

The Beginnings of Eastchester and the First Noel
by
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Centuries ago deeply religious Protestants started Eastchester. However, the celebration of Christmas did not take place in this town until many years later. Below is the story of how Christmas came to Eastchester.

The town of Eastchester began in 1664 when Phillip Pickney and ten Puritan farm families from Fairfield, Connecticut bought Eastchester from Thomas Pell, a land merchant and the future lord of Pelham Manor. The Puritans both in Britain and even more so in the New England colonies practiced an austere religion without what they considered to be the corrupt and ostentatious practices of the Catholic and Episcopal churches. Strict rules and harsh punishment outlawed sinful practices. Singing and dancing were discouraged. The practice of celebrating Christmas was forbidden.

The ten Puritan farm families were hard working and high minded individuals who set the foundation for the present town of Eastchester. A very important document called the Eastchester Covenant was signed a year after the first families moved in. A covenant is an agreement between people made in the sight of God. The covenant stated what kind of community Eastchester would be and what type of government the town would have. It was clearly stated that the men of Eastchester would run their own affairs by holding town meetings every other week “for one hour to talk about good things.” Town board meeting continue to this day to run the affairs of Eastchester.

The founders of the town made old Eastchester appear like a New England town. The town government supported the minister, educated the children so that they could read the bible, and to use the exact words of the covenant ‘keep and maintain Christian love and civil honesty.’ Overseers of the poor were set up to help the poor, orphans, widows, and people in need. The ministers made sure that men did not mistreat their wives. One room school houses dotted the landscape.

The Eastchester Covenant in many ways is like the Mayflower Compact of Westchester County. However, as time passed on, the Puritan character of Eastchester began to wane. Witch trials ended before the first accused witches were hung in Salem. The practice of public whippings for crimes committed was abolished in 1754 at the start of the French and Indian War.

Also at the beginning of the eighteenth century the inhabitants of Eastchester began to celebrate Christmas. Saint Paul’s Church, the site where Eastchester began in 1664, was made an Episcopal Church by an act of the Anglican king. The priest who was sent to take over the church did not ostracize the Puritans who founded the church but shared the church with them. Christmas was an important holiday to Episcopal, Anglicans outside of Britain. Thirty eight years after the founding of the town deeply religious Christians of this town started to practice Christmas at their Sunday services.

Annually in December the Eastchester Historical Society has a Christmas party at the one school house at the intersection of New Rochelle and California Road. The party is open to the public. A Christmas tree is decorated with candles popcorn, and old fashioned decorations. Around the tree are nineteenth century toys and memorabilia.

The spirit of Christmas lives on as the Eastchester Historical Society keeps the rich historic traditions of the town alive. The most important tradition comes from the Eastchester covenant that the citizens of Eastchester should ‘keep and maintain Christian love and civil honesty.’ Merry Christmas.