

Alexander Hamilton's Eastchester Connection

By

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In the turbulent days after the passage of the Intolerable Acts and over a year before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Alexander Hamilton, a 19 year-old collegiate at King's College was engaged in a series of debates in the New York City press with Samuel Seabury, the Loyalist minister of Eastchester's only church, Saint Paul's. Even though Seabury was a prominent and highly esteemed colonial leader, Hamilton in a series of brilliantly written articles systematically refuted Seabury's Loyalist arguments. His articles were not only read by people in Eastchester but were influential in convincing people to support for the Patriot cause.

Even though there is no record of Alexander Hamilton during the American Revolution of ever setting foot in Eastchester, there is good reason to believe that he was acquainted with what was happening in the town and knew personally some of its residents. The event that occurred in Eastchester that drew Hamilton's attention was known as Sear's Raid.

Exactly eight months after the opening shots of the Revolution were fired at Lexington, Isaac Sears, a prosperous skipper who had worked the West Indian trade and amassed a small fortune as a privateer during the French and Indian War, had become a Patriot militant. Sears gathered up a militia of nearly one hundred horseman in Connecticut, kidnapped the Reverend Samuel Seabury, the local judge named Jonathan Fowler, and a Westchester mayor. Seabury's family and possibly Fowler's were terrorized before Seabury was taken as a Tory trophy to New Haven, Connecticut under military guard. Seabury refused to confess that he was the "Westchester Farmer" whose essays had provoked Hamilton's celebrated rebuttal.

Hamilton's reaction to Sear's Raid in his private letters is very revealing. In a letter to the patriot John Jay he stated that he found Loyalist sentiment of men like Seabury and Fowler as "dangerous and pernicious. Never the less, Hamilton felt obliged to condemn the lawless nature of Sear's raid. In his letter to John Jay he stated, "In times of such commotion as the present while the passions of men are worked up to an uncommon pitch, there is great danger of fatal extremes."

Even as a twenty-year old Hamilton favored the ideals of the Revolution but also worried about the long term effect of habitual disorder, especially among the uneducated masses. Hamilton believed in freedom within order. He clearly saw that greater freedom could lead to greater disorder that resulted in a loss of freedom. All his life he would try to balance the conflict between liberty and order.

His reaction to Sear's raid foreshadowed his disgust with the reign of terror during the French Revolution. As a youth he had seen the first hand the horrors of slave rebellions in the Caribbean. Many years later this clash of ideals would cause a break with his fellow cabinet member, Thomas Jefferson, who said, "The blood of tyrants must be spilled every twenty years".

And there is the possibility of another Eastchester connection with Hamilton. The judge who was kidnapped along with Seabury was a prominent jurist and a member of Eastchester's most prolific family, the Fowler's. The patriarch of that family, Henry, was a signer of the Eastchester Covenant. In the 75 years before the American Revolution a member of the Fowler clan was served as Town Supervisor 24 times.

At the outbreak of the American Revolution the leading figure of the Fowler clan was the Loyalist Judge, Jonathan Fowler. Sears had lawlessly kidnapped Judge Fowler along with Seabury. While there is no conclusive proof, Hamilton logically would have objected to the treatment of Judge Fowler. Some historians believe that Judge Fowler was forced to leave his native Eastchester and move to Nova Scotia.

A fascinating piece of information is that Judge Fowler's son, Theodosius, had rejected the Loyalist cause and became an officer in George Washington's Continental Army. Theodosius Fowler who eventually rose to the rank of Captain fought in the Continental Army along with Hamilton in the Battles for New York, Monmouth, Yorktown, and shared the freezing cold at Valley Forge. Both Fowler and Hamilton were Revolutionary War heroes. After the war, Theodosius had a business relationship and most likely a personal relationship with Hamilton.

It is possible that Theodosius Fowler while willing like Hamilton to spend the seven years of his life fighting for American independence would have objected to the lawless behavior of Isaac Sears and his Connecticut militia who had so mistreated his father.

In the next article the ways that the military careers of Hamilton and Fowler intersected in the cause of American independence will be described.

Gratitude goes to Ron Chernow for his masterpiece history *Alexander Hamilton* that inspired Lin-Manuel Miranda to play *Hamilton* from which information about Sear's Raid is obtained.

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.