

East Chester Two Hundred Years Ago

The Old Post Road, School, and Church

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Two hundred years ago the town of Eastchester was three times the size that it is today. In addition to the land that is today Eastchester, Bronxville, and Tuckahoe, our town then known as East Chester, included the land encompassing the present city of Mount Vernon and the northern part of the Bronx between the Hutchinson and Bronx Rivers, all the way down to Eastchester Bay (City Island was part of Pelham) As today the village of Scarsdale was the northern border.

Even two decades after the end of the American Revolution, Eastchester had not recovered. In the present town only two houses remained standing at the end of hostilities. As an old map issued in 1797 shows, East Chester (the spelling on the map) consisted of widely scattered farms, forests, and not much else. Farmers took their grain and livestock to market by cart or wagon down the Old Post Road (presently Route 22/ White Plains Road). Once the goods arrived at the southern tip of the town, they would be transported either to New York City or Brooklyn. White Plains Road is one of the oldest roads in America. In the eighteenth century it was known as the "The Old Post Road" and it left the Old Boston Post Road in the Bronx at Route 22 and 228th Street. It passed through Mt. Vernon, Bronxville, Eastchester, Scarsdale, and White Plains, a tip of Connecticut, Armonk, Bedford, and Cross River. There the road divided. One branch continued through North Salem into Putnam County through Millerton and Amenia to Vermont. The other branch went to Boston by way of Danbury, Hartford, Worcester, and Boston. This second branch was known as a second "Boston Post Road."

The Old Post Road, now Route 22, was the forerunner of the original postal system. In 1763 Benjamin Franklin was assigned the task of placing markers at one mile intervals. The road was measured by a device that was attached to Mr. Franklin's carriage. As the wagon wheel turned it acted as an odometer that would indicate where a mile marker should be located. Work crews that followed would erect the marker that was engraved with the mileage from New York City. These markers were made out of red Connecticut sandstone like the 23 mile marker that is found just north of Homestead Avenue on the east side of Route 22. If one studies the old maps, the proper location of that mile marker is at the intersection of White Plains Road and Winterhill Road just north of Concordia College.

Life in the town could not have been too exciting. President John Adams and his wife Abigail spent the month of October, 1797 in East Chester on their way to the

capitol in Philadelphia. A virulent small pox epidemic ravished the city and two-thirds of the population of Philadelphia had fled the capitol. The President and the first lady were forced to stop and wait at East Chester with their daughter Nabby Smith. Abigail adored her daughter and four grandchildren but she found life in our town unbearable. She vainly tried to get her daughter to go to Philadelphia with her. In a letter written to a friend she wrote, "I cannot let her here this winter with not a single creature within 20 miles of her to speak a word to, or shorten the long solitary winter evenings." It can be said for the month of October 1797 Eastchester was the capitol of the United States.

One room schools houses dotted the landscape. The same year as John and Abigail Adams stayed in the town, 1797, the first one room school house in the present town of Eastchester was built at the corner where Wilmot Road intersects with White Plains Road across the street from Lord and Taylors. When there were not enough pupils to run an effective school, Eastchester youngsters walked to New Rochelle and attended the one room school house that is still attached to Saint John's Episcopal Church at the corner of Wilmot and Mill Road in New Rochelle. The curriculum consisted of the three 'R's, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Students ranged from ages 5-17. The school year started after the last harvest and concluded around the time of the first planting.

Saint Paul's Episcopal Church was the cultural center of the town. A meeting house had been erected on the village green of Eastchester in late 1600s. The church and the town were started by ten Puritan farm families from Fairfield, Connecticut. The present church was begun in 1763 but was still not completed at the time of the Revolution. In October of 1776, Hessian soldiers tore down the church and used it for firewood. The present church was completed in 1789. Town meetings took place at local taverns. An overseer of the poor elected by male property owners used tax money to help the destitute. People on the public dole were expected to do public work like road repair to repay their debt.

Between the War of 1812 and the Civil War the town of Eastchester would be transformed from a sleepy rural farming hamlet to a more dynamic industrial center. One of the first cotton mills in America would be built in Tuckahoe on the banks of the Bronx River just before the war of 1812. It would be the Tuckahoe marble industry and the building of the New York and Harlem Railroad that would forever change our town and villages. More about these changes in the later articles.