

## No Witch Trials in Colonial Eastchester

Sarah Sanford Shute and Nathaniel Brewster

Article # 3 on the Founding of Eastchester

By

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The original town of Eastchester was more like a New England village outside of Boston or Hartford than a settlement eighteen miles from the more diverse, tolerant and multi-ethnic New York City. Eastchester was founded by Puritans, a people whose religious beliefs penetrated all discourse, underlay all thought, marked all observances, and gave meaning to every public and private crisis.<sup>1</sup> There was no separation of church and state in today's sense. The sacred and the secular were one. Family, churches, towns were covenanted with God.<sup>2</sup>

Put in simpler language, the Puritans believed that they had been charged by God to save humanity by founding a new society, divinely inspired, a beacon on a hill, a community of saints for all mankind to see. Sometimes Puritanism led to excesses. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and for a good deal of the twentieth century the Puritans were viewed by historians and writers as joyless, petty, dark minded, firm believers in human depravity, witch hunters, and theocrats. Yet historians starting in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century realized that Puritan settlements were much more complex, exhibited variety, diversity, and vitality than initially believed.<sup>3</sup> The nascent community of Eastchester is a prime example of the latter.

Witch trials and executions were quite common in New England in the latter half of the seventeenth-century. The notorious Salem Witch Trials in 1692 in which 20 people were wrongfully executed is the most notable example of witchcraft hysteria in communities founded by Puritans. Yet there were never any witch trials in Eastchester. Why?

One of the people who came with her husband, Richard, to Eastchester was Sarah Sanford Shute. Her uncle, Andrew Sanford, a physician in Hartford, and his wife Mary were accused of witchcraft. She was convicted in 1662 and presumably executed.<sup>4</sup> The memory of the incident must have been fresh in Sarah's mind when she arrived in the settlement that they would call Eastchester in the summer of 1664.

But Sarah Shute was not the only arrival to this area affected by the witchcraft mania that took place sporadically throughout New England at this time. Thomas Pell, who sold a large portion of his land to his Fairfield neighbors, knew firsthand about the damage from witchcraft trials. The wife of Thomas Basset, who fought with Pell during the Pequot War, was executed in Stratford, Connecticut in 1651. By 1653 Pell and his new bride, the widow Lucy Brewster, were living in Fairfield. There the first wife of Roger Knapp was convicted of and executed in 1653.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas Pell, educated at Cambridge and a brother of John, a renowned mathematician, linguist, and political advisor, most likely was aware of the injustices and havoc caused by witchcraft trials. In 1665, Pell's stepson, Thomas Brewster, according to article # 19, of the Eastchester Covenant became the first and only ordained Puritan minister, to preach in Eastchester. Nathaniel Brewster graduated from one of the first classes of Harvard in 1642. He served as a preacher in England from 1643 until 1663. After preaching in England for two decades, he returned to America two decades later after 'The Great Ejection'

that followed the 1662 Act of Uniformity reestablishing the Anglican Church as the established Church of England. In the 'Great Ejection' Brewster and about two thousand left their positions as Church of England.<sup>6</sup>

About a half decade after Thomas Brewster left Eastchester for Setauket, Long Island where he would preach for twenty five years until his death in 1690 (Setauket is the place where the AMC Series Turn: Washington Spies is based). Early in his tenure as a preacher there, a local husband and wife, Ralph and Mary Hall were accused of practicing witchcraft and harming local residents who became sick. There is strong circumstantial evidence that Brewster brokered an agreement with his stepfather, Thomas Pell, to allow the Halls to flee to Minneford Island, (today City Island), part of Pell's land. The noted Pelham historian, Blake Bell, speculates Thomas Pell's pangs of remorse about his community of Fairfield earlier involvement in witchcraft hysteria played a role in allowing Mary Ralph and Mary Hall settle on his land.<sup>7</sup>

The Puritan village of Eastchester never had any accusations of witchcraft, no less a trial. Evidence suggests that important people and their families; Thomas Pell, his stepson the Reverend Nathaniel Brewster, Eastchester's long serving town clerk, Richard Shute along with his wife Sarah had an aversion to the witchcraft hysteria that would sweep through New England until the infamous Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

The late 17<sup>th</sup> century community of Eastchester is a prime example of the vigor and diversity of that many Puritan towns that were established during that period in New England, New York, and New Jersey.

In the next article information about how founders of the original town of Eastchester were able to overcome the wilderness.

Please contact us at [historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:historian@eastchesterhistoricalsociety.org) about any comments or questions you might have about this column. Also any questions about sources of information will be addressed.

This column would not have been possible without the research and writings of Regina Baio, "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville (1664-1214)*

Blake Bell, "Rev. Nathaniel Brewster, Stepson of Thomas Pell" *Home Page of the Historic Pelham Blog* Tuesday, November 14, 2014.

David Tompkins *Eastchester Village: Colonial New York: 1666-1698, Maps and Inhabitants* (Eastchester, New York: Eastchester Historical Society, 1997)

David Weir *Early New England: A Covenant Society*

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<sup>1</sup> Patricai Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* New York: Oxford University Press, Updated Version, 2003, First, 1986) 3; Regina Baio, "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville, 1664-2014* (Eastchester 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Inc.) 66; Robert A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenant Society* .(Grand Rapid Michigan: Willim Be Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005) 4 and 9.

<sup>2</sup> Regina Baio, "The 1665 Covenant: Life in Seventeenth-Century Eastchester" *Out of the Wilderness: The Emergence of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville, 1664-2014* (Eastchester 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Inc.) 65 and 66.

<sup>3</sup>Robert A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenant Society* .(Grand Rapid Michigan: William Be Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005) 430 (End note)

<sup>4</sup> David A. Tompkins *Eastchester Village: Colonial New York: 1666-1698, Maps and Inhabitants* (Eastchester, New York: Eastchester Historical Society, 1997) 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*; Blake Bell, "Rev. Nathaniel Brewster, Stepson of Thomas Pell" *Home Page of the Historic Pelham Blog* Tuesday, November 14, 2014, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Blake Bell, "Rev. Nathaniel Brewster, Stepson of Thomas Pell" *Home Page of the Historic Pelham Blog* Tuesday, November 14, 2014, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.