



Historically Speaking

with Eastchester Town Historian
Richard Forliano

Eastchester's African Heritage

*First in a series of articles on
Eastchester's African-American heritage*

In 1664, some of the original 10 English Puritan farm families who founded the present town of Eastchester brought African-American slaves with them. The archives of the Town of Eastchester possess some of the oldest documents in the United States. The second oldest known document in the archives shows that in 1672, eight years after the first settlement, a bill of sale was issued selling an unnamed African-American woman of about 30 years old. The seller was a farmer named Moses Hoyt, the head of one of the original families that founded Eastchester. The bill of sale was recorded by Eastchester's first town clerk, Richard Shute.

To the astute student of history, the question that immediately arises is why didn't the general public know that the original colonial settlers not only owned, but trafficked in the sale of African-American slaves? Was there a sinister plot from academic and local historians, or was it simply a matter of embarrassment?

The answer to the above is a resounding no. The problem was that no one until the 1960s had ever begun to transcribe and to record the voluminous volumes of priceless documents stored in the archives of the Eastchester town government dating back to 1665. This was a task of herculean proportions. Many of these priceless documents were written in old English before the use of dictionaries. Words were spelled in a haphazard fashion and documents had to be translated. Once translation began, there were scores of volumes that had to be compiled and printed. Moreover the original documents had to be preserved. Two women, Harriet Bianchi and Phyllis Knowles,

both full-time working women and mothers, were responsible for this unbelievably difficult and time-consuming task. Their work took decades to complete.

The first person to discover the real story of Eastchester's African-American roots was my fellow colleague and Mount Vernon historian, Dr. Larry Spruill. It is very important to remember that the present city of Mount Vernon was part of the Town of Eastchester until 1892. Dr. Spruill has been very active in the search to restore African-Americans to their rightful place as a major contributor to local, American, and world history. His search to find the African-American heritage of Mount Vernon took him to the Eastchester Historical Society and Eastchester's "Books of the Colored People," documents that had been transcribed and recorded by Harriet Bianchi and Phyllis Knowles.

What Spruill discovered was startling. Africans were among the original settlers of Eastchester.

He would record his findings in a book written in 1987 entitled, "A Portrait of African-American Life in Mount Vernon." The English had taken over the Dutch colony of New Netherlands in 1664, the same year that the Puritan farm families moved into Eastchester. Under the British, the Dutch policy of indentured servitude was discarded. The English declared Africans to be in perpetual slavery. Thus, a major byproduct of the English conquest was the growth of African slavery in colonial New York.

In 1668, the governor of New York decided that the original 10 farm families of

Eastchester were strong enough to go it alone. Spruill writes, "The decision to allow the town to develop independently was based on a critical ingredient required to sustain it: labor. Africans were among those original settlers."

And then Larry Spruill, while going through the old Eastchester "Book of the Colored People," uncovered definitive proof that African-American slavery was an integral part of both the colonial economy and culture of Eastchester. Spruill found the following document that is the earliest evidence of the African-American presence in colonial Eastchester:

"The 23rd of Aprile 1672 I Moses Hotte of East Chester have sold unto Mr. Samuwell Markman of Fairfield to saie one negro woman about 30 years of age which I formerly bought of Mr. William Laranc of Fairfield which negro woman I, Moses Hoitte, deliver until Samuwell Adams of Fairfield for the use and service of said Mr. Samuel Markman of Fairfield which negro I do the lawful sall of unto the above said Mr. Samuel Markman. His heirs executors administrators or assigns which is delivered in the presence of us.

Samuel Drake, Llift Haiden, John Haitte, Samell Goodwin

By me, Richard Shute, Eastchester's First

Town Clerk

This document records an African woman in the wilderness of Eastchester (present-day Mount Vernon). It also indicates that she came with the original 10 families from Fairfield, Conn. It is doubtful that she was alone. African-Americans were working in our community a century before the American Revolution. This nameless African woman should be recognized along with the white Puritan farm families as one of the founders of the Town of Eastchester.

The first census of 1698 shows that slavery was an integral part of the economy of Westchester County and the Town of Eastchester. This colonial census shows that 917 whites and 146 Africans lived in Westchester County. Many of these African captives lived in Eastchester. These Africans came in chains and for over 150 years struggled to be free. They came to America, as Frederick Douglas wrote, "captured by a band of successful robbers who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery."

In the next few articles, more will be written about the startling discoveries of Dr. Spruill concerning the African-American heritage of this community. In addition to his duties as Mount Vernon historian, Spruill, in addition to his myriad accomplishments, served as an advisor to the 1986 award-winning documentary "Eyes on the Prize."



Special thanks should be given to Dr. Larry Spruill, the Mount Vernon City Historian whose pioneering research and publication uncovered that African-Americans were among the original settlers and part of the colonial economy and culture of Eastchester. Contributed photo