

Eastchester's Best Kept Secret

The Eastchester Covenant

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Over the last four months eight articles have been written that focus in one way or another on Eastchester's most precious and ancient document, the Eastchester Covenant. The significance of the Covenant is hidden deeply in America's past. Its overall importance is still not fully understood by the general public. It is of the utmost importance that the intrinsic worth of the Eastchester Covenant be known to as many people as possible.

What exactly is a covenant? Covenants are sacred agreements or compacts dating back to biblical times stating basic principles upon which their community would be based. The Mayflower Compact signed by the Pilgrims is the first example of a signed covenant in American history. Simply put the Mayflower Compact said that all the people would be involved in making the law. These colonial covenants signed by small groups of Puritans founding towns governed relations with each other and outsiders. They were mission statements or blue prints describing what type of communities they pledged to God that they wanted to build.

Who wrote, transcribed, and signed the Eastchester Covenant? We do not know for sure who actually wrote our Covenant. One guess, and it is only a guess, is that it was written by Phillip Pinckney, the first man to sign the Covenant. He wrote the document most likely with the input of the ten Puritan farm families who accompanied him when they moved to Eastchester from Fairfield, Connecticut in 1664. At age 47 he signed the deed with Thomas Pell acquiring the 7,000 acres of land that would become the historic town of Eastchester. The educated son of a prominent Puritan minister Pinckney would serve prominent positions in the early government of the town. The document was transcribed by Richard Shute, the town's first clerk. Many of the descendants of Richard Shute still live in Eastchester and lower Westchester today. The document was signed by 26 of the male heads of households between 1665 and 1682. By signing the Covenant they ascribed before God to adhere to the principles in the document.

What are the basic principles enumerated in the Eastchester Covenant? The Eastchester community would be based on sound moral and Christian principles. Put simply in 21st century language, people in our community would be compassionate, kind, honest, cooperative, and generous. Unlike many of the surrounding communities which were more like feudal manors, the town government was an early example of government by the people affirming the principle of consent of the governed. The individuals who founded Eastchester hoped to set up a society where everyone cared about everyone else, where decisions and disputes were settled by consensus, and a place where people were cognizant of human rights that had evolved over the centuries.

How unique is the Eastchester Covenant? There are approximately sixty civil covenants remaining that were signed between 1620 and 1708 in the Northeast. The Eastchester Covenant is the only known surviving civil covenant in New York State. Other covenants were formulated in Westchester, Long Island, and New Jersey but the Eastchester Covenant is the only one that remains intact. The Eastchester

Covenant is a document that ranks along with other early prominent documents in American history like the Mayflower Compact and the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut.

To what extent has the Eastchester Covenant had an impact on the future development of the town of Eastchester? A year after the last man signed the Eastchester Covenant, 1683, the first church was built in Westchester County, Saint Paul's, at the site near where Eastchester was founded. The builders of the church were following the directive in the Covenant to "plainly deal with each other in Christian love." That very same year a vote was taken to build a school house and to hire a school master. School masters were soon hired and in 1726 the first school house was built. Free public education in one room school houses was available in one room school houses that dotted the nearly 18th and 19th century landscape of the nearly 7,000 acres of historic Eastchester.

As early as 1848, 19th century local historians printed transcripts of the Eastchester Covenant. As far as we know, there are no direct references to the Eastchester Covenant as a guide to how the citizens of the town should behave. That is not to say that the educated citizens of the town were unaware of the intrinsic values implied in the Covenant. That being said, it is up to the individual citizens of the town today to decide the extent that compassion honesty, generosity, cooperation, and kindness have been guiding principles that make our community unique.

What are some suggestions that the citizens of Eastchester can pay tribute to our most precious document?

There are many ways that the Eastchester community can pay tribute to the Covenant. In our schools, houses of worship, service and civic organizations, and in the press it is important to recognize the intrinsic qualities inherent in the document.

In September of 2015 the Eastchester Historical Society presented the first Eastchester Covenant Award to a person who epitomized the qualities embodied in the document. The person selected was Virginia Hefti who has dedicated her life to preserving the historical heritage of the town. The Hefti's can trace their family roots back to a signer of the Eastchester Covenant, Henry Fowler.

On September 16th of this year, the "Keeping the Covenant" Award will be awarded will be presented at the annual dinner of the Eastchester Historical Society to Al and Maria Benedict for their decades of commitment in the community to the qualities extolled in the Covenant.