A New Look at Our Community during the American Revolution: Part 1

By

Richard Forliano
Eastchester Town Historian

Heroic images of the American Revolution have always been taught to generations of American school children. We envision Paul Revere on his midnight ride warning the countryside that the British are coming. We see George Washington's bedraggled army crossing the Delaware on Christmas Eve and gaining the next day a much needed victory over Hessian mercenaries. As a starving American army freezes at Valley Forge, we hear Thomas Paine's encouraging words, "These are the times that try men's souls…The summer soldier will soon shrink from the struggle but the winter patriot will endure." We thrill when George Washington claims final victory at Yorktown as the tune, *The World Turned Upside Down,* plays in the background.

More sophisticated students of history know that during America's War for Independence, there was a war within a war; a war so devastating that long after it was over residents would look back with sadness and anger. During this war that created the American nation the town of Eastchester and other parts of Westchester County located only a few miles from Manhattan experienced calamitous depredations more constant and severe with few exceptions than any area of the United States.

As we approach the 250th anniversary of the American nation in 2026, new stories emerge about the role of Westchester County and America's founding fathers in the war that would become a major turning point in World History. Let us go back to those transformative days when the British parliament had closed the port of Boston, put that city under martial law, and witnessed open conflict at Lexington and Concord.

At the start of hostilities in Massachusetts, the farmers of Eastchester as well as Westchester County showed little interest in the activities of their fellow colonists complaining about unfair taxes and the price of tea. The industrious, hardworking, and apolitical farmers of Westchester farmers using the Hutchinson and Bronx Rivers had a ready market in nearby New York City for meat, dairy products, grain, and vegetables. Here there was little poverty or crime and neighbors enjoyed each other. There was little audience for Paul Revere as he passed through Westchester County as he rode up and down the Boston Post Road to stop here to describe injustices inflicted on the citizens of Boston about British tyranny.

It would be an understatement to say that change was unwelcome. Westchester residents established no Sons of Liberty and ignored a 1774 invitation from New York City to create their own Committee of Correspondence. On the eve of the American Revolution the farmers, mill owners, tavern keepers, and other residents of the wealthiest county in the colony of New York had worked hard to achieve their comfort. They greatly resented and resisted any change that participation in an armed conflict with Britain would represent.

After the outbreak of hostilities in Boston the Tory or Loyalist faction (those Americans who sided with England) was in the majority. Initially a prominent and wealthy Loyalist elite attempted to convince less educated farmers that joining a revolution against England was fraught with dangers that far exceeded any benefits that might result. Some prominent members of the Loyalist elite were Frederick Philipse III, owner of the manor that encompassed almost half of Westchester County, Judge Jonathan Fowler, a descendant of a signer of the Eastchester Covenant and the patriarch of one of Eastchester's largest and

most influential families, and last but not least the Reverend Samuel Seabury, the Episcopal minister of Eastchester's only church, Saint Paul's (Now a National Historic Site.

In 1774 and 1775 Seabury, an uncompromising Loyalist, anonymously published a series of pamphlets in local New York City newspapers commonly called "Letters from a Westchester Farmer." A slight, boyish 19-year- old college student of questionable birth and a recent immigrant from the Caribbean had most likely read Seabury's pamphlets published in the New York City press. On July 6, 1774 this young man named Alexander Hamilton attended a meeting of the militant Sons of Liberty. He endorsed the Boston Tea Party, deplored the closure of Boston's port, endorsed colonial unity against unfair taxation, and came down in favor of a colonial boycott of British goods.

The stage was now set for first a war of words. It would be the Loyalist Episcopal minister, Samuel Seabury, backed by the aristocratic merchant class and landowners against this young radical college student, Alexander Hamilton.

In the next article, the story of this fascinating exchange of words will be examined as Westchester County, the colony of New York, and the Patriot opposition are forced to confront the power of the British Empire.

Many thanks to Edna Gabler, author of the chapter "Caught between the Lines, Eastchester and the American Revolution" in *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214).* Her thorough research and lucid writing made this article possible.

Please contact us historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org with any comments or questions you have about this column. For more information on the Eastchester Historical Society and its numerous programs go on the web to www.eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org