



# Historically Speaking

*With Town Historian  
Richard Forliano*

## The ignored significance of faith in the heritage of Eastchester

*It is necessary to interrupt the series of articles on the Italians in this community to correct an unintended omission to the many articles that have been written on the history of this town.*

*Christian houses of worship have played a significant role in the history and character of this community and with the exception of St. Paul's Church, the site where Eastchester was founded, the overall impact of sacred places has not been adequately covered. In our politically correct culture, the subject of religion has become very sensitive. The eighth article in the series on the Italians in our community will be on the Assumption Church that in 1911 celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary.*

*Some people might justifiably ask why the impact of one church built in 1912 is being singled out while the impact of other houses of worship has not even been mentioned. Hopefully, the next two articles will partially put some of these possible criticisms to rest.*

Most people fully understand that the community of Eastchester, from its very beginnings, was founded by people looking for a better way of life. What many people either forget or no longer comprehend is that the Christian faith played a prominent role in developing the character of this community.

Anne Hutchinson and her family, religious dissenters from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, were the first European inhabitants of Eastchester. Twenty-one years after her massacre, the historic Town of Eastchester was founded in 1664 by 10 deeply-religious Puritan farm families from nearby Fairfield, Conn. A year later, the male heads of these 10 families signed one of the more important documents in this county's history, the Eastchester Covenant. This document insisted among other matters that the town government would support the minister, educate their children so they could read the bible, and "keep and maintain Christian love and civil honesty."

The town government set up by that covenant soon set up an "overseer of the poor" that distributed public funds to help those unfortunate people who could not support themselves. This position remained part of the local government until the Great Depression. Acts of private charity were common. On Sunday mornings at church service, it was not uncommon to hear the minister calling out a parishioner and publicly reprimanding them for their wayward ways. A nagging wife or a drunken husband would be publicly humiliated. An



**Alexander Masterton, a major figure in the development of the Tuckahoe Marble industry, was instrumental in building the first church located in the present Town of Eastchester.**

official figure of the town government was the town whipper who administered lashes for infractions up until the outbreak of the French and Indian war. His name was Mark Christian.

The issue of whether to fight on the patriot or loyalist side during the American Revolution not only divided families, but also Protestant congregations. There were three churches that people attended in 1775: St. Paul's Church, now a National Historic Site in Mount Vernon, (Mount Vernon was part of Eastchester until 1892); Asbury Methodist Church in Crestwood, and St. John's Church in Colonial Heights. During the devastation of the eight years of the revolution, all church services were suspended. After the conclusion of hostilities, the town was sparsely settled by farmers but church services resumed.

It would not be until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that the population of Eastchester would expand and two new churches would be built; one Protestant and another Roman Catholic. The event that precipitated not only caused the increase in population, but also a change in the ethnic makeup of the community, with completion of the New York and Harlem River Railroad that included stops in Tuckahoe and Bronxville (then called Underhill's Crossing).

The man most responsible for the development and modernization of Tuckahoe marble was Alexander Masterton. Masterton was a 20-year-old Scottish immigrant trained as a mason who arrived in the United States soon after the end of the War of 1812. Masterton, with no professional experience, became an important architect and a builder in New York City. In 1835, Masterton moved to Eastchester and erected a beautiful house still standing located on White Plains Road in present-day Bronxville.

But Masterton was more than a builder and businessman; he was a man of faith. A number of New York City businessmen, hoping to escape the noise and dust of the city and avoid the yearly epidemics of cholera and yellow fever that took a heavy toll on city dwellers, had built estates in Eastchester and became Masterton's neighbors. In early 1848, Masterton went to two of those men with a deal: James Prescott, who had built a large stone manor house on his farm in 1840, and James Swain, Prescott's son in law. James Swain had erected a factory for the manufacture of cutlery on the Bronx River.

The deal was quite simple. If Prescott and Swain could assure that a certain minister, Abel T. Stewart, would come to town and "preach once every Sunday," Masterton would supervise and help in the building of a church. Masterton stated that I "agree to donate the use of my oxen and the labor of some of my men and will give as much time as I can spare."

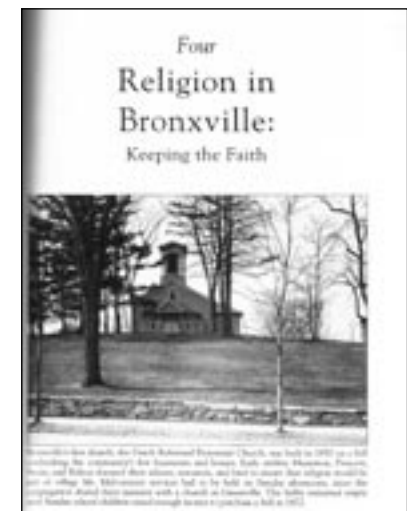
The story of how the Reformed Church of Bronxville is well described in a history of the book written for its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that church.

"True to his promise, Masterton pooled his oxen and carts with those of Mr. Prescott and Mr. Swain. Yokes of oxen hooked up to heavy two-wheeled cars might be seen slowly plodding over the winding roads, hauling lumber, stone and other building material from the dock in Eastchester Creek to the site of the church. Busy men excavated and graded, fitted the foundation stones and framed the beams, while the entire community cooperated cordially in the undertaking to bring building materials for this new church."

In April 9, 1850, the Dutch Reform Church located in Bronxville was officially dedicated.

Just a few hundred yards up the road from the home of Alexander Masterton on White Plains Road, the newly-arrived Irish Catholics, many employed by Masterton, were also looking for a place to worship.

*The next article will describe how other parishes were established in the town.*



**The first church in the present Town of Eastchester, the Dutch Reformed Protestant Church, was built in 1850 on a hill overlooking a few homes and businesses in today's Village of Bronxville (incorporated in 1898). The belfry remained empty until 1872 when Sunday School children raised enough money to purchase a bell.**  
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