

Something Happening Here

By

Richard Forliano

Eastchester Town Historian

On the evening of June 24th in the lobby of Eastchester Town Hall something happened that had never occurred before in history of America. Elected officials in Eastchester, Bronxville, and Tuckahoe did what no other community in America had ever done. They signed a pledge renewing their dedication to the principles in the Eastchester Covenant written by the town founders 349 years before. None of the 100 communities in New England and other sections of the Northeast that had ever signed civil covenants that recommitted themselves to the principles upon which their communities were founded.¹

What are the beliefs that the original settlers committed our community to long before American democracy had been achieved. Implicit in the covenant is the centuries old ideal of governance by the people. Our most precious and important document, states that this community would be based on fundamental moral and spiritual principles such as compassion, honesty, generosity, cooperation, governance by the people, and devotion to family, faith, and community. Recent scholarship by prominent historians and political scientists rank our covenant among some the most important documents in American history.

That night Town Supervisor Anthony Colavita stressed that “Eastchester’s foundation, its very bedrock, is the family. It was created by 26 families and to this day it has always existed as a collection of families.”² In the seventeenth and eighteen century the families consisted of people of English and French Huguenot stock mixed in with a number of African American slaves and some free blacks. With the arrival of the railroad in the mid-nineteenth century Irish and German immigrants became the bedrock of the Tuckahoe and Eastchester communities. Later in the early twentieth century waves of Italians came to Tuckahoe and Eastchester followed by an influx of African Americans to Tuckahoe starting in World War I.

Today the town of Eastchester and its two villages like our ancestors over three centuries ago provides a safe haven for families to raise their children in a place that in the words of the Town Supervisor are joined by a bond of “genuine respect and benevolence we share toward one another....family to family and neighborhood to neighborhood.”³

Eastchester is a caring community. After 9/11 hundreds of people in the town gathered with our political and religious leaders in front of Town Hall to mourn our collective loss. The words of the Town Supervisor Jim Cavanaugh still ring true today:

“We are attacked not because we worship god, but because we allow worship of God in all ways. We are attacked not because we are rich but because we refuse to believe that people must be poor. We are reviled by zealots not because we threaten their way of life but because we are so successful in protecting ours. These men of dark and cold hearts oppose us not because we are oppressive, but we remain the world’s greatest refuge for every person who flees the tyrant.”⁴

If the ghosts of the men and women who originally settled here over three centuries ago heard those words they would be proud. Overall the Eastchester Covenant encourages a compassionate, honest, fair, and cooperative community. It inspires us to stand together, support each other, and deal with each other in a fair manner.

Over Eastchester's three and a half century history there have been times when its citizens have followed the spirit of the Covenant. In 1850 John Stevens, a New York City merchant tailor organized mechanics and laboring men from New York City to combine their resources, buy land, and build houses of their own. Stevens' plan was to allow people of sound moral character, mainly mechanics and laboring men, fleeing the exorbitant rents of New York City to buy affordable homes. Within six months he had a thousand subscribers, and the group began looking to buy land within a reasonable commuting distance from their city jobs. His group bought five adjoining farms in southern Eastchester consisting of 365 acres, positioned near the junction of the Harlem and New Haven railroad.⁵ The name that was given to this area was Mount Vernon, a village for 39 years in the town of Eastchester.

The present day village of Tuckahoe is a unique example of how people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds got along so well long before the Civil Rights movement. A young man growing up in Tuckahoe after World War 2 commented, "This small village represented everything that was good and wholesome about small town America. What made Tuckahoe unique was its cultural diversity long before the term was popular. Tuckahoe was a true melting pot of Italians, Polish, Jews, and African Americans . . . and many others . . . There were no jealousies or animosities."⁶

There are many numerous examples of how people over the span of long history have followed the spirit of the Eastchester Covenant. Houses of worship, service and civic groups, scouting organizations, private charities and fund raising groups, volunteer organizations, and private acts of charity have enriched our community beyond measure.

The people of Eastchester including the villages of Tuckahoe and Bronxville are bonded together by trust, compassion, honesty, generosity, family, and faith. The origins of these noble qualities can be traced to the signers of the Eastchester Covenant from 1665 to 1682. There are many other examples of this communities' citizens adhering to the principles behind the Covenant, a document that most likely have never read but is part of Eastchester's legacy.

What better legacy can we pass on to our children than that the people of our community are 'still keeping the covenant.'

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 David Weir *Early New England: A Covenanted Society (Grand Rapids, Michigan)* William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 2005) 228, 251. In this book David Weir takes into account all of the surviving covenants in New England, New York, and New Jersey. This unmatched study reveals much about New England society including that of 17th century Eastchester. Professor Weir lives in Bronxville with his family.

² Program/Remarks by Anthony Colavita, June 23, 2014., 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3

⁴ James Cavanagh *Speech in Front of Eastchester Town Hall* September 15, 2016.

⁵ "The Mod-Nineteenth Century", *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville, 1664-2014* (Eastchester 350th Anniversary, INC) 146-147.

⁶ Al Mariani, *Columbus and Maynard: A Trip back in Time to recapture traditional values*. (Stanford, Connecticut: Brew Printing, 2004) 1 and 2.