

The Call to Arms 1664 -1865
or
Why They Fought

By
Mike Fix and Richard Forliano

We have been asked a number of times over the years by both students, colleagues, and people in the community why serving one's country holds so great an importance to the citizens of this town. It is with great trepidation that we write the next two articles because it is impossible to get into the hearts, minds, and souls of those who went off to fight and oft times die in foreign wars. Over the next few weeks from May 27 to July 5 many people will come to the OSilas Gallery at Concordia College to view the exhibit entitled "The Hero Next Door: Local Stories of Wartime" that features a collection of personal stories of more than 70 Bronxville, Eastchester, and Tuckahoe men and women who died in the service of our country in World War I, World War 2, and Vietnam. We hope that they will continue to share with us their insights about this important question.

The historic town of Eastchester dating back to 1664 and including at one time parts of the North Bronx and the city of Mount Vernon epitomizes how the United States has been a country made by war. The Puritans from Connecticut who settled the town and the Huguenots from New Rochelle who were related to these same Puritans through blood and marriage were always willing to stand up against tyranny. In 1688 James II saw the colonial assembly as a threat to his royal authority. He closed down the assembly and threatened to take away other rights. His goal was to end representative government in the colony of New York.

The farmers of Eastchester would not allow the King to enslave them. Three hundred Eastchester farmers along with discontented Huguenots from New Rochelle staged a rebellion, refused to obey royal authority, and under the leadership of a Dutch merchant named Jacob Leisler made the assembly the official governing body of the colony.

Leisler's rebellion had been successful. The royal governor was forbidden from taxing the colonists without the permission of the assembly. Sadly Jacob Leisler did not fare as well. Leisler was accused by the landed gentry of using the rebellion as an excuse to come to power. The new royal governor accused Leisler of treason. He was brought to trial, found guilty, and hung. Today people can still see his statute as you drive up North Avenue across the street from New Rochelle High School. (That is not a statute of Tom Paine)

The conflict between the landed gentry and ordinary farmers did not end with Leisler's Rebellion. In 1733 a dishonest royal governor attempted to take back rights won by the people by fixing an election to the colonial assembly in Eastchester. His attempt to fix this election was thwarted by farmers of Eastchester. John Peter Zenger printed an article about this abuse of authority and later this article among many others would be part of the indictment accusing Zenger of seditious libel. The trial of John Peter Zenger that took place in New York City would become a cornerstone of freedom of the press and American liberty.

Militia drilled here and people died during the French and Indian war, the American Revolution, and the War of 1812. Few communities suffered more devastation than did Eastchester during the Revolution. In the present town there is definite proof that only one house remained standing. Volunteers in Eastchester fought in the Mexican and Spanish American wars.

In the Civil War over 100 volunteers from town served in the New York Sixth Heavy Artillery in the bloodiest battles of that conflict in Virginia after Gettysburg. A sergeant in that regiment, William Thiselton, wrote in his diary why they fought, "When the regiment was formed there were no bounties offered as an inducement to enlist and it is safe to say that patriotism is the only motive that brought this body together in defense of our country's cornerstone, the constitution."

After the end of the Civil War the citizens of the town demonstrated their concern for people impacted by the most destructive war in the history of this nation. The Wartburg home for orphans of civil war veterans was established by the Lutheran Church in what today is northwestern Mount Vernon. A Masonic temple was established in Tuckahoe and the masons used their resources to help veterans and others impacted by the ravages of war. A bachelor named Thomas McCarthy owned an acre farm in the north end of town at 49 Maple Street until 1891. In his will he gave life interest in the farm to his brother's son, James. Upon his death, the property was bequest to the Saint Benedicts Home for the Destitute Colored Children of Rye.

When people went off to fight in eighteenth and nineteenth century wars they must have known about many of the great sacrifices the people who settled the land during colonial times had to make and the devastation from the American Revolution. They attended one room school house like the one on the grounds of the Eastchester Historical Society. William Thiselton would write in his diary "Of the original 1100 men who enlisted in August of 1862 but 55 men who could not write their names."

We do not feel it is a stretch to believe that the soldiers going off to World War II had knowledge of the great sacrifices that their forefathers had made.