hero

1647-1664

This is the sixth in a series of articles on the Colonial and Revolutionary History of Eastchester

By

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History is often unkind to people who should be ranked among the heroes of America. The obscurity of reliable records can doom these figures to relative oblivion. The complexity of the era in which they live or failure to identify with a ruling elite can also obscure their importance. Thomas Pell is such a person. Today the amazing life of Thomas Pell would make a great story for a best-selling historical novel or a gripping subject for a made for TV mini-series.

Who was Thomas Pell? He was born the second son of a prominent Englishman. Orphaned at age 4, he was raised by caring stepparents. As a very young man, he held a minor position in the court of King Charles I but was forced to leave the country on account of an indiscretion with a lady of waiting to the Queen. Pell volunteered in the Netherlands to help that country fight for its independence against Spain. There he mastered enough of the medical practices of the day to be considered a surgeon. By 1637 the 24 year old Pell had crossed the Atlantic and was found practicing his surgical skills in the bloody Pequot War on the side of the Puritans in nearby Connecticut.

As he amputated limbs and bandaged wounded men, he witnessed firsthand the horrors of the savage combat between the Native Americans and Europeans. There is good reason to believe that Pell heard the screams and smelled the burning flesh of the 600 old men, women, and children who were burned alive in their stockade by Puritan militia as he tended to the wounded aboard a nearby ship.

A few years after the war was over, Pell moved to New Haven, practicing his surgical skills and investing in real estate and shipping. He soon became a wealthy man. In 1647 a 35 year old Pell married the widow Lucy Brewster and began to relocate to Fairfield, Connecticut. Also in that year Pell had his first brush with Peter Stuyvesant, then the newly arrived Dutch governor of New Netherlands. One of his vessels filled with beaver skins was halted in the East River by Dutch authorities under Stuyvesant's command and the cargo of valuable skins confiscated.

By 1653 Pell began to sell substantial holdings in New Haven and bought a permanent home in Fairfield, Connecticut. Fairfield, located at the edge of the Puritan wilderness, bordered the Dutch territory of New Netherlands and the remnants of the Lenape tribes that had been decimated by a recent conflict known as Kieft's war. That very same year an abortive plan to invade New Netherlands by Puritan invasion enthusiasts from Fairfield had been scrapped. But Pell thought of a more subtle way of gaining control over unsettled lands controlled by the Dutch.

His plan was both simple but ingenious. He would purchase a huge tract of disputed lands from five Lenape chiefs. By gaining dominion over the lands that later in the 17th century would become lower Westchester County the English could block any further movement of Dutch settlers, at least along the shore of the Long Island Sound westward to the Hutchinson River. Pell had developed considerable knowledge of dealing with Native Americans both from firsthand experience and hearing about needless hostilities that

had led not only to the massacre of Anne Hutchinson and her party but also the near extinction of the Dutch settlement a decade before.

Pell on June 27th, 1654 met with five Lenape sachems to buy all of what is today the eastern half of the Bronx and a portion of eastern Westchester County. To prevent any uprisings that might arise over the land purchased, the sachems agreed to send a delegation every spring to the exact spot where the treaty was signed to mark the boundaries of the land that had been purchased. Yearly meeting at the oak tree where the treaty was signed, the sachems and Pell traced the exact boundaries of the treaty.

This treaty was significant. While sporadic outbreaks of violence broke out in other places, no hostilities every broke out in the 9,000 acres purchased by Pell. An interesting aside is that one of the sachems who signed the treaty named Wampage or John White is alleged to have signed his name as “Anhooke” and claimed to be the person who killed Anne Hutchinson. While this story is recounted frequently, there is no clear documentation to prove the validity of that claim.

A year after signing the treaty Thomas Pell gathered fifteen men to settle the village of Westchester on land he had purchased. It was no coincidence that war had broken out in Europe between England and Holland. When Peter Stuyvesant learned about this intrusion, he ordered the settlers of Westchester to leave. Conflict persisted for almost two years and was finally resolved when the settlers of Westchester signed an oath of allegiance to the monarchs of Holland.

The town of Westchester, now a section of the Bronx, while ostentatiously under Dutch control remained more or less an English settlement with British customs and language, its own militia, and continuance of good relations with Native Americans thanks to Thomas Pell. Pell would get one last chance to establish an English settlement when on June 24, 1664 he granted a deed to ten Puritan farm families that would become Eastchester from Fairfield, Connecticut.

Thomas Pell was a 17th century swashbuckling adventurer who overcame overwhelming odds to become a major player in the history of lower Westchester County and the Bronx. The treaty that he signed in 1654 was very unusual in that it insured peaceful relations with the Native American population. His sale in 1664 of 6,000 acres to fellow town's people from Fairfield, Connecticut marked the beginnings of the town of Eastchester.

In the next article in 2016, the story of the founding of Eastchester will be told.

Please contact us at historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org about any comments or questions you might have about this column.

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