Draft Riot   July 1863

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During the Civil War the drills, picks, and sledgehammers were silent in the Tuckahoe marble quarries. Construction of new houses and large estates stopped. For two long years the quarrymen, mostly Irish Catholic immigrants, were unemployed and restless. On March 3, 1863 Congress had passed the Conscription Act, the first draft law in American history. When news of the horrendous causalities at Gettysburg reached New York City on July 11, 1863 the New York City draft riots broke out. Working class Irishmen irrationally blamed African Americans and the Republican Party for the war. A grotesque race riot ensued.

Roving bands attacked and lynched African American men, women, and children. An African American orphanage was set ablaze. Irish firemen led 20 children to safety. The entire New York City police force as well as five battle hardened regiments of United States troops were brought in to halt the murders and restore order. In the end, at least 105 people were killed, making the draft riots the most violent insurrection in American history.

Disturbances from the New York City draft riots spread to Eastchester. Rioters tore up rails on the New Haven and Harlem tracks near the Bronx River. A sympathetic mob from the marble quarries at Tuckahoe went on the march into mount Vernon (then a newly formed village in the town) armed with sticks, stones, and other makeshift weapons with the avowed purpose of burning down the houses of all the Republicans in the place. Captain William Barker assembled a home guard and took a stand in a cartridge factory on Fifth Avenue and near First Street in present day Mount Vernon. Several prominent Democrats met the mob and convinced them to give up the notion of burning houses.

While Eastchester and the rest of the Westchester County escaped the worst of the violence and chaos of the New York City Draft riots, political and socio-economic divisions in the town were exposed. In the Presidential elections of 1860 and 1864 a small majority, but a majority no less voted against Lincoln. Why? Slavery was a major cause, if not the most important cause of the Civil War. But people in this area and the rest of the North were bitterly divided over the abolition of slavery. Northern workers, many of them Irish, resented the possible competition for jobs that they believed would take place if 4 millions slaves were freed. In the 1850's When New York City longshoremen went on strike and were replaced by free African American workers, their worst fears were realized.

On January 1, 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in areas of rebellion, went into effect. As has been previously mentioned, in March of 1863, the first draft on the American people was instituted. The Civil War had become a poor man's fight. Rich people were able to pay a sum of up to $300 to get someone to take their place in the draft. Even more insulting

was that the town of Eastchester used local revenue to provide bounties to exempt people whose occupations were vital to the community.

The Conscription Act and ensuing Draft Riots had biased poor against rich, magnified racial fears, and highlighted the perception that the federal government under Republican leadership had spearheaded an intrusion of federal government as never before over local affairs. This tension would continue in the town of Eastchester long after the last shots of the Civil War were fired.

The Civil War would prove to be this nation's single most defining experience. It was the bloodiest conflict in American history, 620, 000 causalities, more than almost all other American wars combined. Ultimately the Civil War would give new meaning to the word freedom. Sadly the war would expose deep divisions in the town that would persist for a very long time.

What has not been known up until recently is that a sizable number of people in Eastchester not only supported the war but also volunteered to fight. They too made a statement. Their story will be told in the next article.