

Your Weekly Dose of Town History

The Beginnings of Eastchester

By Richard Forliano, Eastchester Town Historian

The year before the English takeover of New Netherlands the area that the present town now encompasses was barren wilderness. Roving bands of hunting parties from Algonquin tribes like the Siwanoy built wigwams as temporary shelters in their pursuit of game and fish. In 1664 Thomas Pell (after whom Pelham is named) sold Eastchester to ten Puritan farm families from Fairfield, Connecticut. The deed said in part that they could settle down at the Hutchinsons, where Anne and her family had been massacred 21 years before. Ironically the Indian chief, from whom he purchased the land, Wampage, was the same leader who had massacred Anne Hutchinson.

Eastchester as the town now exists, three and a half miles long and a mile and a half wide, is only the northern half of the town as it existed in colonial times and continued until the late nineteenth century. The old town originally spelled East Chester ran between the Bronx and Hutchinson rivers from the Scarsdale line south through Mount Vernon and down to the Eastchester Road section of the Bronx. The original deed allowed Phillip Pinckney plus the 26 others who joined him to take over the land, build houses, and settle down. The original ten families built the original village along the lower part of the Hutchinson River near the swampy meadow of Eastchester Creek. The community that was set up was almost identical to the puritan communities that dotted the New England landscape.

The original village was also similar to villages in England, where homes were clustered together with the farming land away from the town center. Home lots in the village were between 2 & 1/2 and 3 acres with planting and pasture lots nearby. The five original home lots, the first church and

school were located in the southern half of Mount Vernon where Saint Paul's National Historic Site now stands. The other five lots, the first mill and the planting grounds were located where Co-op City now covers Rattlesnake Brook, the old meadows, and the Old Salt pond, and the Pines.

According to some local historians, the origins of the name of Westchester took root at this time. Thomas Pell was the land merchant from Fairfield Connecticut who purchased Pelham and Eastchester from Native Americans in 1654. Eastchester and other parts of Westchester County were considered to be an extension of Fairfield, Connecticut. The English word for town is Chester. East Chester (old spelling) was considered to be an extension or town to the east of Fairfield. West Chester square in the Bronx was the western extension of Fairfield. Later all of the county would assume the name Westchester.

The town of Eastchester in colonial times was more like a town outside of Boston than one a few miles outside of New York City. Witch trials took place here. Stocks were used as punishments and town records show that town whippers were hired by the town to lash people as late for various transgressions as late as 1754 when the French and Indian war began. Town records substantiate that slaves were bought and sold as early as 1672. In fact, the slave population of Eastchester reached ten per cent in colonial times.

An excellent book for people who love colonial history is Eastchester Village, Colonial New York, 1666-1698, Maps and Inhabitants. The book was researched and written in 1997 by David Tompkins, a direct descendant of one of the original ten families that founded Eastchester and a vice president of the United States. People with an interest in this history can purchase the book from the Eastchester Historical Society (793-1900)