

Cold Case

By

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What journalists and historians have in common is that they should seek out the truth. But after that the similarities between the two professions often differ. Journalists under the first amendment do not have to reveal their sources; the function of investigative journalism is to make sure that the people, institutions, and corporations that control our lives remain honest. Historians provide a similar function but must be accountable to much different standards.

First and foremost, historians must not only document their sources but also make sure that they have surveyed all the possible evidence. In many ways the local historian is like the detectives and district attorneys working together on the popular show *Law and Order*. Once all the evidence has been collected, a case must be presented that proves beyond a reasonable doubt that the points the historian is making are valid. In this column every effort has and will be made to highlight the most significant aspects of our collective memory, point out the blemishes, and hopefully help citizenry make choices that are in keeping with cherished traditions.

Working with the Mount Vernon City Historian, Larry Spruill, a series of three articles were written on Eastchester's African American heritage. It must not be forgotten that the village of Mount Vernon was part of the town of Eastchester from 1850 to 1892. In 1892 to prevent annexation by New York City Mount Vernon became a city and became a separate municipality.

In 1902 the village of Tuckahoe following Bronxville's lead four years before became a village in the town of Eastchester. A recent analysis of the New York State Census of 1915 shows less than 60 people of African American descent lived in Tuckahoe. Like the Italians who had also recently arrived and came in great numbers, the African American men were employed as day laborers, carpenters, masons, and contractors. Roy Jowes was even listed as a whaler. Within ten years the New York State census of 1925 shows that the African American population of Tuckahoe had increased tenfold.

But for now investigation of Tuckahoe's African American population turns up too many unanswered questions. The most important and interesting question is why in the nineteen twenties was the village of Tuckahoe a place that celebrated ethnic and racial diversity four decades before the civil rights movement of the 1960's.

Henry Norman and Edward Woodward were two African American men who grew up in Tuckahoe, attended the Main Street School, now Tuckahoe Village Hall, and Tuckahoe High School. Henry Norman became the first African American police chief in Westchester County. Both Henry Norman and Edward Woodward longed to be pilots in the air corps during World War 2. Henry Norman qualified but was denied the opportunity because in his own words, "the quota for negroes was filled up." Woodward was more fortunate. He was one of the original

Tuskegee airmen whose job it was to protect slow moving bombers manned by white pilots that flew in the skies over Europe.

Captain Edward Woodward returned to the village he grew up in last summer. He turned over his memorabilia from his war years to former mayor Phil White and the Tuckahoe Centennial Committee. Woodward mentioned that he never experienced the sting of racial prejudice until he entered the military. He served in a segregated unit, received lower pay, and had his unit that risked their lives every day had to march in the back of the line behind white troops.

The question that needs to be answered is why was the village of Tuckahoe, to borrow a phrase from Martin Luther King's "I have a dream speech", by the content of their character, not by the color of their skin." Presently the answers to that very important question are only theories that are not substantiated by evidence.

The following historical questions need to be explored. First, to what extent was the physical layout of the village of Tuckahoe and the burgeoning economic prosperity of the working class suburb contributing factors? At this time people living in downtown Tuckahoe were located in a contained area roughly between the Bronx River and a ridge of marble to the west. In this small area there was no room for separate neighborhoods. People with different ethnic and racial background lived in modest but well built single family homes and apartment buildings. Secondly, by 1925 work was plentiful. The Benedict marble quarry was still in existence, Hodgman Rubber was the largest employer in town with over 1700 workers, and other people were employed as contractors, masons, and carpenters.

The second historical question that needs to be explored is the uniqueness of the groups who lived in the area and the spirit of community that began at that time. In 1911 the Assumption Church was completed for Italian speaking Catholics who wanted to worship according to the traditions that they brought over from the old country. Two years later the Shiloh Baptist congregation was formed for African Americans living in the community.

There are other questions that need to be explored. Where will answers to these important questions be found? Naturally more in depth research has to be done. The state census records in 1925 must be more closely analyzed. The names of people and occupations of different groups in the town must be recorded. Church records have to be analyzed. The families of African American, Italian, Irish, and other ethnic groups who have been part of the community need to be interviewed. Birth and death records need to be studied.

It will be necessary in the near future to take hopefully only a short sabbatical to complete this necessary research. The town of Eastchester including the villages of Tuckahoe and Bronxville starting in 2014 will be celebrating its 350th anniversary. There are other unanswered questions that need to be explored so that the community has the clearest vision of our unique past.

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