

Further analysis of the thesis show serious flaws.

- 1. The Italian population never exceeded 30% while Lawson and other newspaper account claim it was 60 per cent. The African American population of Tuckahoe was a bit less than 10%, not 30%. The 1930 census was analyzed and it was shown that the former statistics were correct.**
- 2. While blighted housing existed, the thesis leaves out well built and sturdy structures that still stand today.**
- 3. The thesis shows a well meaning but incorrect analysis of Tuckahoe's housing.**

Corrections Added: June 29, 2013 by Richard Forliano

The thesis that exposed the tenements" 1936 A Critique

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In 1935 a group of people existed interested in improving living conditions in Tuckahoe. This group would eventually reach out and include the Tuckahoe Chamber of Commerce, the Lion's Club, the Eastchester Neighborhood Association, and various other organizations. According to the master's thesis that Suzanne Payne Lawson completed in 1936 entitled *Some Aspects of Housing in a Blighted Area in Westchester County*, her dissertation was used by other groups as a basis "to investigate present circumstances and to discover a means of improving them."

No one can contest her vivid depiction of the deplorable conditions in these tenements and the plight of the African Americans who lived there. Forty six of the 50 people she did in depth interviews with were African American. Suzanne Lawson and the Eastchester Neighborhood Association who she interned with deserve credit at exposing "the inadequate, unsanitary, dilapidated housing, and the lack of satisfactory dwellings at a price within the reach of its clients."

Her study of the African American community that lived on Washington Street in 1935 is enlightening. Almost all of the African Americans interviewed came from the South, mainly Virginia and North Carolina. In the report she asserts that "with the increasing prosperity of building trade workers up to 1929, the Italian group was able to afford better homes, and the increasing number of Negroes supplanted them in the older and less adequate tenements." She goes on, "In cases where Italian tenants remained in the homes...their rents were generally less than those charged Negroes in similar circumstances." In another part of the thesis Lawson mentions that during the depression more employment were open to the 'negroes' than to the Italians in these tenements because little more than domestic employment was available in wealthy communities.

In 1935 one-fourth of a family's income should have been allocated to rent. Yet the residents of Washington Street had to spend between 35 and 40 per cent on rent. Their living conditions were deplorable. The overcrowding was rampant. Families of eight were relegated to two bedrooms. In addition poor ventilation, dampness, lack of bathing facilities, unsanitary and inadequate toilets, and inadequate garbage disposal all contributed to "encourage members of the household to spend their free time away from home, and ...congregate in the street, the pool hall, the dance hall, and the barroom." One respondent put it best when he said, "There is a fit place a negro to rent in Tuckahoe.'

Suzanne Lawson's analysis of the Italian community lacks both the objectivity and sensitivity that is afforded to African Americans. Only 4 out of the 50 people she interviewed were of Italian descent. In the thesis she maintained that "Italians because of prevailing customs do not want to work in service" unlike the African Americans. Unfortunately she does not explain what were the prevailing customs that prevented Italians from working as servants during the depression. Could that 'prevailing custom' have not been on the part of Italians but on the part of the wealthy on preferring people of color to Italians? Furthermore, no statistical proof is given to prove that most of the Italians were employed in the building trades in the nineteen twenties.

While Lawson does a commendable job in describing the deplorable conditions in the tenements, she totally omits positive aspects about Tuckahoe community life. Her assertion that the Italians "built with poor materials and no community planning...three story, frame, rectangular houses, which would enable them to keep close together" is not totally accurate. What Lawson omits from her thesis is that are the many well built homes that existed throughout the village. She makes a very elitist statement when she insists that "Tuckahoe is unique in that it received little or none of the skilled landscaping and beautiful architectural patterns of its wealthier neighbors."

In 1935 Tuckahoe was a close knit working suburb suffering through the worst economic catastrophe in American history. Italians who made up sixty per cent of the population were united by their Catholic faith and their close knit families. Unlike most communities in America at that time Tuckahoe was a place where people of color, ethnicity, and different faiths lived in a supportive atmosphere. Personally I have read and conducted numerous oral interviews that stress the strong community ties that bond the different ethnic groups of Tuckahoe together.

It is very easy to judge from a twenty first century view point the bias of a very intelligent, dedicated, and compassionate social worker whose dissertation would help lead to the riddance of slums and the development of the Tuckahoe Housing Authority. As any serious student of history knows, those types of judgments are not fair.

In 2009 a study has still not been made about what specifically were the occupations of the Italians who settled in town. Where did they come from in Italy? How did the different houses of worship help get their parishioners through the worst aspects of the depression? To what

extent did a cultural bias exist between the people offering help through the Eastchester Neighborhood Association and the people receiving support exist?

People of Italian descent make up a majority of the town of Eastchester. Their full history has not yet been researched and written.