

YOUR WEEKLY DOSE OF TOWN HISTORY

Eastchester's Beginnings and World War II

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By Richard Forlano
Eastchester Town Historian

It was the winter of 1942. By the hundreds the young men of Eastchester volunteered to fight fascism after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 6, 1941. Others would soon be drafted. Many would not come back. The "greatest generation" was fighting for their country, their community, and for their belief that there was something very special in being an American. Many like Gabe Rescigno, the first modern Eastchester town historian, shared the belief that the Town of Eastchester had a very special connection with the bill of rights.

The man most responsible for informing the general public about Eastchester's connection with the bill of rights was not a professional historian but a member of the clergy. His name was Father Harold Wiegler and he was the Episcopal rector of Saint Paul's church, the place where Eastchester was founded by ten Puritan farm families from Fairfield, Connecticut in 1664. During the depression Saint Paul's church, now a national historic site visited by over fifteen thousand people, was a struggling Episcopal church located in a section of Mount Vernon that was becoming more industrial and whose demographics were rapidly changing. (Up until 1892 the town of Eastchester included part of the northern Bronx including coop city and all of Mount Vernon.)

The congregation that once included distant ancestors of the Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt families was shrinking. Without more members and funds Wiegler feared that the church would not be able to sustain itself. He came up with a plan to save the church that involved both the rich history of the town of Eastchester and the freedoms in the bill of rights.

Father Wiegler appealed to Sarah Delano Roosevelt, the mother of the President. He explained that John Peter Zenger in the inaugural issue of the *New York Weekly Journal* had published an article exposing an attempt by the royal governor to fix an election to the colonial assembly in Eastchester. The farmers of Eastchester were successful in preventing the governor's candidate from getting elected. Zenger was jailed for printing articles in an unprecedented opposition paper that caused unrest against the crown. Zenger was acquitted by a jury in New York City using the defense that newspaper writers

had the right to print the truth. Zenger's trial for printing articles such as the one on the famous and controversial election of 1733 would be cited as a precedent for freedom of the press in the Constitution. At the time Wiegler used this information that was accepted by local historians and journalists alike.

It is safe to say that the events that took place at Saint Paul's in the early eighteenth century was clearly a benchmark and a touchstone to the soldiers going off to war that clearly connected Eastchester to the principles in the bill of rights. President Franklin Roosevelt, a direct descendant of Anne Hutchinson, agreed with contemporary historians today that the events at Saint Paul's connected Eastchester more with freedom of religion than with freedom of the press. Regardless he supported the efforts of his mother to help the church.

In 1944 the Sulzberger family that still owns the *New York Times* was attending a ceremony at Saint Paul's sponsored by an organization known as the Soldiers of the Press Fifty correspondents who had been killed during the war were being honored by the organization. The family donated an eternal light lamp from their family collection to honor the newspaper men who paid the ultimate sacrifice. The lamp is still in place at the church.

In 1945 at the end of the war Father Wiegler started the Society for the Preservation of the Bill of Rights at Saint Paul's. Sadly by 1979 it looked like the church would have to forever close its doors. The membership could no longer support the church. The society formed at the end of the war by Wiegler organized a coalition of historical groups and with the help of Representative Richard Onger had Congress pass legislation that recognized Saint Paul's Church as a national historic site.

On Saturday, May 12 the Society at Saint Paul's national historic site formed by Father Wiegler sixty two years ago and will honor World War II veterans at its annual fund raising dinner. The purpose of this dinner is to acknowledge the sacrifices of the "greatest generation" from World War II.

None of us should forget that without their sacrifice Americans today would not be able to enjoy those wonderful freedoms in the bill of rights. Future articles will elaborate the personal sacrifices that the families of Eastchester, Tuckahoe, and Bronxville made.