

Setting the Record Straight

1637 to 1646

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

By

Richard Forliano, Eastchester Town Historian

In the years 1637 and 1638 a number of seemingly disconnected and distant events would have far reaching ramifications for the future settlement of Eastchester. In that time violence from the bloody Pequot War had reached its zenith culminating in a ghastly massacre of Native Americans at Mystic, Connecticut. Participating in the conflict as a self-trained surgeon was a recently arrived young English adventurer named Thomas Pell. Later Pell would have a significant impact on the development of Eastchester, the Bronx, and Westchester. All this was taking place at the same time that Anne Hutchinson was being forced out of Massachusetts Bay for her strong religious views. She would eventually come to live and die on land that would become Eastchester.

The intense rivalry between the disorganized Lenape speaking tribes, the Dutch, and the English colonists over the fur trade had a severe impact on settlements in nearby New England and New Netherlands. Indians still far outnumbered the settlers who had crossed the Atlantic even though the total number of Native Americans had been severely decimated by three decades of exposure to European disease. Tribes like the Pequots allied themselves with the Dutch and others like the Mohegans and Narragansets conspired with the English. Efforts to control the fur trade provoked violence in the Connecticut Valley not only between the Dutch and English but among the Lenape speaking tribes that were competing for a piece of the action.

By early spring of 1637 the Pequots were on the warpath killing 30 men, women, and children in nearby Connecticut towns. In retaliation Puritan militia from Massachusetts under the command of Captains John Mason and John Underhill surrounded a Pequot village at Mystic, Connecticut. Entrances to the village were blocked while all the inhabitants were burned alive. Approximately 600 old men, women, and children were incinerated. Native American allies of the English were so disgusted by the Mystic massacre that they gave up the fight against their sworn enemies. By 1638 the Pequot nation was thoroughly defeated. Almost overnight the balance of power had shifted from the populous but disorganized Pequots to the militant Puritans.

Into the carnage of America's first full scale Indian war would come a fascinating and dynamic individual named Thomas Pell. This is the same Thomas Pell who almost three decades later would sell the land that would become Eastchester to ten Puritan farm families from Fairfield, Connecticut. Who was this man?

Thomas and his older brother John were born the privileged sons of a well-connected Englishman named John Pell. Unfortunately both his mother and father died before Thomas turned five. As a young man barely out of his teens, Thomas Pell held a minor position in the court of King Charles I. One biographer believes he was forced to flee England "to save his neck ...being caught making love to one of the Queens Ladies in Waiting". Feeling threatened for his indiscretion and facing limited prospects in a society favoring the first born son, Pell volunteered for service in the Netherlands during that country's war for independence from Spain. He rose to the rank of Lieutenant and mastered enough of the medical practices of the day to be considered a surgeon.

By 1637, the 24 year old Thomas Pell had crossed the Atlantic and was found practicing his surgeon skills during the Pequot War. As a surgeon he would witness the horrors caused by that horrendous struggle. Pell was with John Underhill at Mystic but instead of taking part in that ghastly massacre, he ministered to the wounded, amputating limbs and bandaging the wounded men. As the war progressed, Pell continued to witness the aftermath of the terrible atrocities committed by English settlers and Native Americans alike.

The needless and hideous atrocities from full scale conflicts between Europeans and Native Americans must have had a profound impact on this shrewd, ambitious, and most likely compassionate individual. When Pell learned five years later about the brutal slaying of Anne Hutchinson and many of the members of her family, he was rudely reminded of the terrible consequences of full scale warfare between Europeans and the indigenous population. Pell would deal with the Native Americans firmly but fairly.

The story of Anne Hutchinson and how her family came to the land that would later be called Eastchester is well known. Hutchinson, branded as a heretic and banished, initially brought her family to Rhode Island. Feeling unsafe in Rhode Island, Anne moved to Eastchester. William Kieft, the Dutch governor of New Netherland whose jurisdiction she fell under had a contentious relationship with the Native Americans. When Anne Hutchinson and her party showed up in Kieft's domain, he placed the Hutchinson's in a no man's land at the height of the Indian troubles. Less than a year after her arrival, the 52 year old woman, six of her children, and nine others perished in an Indian attack.

In the fall of 1643, a force of 1,500 Native Americans invaded the province and massacred any colonist they encountered. These attacks almost destroyed the Dutch settlement at New Amsterdam and surrounding areas. In desperation, the Dutch offered a huge reward and hired John Underhill, the same Puritan captain from Massachusetts who participated in the brutal massacre of defenseless Pequots at Mystic. Forces under the command of Underhill surrounded 600 of the Lenape in their stockade somewhere between Bedford and Greenwich. These defenseless Indians were burned alive in the same manner that Underhill had incinerated the Pequots at Mystic six years before.

In the next article the story of how Thomas Pell by dealing fairly with Native Americans was able to purchase land and start settlements without bloodshed.

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

Many thanks to Blake Bell, the Pelham Town Historian, and Lloyd Ulton, the Bronx County Historian, for their pioneering research and writing from which much of the material in this article is taken.