

The Ties That Bind 1908-1917

By
Richard Forliano
Eastchester Town Historian

Bronxville and Tuckahoe had become separate incorporated village at the start of the twentieth century. It seemed that divisions over income, ethnicity, religion, and race would continue to divide the town. Events would prove that the bonds that united the community of Eastchester would militate against those that were separating the town.

The positive response to the terrible depression of 1908 showed that people in the town still cared deeply about each other. In 1908 hundreds of men, heads of Tuckahoe families had been thrown out of work by the closing of the marble quarries, the main source of employment in the village. In the nineteenth century Tuckahoe had been called the Marble Capitol of the World. But by 1907 the quarries were worked out. Because of the high rate of unemployment, the situation in Tuckahoe was desperate.

In nearby Bronxville, Virginia Lawrence, the daughter-in law of the founder of the village was deeply concerned. Virginia talked the situation over with the wife of the owner of the local drug store and a small office was opened over Chambers Drug Store in the Arcade Building in Bronxville with hours from 4 to 6 p.m. on Wednesday and Saturday. A notice had been put into weekly newspapers, offering assistance “if there is sickness in the house, if clothes are required, if employment is wanted, if in fact, anybody wants help and does not know which way to turn to get it.” By Memorial Day 50 families mostly from the village of Tuckahoe had applied for help finding jobs. The people who applied for relief were stone cutters, carpenters, day laborers, office workers, handymen, laundresses, nurses, seamstresses, and house cleaners.

The Relief Association of Eastchester had been born, composed of caring and concerned women in Bronxville. Jobs were found in the lumber yard operated by the Lawrence interests in Bronxville. Women were given employment as domestic day workers. As the work increased, more Bronxville women were enlisted until the Association had forty public spirited volunteers.

Unique ways were found to help the villagers of Tuckahoe who were having difficulties. Property owned by the Lawrence companies on was made available for vegetable gardens. These gardens proved the forerunners of the war gardens of World War I and the Victory Gardens of World War I. The Bronxville women met at regular intervals and sewed for needy families. On other occasions classes in sewing and cooking were conducted so that people down on their luck could learn to make clothes for their families and give them nutritious well balanced meals.

Four years later the success of the Eastchester Relief Association had created a new problem. The association had succeeded in finding day work for women, most often in the large Bronxville houses. Who would take care of the youngsters left at home? A group of Tuckahoe residents led by the wife of the village’s only doctor, Elizabeth Austin, began a day nursery on

Lake Avenue. The fee was five cents a day. The nursery had one paid worker and the rest of the work was done by members of the nursery's board of directors. Unfortunately the nursery had a hard time making ends meet.

A century of private social work had begun. In 1916 the Eastchester Relief Association and the day nursery became the Associated Charities of Eastchester. The merged group changed its emphasis. Instead of merely dispensing financial aid and providing jobs, it also sponsored settlement house activities and began a major drive to improve local health facilities. The headquarters were moved to a donated farmhouse on a hill, a spot which has now become High Street. Funds were provided by donations and by more teas, euchre parties, and other functions given by other individuals interested in the project. The purpose of this group is clearly stated in its by-laws:

“The objects of the Associated Charities of Eastchester are: To relieve poverty and suffering and to aid and assist poor people in general, to educate the poor to a better use of their resources, and generally, to carry on all kinds of settlement work, including the establishment of clubs and classes for recreation purpose: to establish and maintain a Day Nursery for the Village of Tuckahoe for the benefit of needy women and children.”

“Visiting committees, a group of women who observed the nursery and talk with mothers were begun. In these talks beginning no doubt with the question of whether or not the mother could afford the daily fee, members learned about the difficult problems that the people of Tuckahoe faced. These women, interested in welfare work, tried to help iron out the difficulties in the various cases. In this way family case work began.

At the start of World War I in 1917, Bronxville and Tuckahoe had become two very different villages with their own schools, village governments, ethnic and racial compositions, and intrinsic separation caused by class and income. Yet in the times of hardship well meaning people in Bronxville would rally to the assistance of people not as fortunate as them. While differences between the two villages would continue to separate us, the response of decent people in the town to serious problems would bring the people of the town together.