

Background to Eastchester's Founding in 1664

This is the sixth in a series of articles on the Colonial and Revolutionary History of Eastchester

By

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The background behind the founding of Eastchester in the summer of 1664 is incomprehensible without taking into consideration the intense and oft time's violent international rivalry between the Netherlands and England over colonial possessions and maritime trade. The Dutch colony of New Netherlands stretched from Connecticut to Delaware and included present day New York City. The Dutch name Manhattan was New Amsterdam. This entire area of New Netherlands was located in a precarious position between English colonies in New England and their first settlement in Virginia.

For seventeen years two men with different temperaments and outlooks exemplified the conflict between their respective countries. In 1647 Peter Stuyvesant was named Director General of New Netherlands. He replaced William Kieft whose brutal and disastrous policies against the Native Americans led to a war that almost destroyed the entire Dutch colony. Stuyvesant, a war hero who had lost a leg fighting in the Caribbean, was intelligent, able, and pig headed. Under his leadership, the threat of immediate Indian attacks was removed and prosperity returned. Stuyvesant also did all in his power to prevent the encroachment of the English into Dutch territory.

One of Stuyvesant's nemesis was a swashbuckling English adventurer from Connecticut named Thomas Pell who learned about in the last column. The rivalry began in 1647 when one of Pell's vessels filled with beaver skins was halted in the East River by Dutch authorities under Stuyvesant's command. His cargo of valuable skins were confiscated. Seven years later, Pell purchased a huge tract of disputed lands from five Lenape chiefs along the shore of the Long Island Sound westward to the Hutchinson River. By gaining dominion over these lands Pell believed he could block any further movement of Dutch settlers into English territory in Connecticut.

A year after signing the treaty Thomas Pell gathered fifteen men to settle the village of Westchester on the land he had purchased. It was no coincidence that war had broken out in Europe between England and Holland. When Stuyvesant learned about this intrusion, he ordered the settlers of Westchester to leave. Dutch paranoia was so intense that Wall Street was erected in lower Manhattan as a barrier to prevent an English invasion. Conflict persisted for almost two years and was finally resolved when the settlers of Westchester were forced to sign an oath of allegiance to the king of Holland. Pell lost 500 pounds in his ill-fated attempt to establish an English beachhead near New Amsterdam. By this time Pell was now living permanently in Fairfield, Connecticut, a town that was on the western edge of the Puritan wilderness.

By 1664 the town of Fairfield was experiencing some difficulties. Like other New England towns in the mid 17th century there were more town residents than town members and more town members than church members. Dissension became so intense in Fairfield that a fine had to be imposed for disorderly conduct at town meetings. While the exact issue that caused so much tension is not known, Thomas Pell was able to convince ten Puritan farm families to leave Fairfield and start a settlement in disputed Dutch territory, just north of the settlement of Westchester, now under allegiance to the Netherlands.

On June 24th, Thomas Pell, an unlicensed land agent, granted to Phillip Pinckney and James Evert a deed to the land that would become Eastchester at a spot near where Anne Hutchinson had built her farm. Pell's motives were not complicated. He wanted to establish a fifth column or cultural beachhead near the more diverse Dutch settlement of New Amsterdam. His previous attempt nine years before when he both financed and encouraged the settlement of the town of Westchester (today in the Bronx) had ended in failure.

There are no written accounts of why the original ten Puritan farm families left Fairfield and came to live on land owned by another country, the Netherlands. But it was not an easy decision. Some of the original settlers along with many of their grandparents and parents had made the trek from England to Boston, from Boston to other towns in Connecticut, and finally to Fairfield, Connecticut. Now they, like some of their parents, were moving again and forced to operate under extraordinary precautions.

Did Thomas Pell assure them that the treaty he signed with the Native Americans would ensure tranquil relations? Were they confident that Peter Stuyvesant in nearby New Amsterdam (Manhattan) would not force them to swear allegiance to the Netherlands? Did they believe that they could sustain their Puritan values and culture 18 miles from New Amsterdam, filled with taverns, houses of ill repute, and people who spoke many languages? Did they feel that their new settlement of Eastchester would provide them with more opportunities than they had in Fairfield? History does not give clear answers to these questions.

Sometime in August of 1664 the ten Puritan families disembarked from a ship and made a settlement somewhere near where Co-Op City is located in the present day Bronx. They called this village composed of ten farms Eastchester. A few weeks later in September, English gunboats sailed into the harbor of New Amsterdam. Peter Stuyvesant was forced to surrender all Dutch territory without firing a shot.

Great Britain annexed New Netherlands from Connecticut to Delaware. Thomas Pell in a manner of speaking had finally achieved victory over his old adversary. Stuyvesant continued to live on his old estate on Manhattan Island until his death in 1672, outliving Pell by three years. And the settlement of Eastchester would begin to take shape.

The next article will introduce Eastchester's most precious and oldest document, the Eastchester Covenant.

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