



Historically Speaking

*With Eastchester Historian
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Reflections on the Great Depression in town



Tuckahoe Village Hall also housed Eastchester Town government up to the end of the 1930s.

When the Great Depression of the 1930s began, Tuckahoe was still the center of the Eastchester community. Even though - according to the census of 1930 - the popula-

tion of the town outside of Eastchester had almost tripled, old timers never said they lived in Eastchester but in Tuckahoe. The maps of that period refer to the north end of

Eastchester as Upper Tuckahoe. The local newspaper, today's Eastchester Record was known as The Tuckahoe Record.

Vin Bellew, recreation commissioner of the town for 50 years, wrote a weekly column in The Record for decades. He described the situation clearly, "At one time, Eastchester hardly existed by name but did on paper, everything, government, banks, and stores were down in Tuckahoe...there was not a post office in Eastchester, but for the long time the Eastchester government was in Tuckahoe like the post office, banks, and community service." Up until 1929, Waverly School was the high school for Eastchester and Tuckahoe and located in Tuckahoe. The Great Depression of the '30s began to change that situation.

Bellew in his article commented, "Eastchester came into existence when they moved the Eastchester town government to the old Wilmot School, opposite Lord and Taylor's." The school became available after the opening of the Greenvale elementary school that had been built by the federal Works Project Administration (WPA).

Immediately before the depression, there were only 10 families in need of aid in the entire town but by 1933 there were over 2,000 individuals dependent on public and/or private support. There was not enough office space in Depot Square to handle all the paper work. Tuckahoe was extremely hard hit by the depression. In 1925, the Hodgman Rubber Company, the major employer in the town, closed its doors. At one time over 1,700 workers had been employed in the plant. The Tuckahoe marble quarries had been worked out. The housing boom of the 1920s had ended: The need for private contractors had dried out. Unemployment was rampant in the village.

Tuckahoe faced the greatest challenges of the depression and against overwhelming odds would eventually triumph. Only a few of the reasons for the success of the town mitigating the traumatic impact of the depression have been mentioned in previous columns. The Eastchester Neighborhood Association (ENA), the private charity that

addressed the social needs of the community, worked closely with Amy Dusenberry from Bronxville, Eastchester's last overseer of the poor and first public welfare officer to distribute public and private aid. Amy and the caseworkers of the ENA knew the specific needs of people who had fallen on hard times. In 1933, Ms. Dusenberry described in The Tuckahoe Record how her public office and the private social agency worked in tandem:

"If a person is drowning, I hold his head above water, until the ENA comes along, teaches him how to swim and shows him how to be self-sustaining. It would be a simple matter for the town to give the needy supplies, etc. but if this was done without the supervision of the ENA, the bread line would continue and grow endlessly. The ENA tries education to make people self-respecting and self-reporting."

The other issue that the community addresses was that substandard housing existed in the community. In August of 1935, at the urging of the Tuckahoe Chamber of Commerce and the ENA, Mayor William Crouch of Tuckahoe appointed an independent citizens committee to conduct a town-wide survey on housing. Over the next six years civic and service organizations led by Tuckahoe Lion's Club in conjunction with town and village government continued to address the problem of slum clearance. On April 12, 1941 President Roosevelt signed a bill providing for a loan of \$325,000 to the Tuckahoe Housing Authority to build affordable housing.

But relief, charity, and public housing might not have been the most important reasons why the town and the two villages triumphed over The Great Depression.

In the next column other factors will be addressed that not only have not been mentioned but also point out the characteristics of our community that make it a very special place. Read the next installment in the Nov. 1 edition of The Town Report.