



# Historically Speaking

with Eastchester Town Historian  
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## The longest-lasting Legacy of the Eastchester Historical Society

I was appointed Eastchester Town Historian 21 years ago. Even though I had been teaching history for 20 years, I only had the vaguest idea of the importance of the preservation, transcriptions, and archiving of Eastchester's rich collection of historical documents. Fortunately I had three of the best mentors imaginable—all residents of the town and members of the Eastchester Historical Society (EHS). Patty Dohrenwend was the Eastchester Town Clerk who faithfully held record-management meetings that included the archivists from EHS, Harriet Bianchi and Phyllis Knowles. Presently Patty is the head of the County Archives.

Sadly Harriet and Phyllis are no longer with us.

Starting in the early 1960s, Harriet and (Phyllis working with the Town of Eastchester) were responsible for the archival work, research, and publication of 10 volumes of the records of the town as well as the burial records of Saint Paul's Church, the site where Eastchester was started in 1664. What the general public did not know is that these records date back to 1665 and were written before the use of the dictionary; they had to be translated as if English were a foreign language. Many of these documents are priceless. The Eastchester Covenant, written in 1665, was Eastchester's founding document, the Mayflower Compact of Westchester. Eastchester's "book of the colored people" is an invaluable source in studying slavery in colonial times. The book of the overseer of the poor is instructional to historians on how local support was given to people down on their luck.

Harriet and Phyllis were working mothers

with two children who miraculously saved some of the oldest and richest archives in New York State. But Harriet and Phyllis did not only help with public records. By the 1970s EHS had accumulated a reference library of some several thousand volumes. But this situation would soon cause problems.

Due to a lack of space at the time these volumes were stored in the houses of members and were available to the public only on a very limited basis. The annual report from 1970 President Knowles stated:

*Our other collections—the ones that do not pertain to the school house—have grown by leaps and bounds. They include maps, period clothing from 1800-1940, the Bertrand Burtnett collection of town history (on permanent loan from the Bronxville Public Library), photographs and paintings, antique furniture, household goods...silver jewelry, historic documents and an excellent reference library. Unfortunately except on very special occasions when the Society holds an exhibit. We must press in this next decade for space to use and display our rich historic heritage.*

Events would prove Phyllis' request prophetic. A controversy arose over who would keep final possession of the collection of Bertrand Burtnett, the former Bronxville historian who passed away in 1955. Bertrand had attended the one-room schoolhouse that was the headquarters of EHS; according to Phyllis he had left the collection to the society.

But Bertrand had also been an important figure in the Bronxville community. In addition to being the village historian he was a state assemblyman and president of the Bronxville Board of Education. Some Bronxville residents wished that his collection be returned to the Bronxville Library.

The real problem was that neither the Bronxville Public Library nor EHS could provide a dust free, humidity-controlled room for storage of historic documents from private collections in acid free containers. Over the next nine years the society would raise almost \$100,000 to build a library that not only would house the vast collection of books that had been collected but would provide a safe and accessible environment to store its priceless manuscripts, pictures, photographs, and other artifacts pertaining to Eastchester's heritage. On April 18, 1982 the research and archival center was dedicated in memory of Angelo Bianchi, one of the founding members of the EHS and Harriet's husband.

Meanwhile Jean Bartlett, appointed the first "official" village historian of Bronxville from 1966 to 1987 established a local history room at the Bronxville Library that provided a safe environment for books and artifacts pertaining to Bronxville history. Over the years Jean was active in many collaborative projects. In addition, her husband David (a fine arts appraiser) volunteered his knowledge and fundraising skills to help EHS fund many of their projects.

There is one other group that following in the footsteps of the archivists above. They have been invaluable to me, along with Mike Fix, as we slowly put together a 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the town. Former Mayor Phil White and his wife Alice along with Tuckahoe Village Historian Ernie Zocchi have put together another collection of documents at Tuckahoe Village Hall.

For an historian to be taken seriously he must act like a lawyer defending a client. He must have evidence to back up his claims and the evidence must make sense. Unless people like Patty Dohrenwend, Phyllis Knowles, Harriet Bianchi, Jean Bartlett, Ernie Zocchi, and Phil and Alice White along with all their helpers do the sometimes thankless job of collecting, organizing, and preserving documents there will be nothing to authenticate the history that is there to be discovered.

### Eastchester Covenant

1. We by the grace of God settle on this land between Hutchisson's Brook where the house was until it comes to the river that runs in at the head of the meadows.
2. That we keep and maintain Christian love and civil honesty.
3. That we help and counsel each other.
4. To deal with one another in Christian love.
5. If any trespassing is done, the trespasser and trespassee will try to work out the matter. If need be a third party will be called in to end the matter, without any further trouble.
6. That all of us pay the minister according to his need.
7. That no one has more than fifteen acres, until all have that quantity.
8. That every man has a meadow that is convenient for him.
9. That every man build and live in his home before next winter.
10. No man is to sell his lot before he has lived on it for one year, and to sell it to the company or to a man they approve.
11. Any man may sell part of his land to a neighbor.
12. That no man buy his neighbor's lot for his particular interest, but with respect to sell it if an approved man comes and is judged by the company.
13. That all public affairs, bridges, highways, or mill, be carried on jointly according to meadow or estate.
14. That provision be made for the education of the children.
15. No man shall entertain a foreigner who is obnoxious. This is amended after a warning is given.
16. That all shall join in guarding the cattle when the company sees it to be convenient.
17. That every man build and maintain a fence around his land.
18. That every man sow his land when most of the company sow or plant in their field.
19. That we give encouragement to Mr. Brewster each week to give us a good word, and when we are settled we meet together every other week for one hour to talk about good things.
20. That one man, either of himself, or by consent give entertainment to strangers for money.
21. That one day every spring be chosen for the destroying of cattle snakes.
22. That some men stay at home on the Lord's Day for the safety of our wives and children.
23. That every man as soon as he can get and keep a good lock on his door.
24. That a convenient place be appointed for omen if it is required.
25. If a man's meadow be of bad quality, it be considered in the quantity.
26. That every man that has taken up lots shall pay all public charges equal to those that have none.

That all who or shall take up lots within this tract of land mentioned shall subscribe to these articles.  
These articles of agreement between us whose names are underwritten A.D. 1665.