

Founding Families and the Legacy of Virginia Hefti

By Richard Forliano, Eastchester Town Historian

What makes reporting on the fascinating history of the town of Eastchester so engaging is that new information is discovered about our storied past that can change our perceptions of who we are and where we came from. It has long been known that the historic town of Eastchester was founded in 1664 by Puritan farm families from Fairfield, Connecticut. The original site of the first settlement was just east of the Hutchinson River near present day Co-Op City in the Bronx.

In those early years, those first families set up a co-operative farming community centered about a village green, around which for almost two decades, they lived on equal size lots, and left each day to separate fields where they raised livestock and produce, most of which was shipped to nearby Manhattan for sale. Starting in 1665 and continuing for the next 17 years, the male heads of households signed or made their mark on a document named the Eastchester Covenant that insisted that people in the community follow the biblically based moral principles of integrity, compassion, cooperation, and reverence. The Eastchester Covenant is the only surviving one in New York State and it affords a window into our mid to late 17th century past.

During last year's celebration of the 350th anniversary of the town of Eastchester, more information has been forthcoming about the contribution of those founding families to the colonial and revolutionary heritage of Eastchester. The Eastchester Historical Society honored one of those, Virginia Hefti, at its annual fundraising dinner on September 18th in which a reenactor, Jack Sherry, brought Ben Franklin, back to life.

Virginia Hefti is a direct descendent of Henry Fowler, one of the town's founders and the 17th man to sign the covenant. Henry Fowler, English born and a blacksmith and miller by trade, brought his family to settle in Eastchester in 1676, two decades after he came to America. He signed our most precious document, the

Eastchester Covenant that insisted that the moral principles upon which this community be based would be integrity, compassion, cooperation, and reverence. Henry and his wife Rebecca had 11 children, two of which became Town Supervisors. One of their sons, William married Mary Pearsall Thorne in 1689, two of whose grandparents signed the Flushing Remonstrance, the first written statement of the need for religious freedom in America.

The Fowlers were a prolific family and a power in the community. Moses Fowler, the son of Henry, served as Town Supervisor for 10 years between 1728 and 1738. As Eastchester Supervisor, in May 1729 he delivered to the town meeting papers giving the town sole title to the land that is present day Eastchester, called the Long Reach.

But Moses' most significant contribution came in 1733 while he was still serving as town supervisor. A corrupt, royal governor had tried to fix an election for a representative to the colonial assembly. Moses was a vote counter for that famous election. A Dutch printer named John Peter Zenger used this incident in the first issue of his newspaper The New York Weekly Journal. While Zenger never set foot in Eastchester and did not write the article, two years later when he was put on trial for seditious libel and acquitted. Many years later, Zenger's acquittal based on the principle that the press has a responsibility to print the truth would be used as a defense for the first amendment right of freedom of the press.

During the American Revolution, the Fowler family was bitterly divided between Patriots and Loyalists. Judge Jonathan Fowler did not support the rebellion and for a brief time before the signing of the Declaration of Independence was imprisoned for his Loyalists view. A few months after his release, his son, Theodosius joined the Continental army. Theodosius fought in the Battle for New York, Saratoga, wintered at Valley Forge, and encountered the British at Monmouth. He was then transferred to upstate New York where he was engaged in savage fighting against the Iroquois. In 1781, Theodosius, now a Captain, rejoined Washington and was present for the surrender at Yorktown. He would spend the last two years with Washington waiting for the

final peace settlement.

In 1787, his loyalist father died and is interned in the family vault at Saint Paul's. Theodosius became one of the richest men in Eastchester and passed away at age 87, a true American hero. He is interned along with his father at Saint Paul's.

Virginia Hefti has every reason to be proud of her heritage. It is an honor for the people of this town that she still lives here. Virginia's ancestors rank among the most influential families in the history of New York State (e.g. Fish, Fowler, Bowne, Reynolds, et al.) Virginia was also honored at the Bronxville Field Club in December of 2014 by the Daughters of the American Revolution. The widow of former Commissioner of Planning and Community Development, Robert Hefti, - Muzzy, as she is known to friends and family, thrice served as Regent of the White Plains Chapter DAR; is a Lifetime Member of the DAR Officers Club; a member of the DAR Roundtable; a member of the Anne Hutchinson-Bronxville Chapter DAR; a member of the Westchester County Genealogical Society; served as a Councilor to the New York State Chapter of the National Society Daughters of Founders and Patriots of America and is an avid genealogy researcher, having corrected the historic records of the National Archives on more than one occasion, receiving both thanks and credit for her academic contributions to the archival integrity of American History.

New insights into Eastchester's colonial and revolutionary past have also recently been provided by descendants of founding families like the Shute's, Pinckney's, Drake's, and Tompkins's. A special debt of gratitude must go to David Tompkins. David is a direct descendant of Nathaniel and John Tompkins, both signers of the Covenant and among the original 17th century settlers of the town. In 1997, David published a meticulously research book on colonial Eastchester from 1666 to 1698. One of his ancestors, Daniel Tompkins of Scarsdale, became Vice President of the United States under James Monroe.