

Keeping the Covenant?

Article # 8 on the Founding of Eastchester

By

Richard Forliano, Eastchester Town Historian

A perplexing question that is very difficult to answer is in what ways have the tens of thousands of citizens who have lived in the historic town of Eastchester adhered to the spirit of our most precious and important document, the Eastchester Covenant. Three hundred and fifty one years ago the Puritan founders of the town began signing the Eastchester Covenant. For the next 18 years the male heads of households either signed or put their mark on what they considered to be a sacred document. In doing so they pledged their adherence to the 26 articles that acted as a blueprint or framework for our community.¹

An important directive from the Covenant was to “plainly deal with one another in Christian love”. In 1683, a year after the last man signed the Covenant, this mandate was fulfilled when a small church was built; the first building designed for worship in Westchester County.² The very same year that the first church opened its doors, a vote was taken at a public meeting to follow article # 14 in the Covenant to build a schoolhouse and hire a school master.

Soon thereafter, a school master was hired but it would not be until 1726 that the first school house would be built.³ Free public education in one-room school houses in the 18th and 19th century were available in one-room school houses that dotted the landscape of the then nearly 7,000 acre community. In the mid-nineteenth century the availability of free public education provided an avenue for upward mobility for the descendants of its first inhabitant and the influx of Irish and German immigrants.

Compassion, integrity, cooperation, charity, and generosity are time honored virtues that implicitly connected our Puritan forefathers who signed the Eastchester Covenant. On the north wall of the Waverly School, there is an inscription, “We came to learn, we leave to serve.” The present Waverly School that was built in the late 1890’s was the High School for Tuckahoe and Eastchester until 1928. The origins of that saying is not known. But in one short sentence this inscription carved in marble connects the selfless spirit of those first town fathers with us today.

In colonial times Eastchester was surrounded by manors ruled by lords appointed by the crown. Heathcote Manor, the present village of Scarsdale, Phillipsburg Manor, the present city of Yonkers, and Pelham Manor to the West were such communities. Their lands were worked by tenant farmers who had little to no say in decisions affecting their lives. To the contrary, the citizens of Eastchester in colonial times were land owning citizens who made important decisions at town meetings controlling their lives.

In both the 17th and early 18th century the farmers of Eastchester would make courageous stands when the right to elect their own representatives to a colonial assembly were threatened. During Leisler’s Rebellion, 1689, seventy Eastchester farmers took up arms against what they considered to be an attempt to close down the colonial assembly. Over five decades later in 1733 the land owning farmers of Eastchester refused to allow a corrupt Royal Governor to fix an election to the colonial assembly.

Most of the 26 articles of the articles of the Covenant are either archaic, obsolete, or abandoned. No longer do we have a day in the spring set aside for the killing of rattlesnakes. Most serious disputes today are handled by the courts, not by third party arbitration. The Puritan communal ideal of all families living

on equal size lots was abandoned in a span of less than two decades. The practice of voting to exclude 'obnoxious people' from moving into the community and insuring that a new arrival could only purchase land after a vote of the inhabitants ended most likely before the last man put his signature on the covenant.⁴

But in other ways the spirit of the Covenant and the hopes of the founding families live on. Town records show that there was a local official called the 'Overseer of the Poor that dates back to the dark days of the American Revolution"⁵. It was the responsibility of this individual to provide for people who could not take care of themselves with the support of the local community. It was not until the depths of the Great Depression of the nineteen thirties that this position was abolished and replaced with a federal welfare officer. Charities, service organizations, and houses of worship, some of whose origins date back to before the Civil War, are committed to helping those who cannot help themselves.

Nineteenth century historians describing the history of Eastchester as early as 1848 published transcripts of the Eastchester Covenant.⁶ The sophisticated reading public was well aware of this, our most important and precious document. One very prominent person who possibly read the Eastchester Covenant was a larger than life woman named Amie Dusenberry.

Miss Amie born in the 1880's was the last of the Masterton clan that pioneered the marble industry in Tuckahoe. She attended church and taught Sunday school at the Reform Church in Bronxville. She was Eastchester's last Overseer of the Poor. It would not be until the depth of the Great Depression that her position as Overseer of the Poor would be abolished and changed to federal welfare officer. In 1940 Amie Dusenberry retired as the public welfare officer. Upon her retirement she continued her work at helping those who could not help themselves by founding the Bronxville League for Service.⁷

Starting as early as the mid-nineteenth century individuals joined houses of worship, founded local charities, and participated in local civic and service organizations. While most of these good people might never have read or heard about the Eastchester Covenant, in a very real sense they were following the spirit of our founder families who designed our community centuries ago;

To a large extent the answer to the question of the extent that the people of this town have adhered the spirit of the Eastchester Covenant is in the eye of the beholder. In the next article, single events from the 19th, 20th, and two from the 21th century will be described. It will be up for the reader to decide whether these events stem from Eastchester's origins or are simply accidents of history.

Founding of Mount Vernon 1850

The Village of Tuckahoe 1930 to Today

The Meeting Outside Town Hall After 9/11

The Ceremony at Town Hall on June 24th, 2014 in which Town Officials resigned the Eastchester Covenant

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

¹ Sixteen men placed their signature and 10 made their mark.

² Lloyd Ulton *The Bronx in the Frontier Era* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1993) 175; J. Thomas Scharf *History of Westchester County, New York Including Morisannia, King's Bridge, and West Farms which had been annexed to New York City* (Philadelphia: L E Preston & Company, 1886) Vol. 1, 10; Volume 2, 723; Regina Baio "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester"

³ "Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville Chronology" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214)* 289.

⁴ Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville Chronology" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214)* 63; *Eastchester Town Records* Book 1, 7,13.

⁵ *Eastchester Town Records. Volume 6. 1778-1824* (Eastchester Historical Society, February 1965) Transcribed by Harriet Bianchi and Phyllis Knowles.

⁶ In the mid-nineteenth century Robert Bartow, Junior *A History of the County of Westchester from its First Settlement to the Present Time*. (New York: Alexander L. Gould, 1848 Volume 1) 122-124.

⁷ Emily Correy *Building a Suburban Village: Bronxville, New York, 1898-1998* Editor Eloise Morgan (Bronxville Centennial Committee, 1998) 220.