

Historically Speaking

with Eastchester Town Historian Richard Forliano

Introduction to the African-American heritage of Eastchester

The topic of ethnicity, at times, can be quite sensitive. On the other hand, the issue of race can be explosive. But to fully understand your own community, both topics must be explored. The Town of Eastchester – including the villages of Bronxville and Tuckahoe – is no exception.

Poor and uneducated immigrants faced serious barriers of discrimination and prejudice upon arrival in America. Yet, the obstacles that African-Americans faced were much greater than those faced by other ethnic groups. Skin color and position on society's social scale made it difficult for African-Americans to assimilate into mainstream American culture during the 17th century.

It has only recently been discovered that African-American slaves accompanied the first English colonists who settled Eastchester in 1664. It must not be forgotten that African-Americans were the only group brought to America against their will. Despite facing serious barriers, the Irish, Italians and other ethnic groups that settled this town viewed America as a land of freedom, opportunity, and hope. That was not the case for African-Americans.

Priceless records in the archives of the Town of Eastchester show that the slave trade in the municipality existed as early as 1672 and continued into the early 19th century – years after the end of the American Revolution. But the first African-American settlers were long gone when other African-Americans moved up from the South at the start of the 20th century.

Italians from southern Italy and African-Americans arrived about the same time in the Village of Tuckahoe. Their children attended the same elementary school – the Main Street School – that was erected in 1906. People of different nationalities and races lived in single-family dwellings and apartment buildings crowded between the Bronx River on the east and marble quarries a quarter of a mile to the west. The Assumption Church was built by Italian immigrants in 1911 and became the center of the Tuckahoe community. The ideal of cultural diversity was a reality in the Village of Tuckahoe long before the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

Edward Woodward and Henry Norman were two African-American youngsters who attended the Main Street and Tuckahoe High School. Capt. Edward Woodward went on to become one of the original Tuskegee Airmen. The mission of the Tuskegee Airmen was to protect the slow-moving bombers manned by white pilots as they flew their missions in the skies over Europe. Woodward asserted that the military discriminated against its black members by making them march in the rear and paying them lower wages. Looking back, Capt. Woodward felt the segregation he experienced in the military was never in effect when he grew up in Tuckahoe. Years later, Henry Norman became the first African-American police chief in Westchester County for the Village of Tuckahoe. Sadly, the acceptance of African-Americans in the village was not a reality in the rest of the

In America, discrimination against people of color was much more virulent than that faced by people from white ethnic groups. Upper mobility for most people of color was not an option during that time. Up until 1928, Waverly was the high school for Eastchester

and Tuckahoe residents. Although African-American children did attend the Main Street School (now Village Hall) in Tuckahoe, no records exist of African-Americans attending Waverly High School. To gain acceptance or to find employment, a Caucasian person from a white ethnic majority could change his name. Obviously African-Americans did not have that opportunity. People from white ethnic groups had the opportunity to move into different neighborhoods, but people of color were not able to buy homes outside of the Village of Tuckahoe until only recently. Likewise, the Eastchester School District had very few African-American students enrolled until the 1990s.

The next series of articles will be on the African-American heritage of this community. Dr. Larry Spruill, the present Mount Vernon historian, has done pioneering work using the rich archives of the Town of Eastchester on the town's African-American heritage. It should not be forgotten that Mount Vernon was a village in the Town of Eastchester until 1892. Dr. Spruill has graciously consented to allow the readers of this column to read excerpts of his findings.

The subjects of race and ethnicity sparked powerful emotions. It is important to tell the stories of people who suffer the pangs of discrimination, both black and white. This is being done not to evoke blame, but to better understand why the problems of the past led to the dilemmas of today.

Research is currently being done and people are being scheduled for interviews so that the sensitive topic of race in this community can be accurately covered. The same tools that were used to study the Irish in the later 19th century and the Italians in the early 20th will be applied to the African-American community in Tuckahoe. Census records needs to be studied, old phone books analyzed, family members have to be interviewed, genealogical records studied along with church histories, and old newspaper articles viewed.

Specific questions need to be addressed. What was so unique about the Village of Tuckahoe that contributed to the positive relations between the people of the groups who lived there? What occupations did the African-American pursue? What was the role of religious institutions in bringing about harmony between the groups?

The next articles will liberally include excerpts from Dr. Larry Spruill's book, "A Time to Remember: A Portrait of African American Life." They will describe what life was like for African-Americans as slaves and for free blacks in our community (Mount Vernon was a village in Eastchester until 1892).



Former Tuckahoe Mayor Phil White and retired Air Force Capt. Edward Woodward, one of the original Tuskegee Airmen, reminisce about growing up in Tuckahoe. Capt. Woodward felt the segregation he experienced in the military was never in effect when he grew up in Tuckahoe. Photo/Charlie Johnson