

To be printed in *Eastchester Review* on November 6th, 2015

The Controversial Trial of Mistress Anne Hutchinson

Richard Forliano, Eastchester Town Historian
and

George Pietarinen, Author of “Anne Hutchinson, A Puritan Woman of Courage” in the book *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville*

Second in a series of articles on the colonial and revolutionary history of Eastchester.

The Puritans who left Europe and settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony were true believers who hoped to create a new Zion, a community of saints, a beacon on a hill for all mankind to see. At that time neither religious toleration nor dissent were considered virtues. Harmony was stressed over dissension, cooperation over strife. While the Puritans left Europe to escape religious persecution, this did not lead to a belief in tolerance for others. The Puritans like many true believers felt that their way was the only way.

But soon, dissension and strife were threatening the unity necessary for the colony to survive. A protracted, bloody and tragic struggle against the Pequot Indians created tensions between those who supported the war and those who did not. Ministers like Roger Williams and John Witherspoon who held views opposed to the ruling theocracy found themselves banished into the wilderness. Anne Hutchinson had lived for only three years in Boston when she too ran afoul of the authorities.

Deputy Governor Thomas Dooley tried to place sole blame on the strife that was dividing the colony on the actions and beliefs of Anne Hutchinson, “Three years ago we were all in peace... Mrs. Hutchinson from the time she came has made a disturbance.” In the late of fall of 1637, Anne Hutchinson was brought to trial in a court presided over by Governor John Winthrop and the most powerful ministers in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The charges against Anne were serious. She had troubled the peace of the commonwealth and churches by holding meetings at her house, slandered the ministers, and promoted heretical views that had caused recent problems. Moreover she had counselled her followers not to participate in the struggle against the Pequot.

The trial began in November of 1637 as the winter was approaching. In the first days of the trial, this proud, brilliant, and learned woman outmaneuvered the accusers who were attempting to prosecute her. She had learned theology and a command of scripture in England from her minister father, Francis Marbury, who had also been imprisoned for religious views similar to the very men who were prosecuting her. Anne cleverly avoided confessing to the charge leveled against her. She insisted that the ministers leveling accusations against her take an oath on the Bible to tell the truth. Effortlessly quoting scripture, she avoided the most serious charge of accusing ministers of advocating a covenant of works over a covenant of grace.

Acquittal seemed clearly in sight when Anne made a very damaging statement. She said in to her accusers:

“You have no power over my body, neither can you do me any harm—for I am in the hands of the eternal Jehovah, my Saviour... I fear none but the **great Jehovah, which hath foretold me of these things**, and I do verily believe that he will deliver me out of our hands. Therefore take heed how you proceed against me—for **I know that, for this you go about to do to me, God will ruin you and your posterity and this whole state.**”

She claimed to have received direct revelations from God and was exempt from the mandates of the court, blasphemy to the Puritans of that time. The final source of all authority was the Bible. It was the function of the clergy to guide their followers in the paths of righteousness. Anne claimed that God spoke to her directly which cast into doubt the need for clergy. In a sense she had confessed to her guilt.

Why at a moment of triumph did Anne make so colossal a blunder? Did she simply crack under pressure or was it simply a matter of not being able to speak the truth. Either way she was doomed. Anne would spend the next four months under house arrest, unable to see her children. In March of 1638, weakened and sickly, Anne recanted some of her views following the advice of two ministers who she respected. But, in the end the court not only banished Anne but cast her into eternal damnation by excommunicating her. In a long, six day April snow storm Anne with her children made the arduous trip to join her husband in Providence, Rhode Island.

What do prominent historians say about the legacy of Anne Hutchinson and her trial? Daniel Boorstein, one of America's prominent 20th century historian, claimed that if the court had treated her differently, 'they would have merited praise as precursors of modern liberalism, but they would not have founded a nation.' Anne Hutchinson was threatening the stability of the colony, the Puritan's holy experiment. Anne was saying that the minister and the church were no longer needed. Edmund Morgan, the Pulitzer Prize winning historian, granting the unfairness of the trial, stated that "once Hutchinson proclaimed a belief in immediate revelation, it was quite impossible for her to remain part of the Puritan commonwealth."

Eve LaPlante, a direct descendant of Anne Hutchinson and author of *American Jezebel*, a best selling work of non-fiction in 2004, believes it might have been better for the judges to banish her without a trial... The transcripts of the trial reveal a strong brilliant woman put down by men who had judged her in advance, "By carefully recording and saving her extensive testimony, the judges inadvertently gave her what few women of her time enjoyed, a lasting voice. The trial that led to her imprisonment lets her speak to us nearly four hundred centuries later."

The divisions caused by the trial of Anne Hutchinson gave rise to the establishment of America's first college. Anne Hutchinson was the true mid-wife of Harvard. To paraphrase an article in the 2002 *Harvard Magazine*, the colony determined to provide for the education of a new generation of ministers and theologians who would secure New England's peace from future seditious Mrs. Hutchinsons."

Anne Hutchinson had taken on the Puritan theocracy and while she lost her trial, centuries later we can only admire her strength of conviction and courage. With the establishment of Harvard College, ministers receive better training and the colony continued to survive.

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