

The Most Asked Question

By Richard Forliano

Eastchester Town Historian

Written 1/8/08

When a person drives in the town of Eastchester they are greeted with the sign, Eastchester, Birth place of the Bill of Rights. The question that I am most asked as Eastchester Town Historian is why is Eastchester called the birthplace of the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights was not written in Eastchester. The trial of John Peter Zenger that was the precedent for freedom of the press took place in New York City, not Eastchester. Below is the historically accurate but rather long-winded explanation that I give.

It is much more accurate to assert that Eastchester is the birthplace of the freedoms in the Bill of Rights. Freedom of religion, speech, press, and assembly have their roots in the colonial heritage of the town. The first European inhabitant of Eastchester was Anne Hutchinson. Anne, along with her husband and most of her children, were banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for having the courage to oppose the intolerance and cruel ministers who ruled the colony. She was massacred along with her family by Native Americans in 1643. Twenty-one years later in 1664, ten Puritan farm families from Fairfield Connecticut move to Eastchester to continue practicing their faith.

Ironically, the original town of East Chester (two words) was more like a New England village than a farm community outside of New York City. East Chester would have a church, Saint Paul's, a town common surrounded by homes, stocks, and a town whipper. In 1665 the original inhabitants joined by 18 other families drafted the Eastchester Covenant that laid provision for a government and schools. This agreement made between God and man is an important document in the history of New York State.

The town of East Chester was inhabited by independent farmers who were quick to defend their rights. In 1733 the English governor of New York, William Cosby, tried to rig an election in Eastchester to the colonial assembly. He sent his candidate out to East Chester but did not announce the time and place of the election. The citizens of Eastchester, when they heard of the governor's plan, sent their own candidate to the site of the election at the common outside Saint Paul's church. The sheriff would not allow Quakers opposing Cosby to vote in the election because they refused to take an oath swearing their allegiance to the crown. Not only did the governor's candidate lose but the next year the colonial assembly passed a law guaranteeing that a person could not be forced to take an oath as a prerequisite for voting that violated their religious beliefs.

John Peter Zenger, a Dutch printer, used the story of the fixed election as the first article in his newspaper. At time went on, the attacks in his paper against the royal governor became more virulent. He was imprisoned for seditious libel and put on trial in New York City. The judges

using current law instructed the jury to find him guilty. However, the jury ruled that a newspaper has a right to print the truth. As every school child knows, the founding fathers used the trial of John Peter Zenger as an early precedent for freedom of the press.

The story does not end here. During the American Revolution every single house in the present town of Eastchester was destroyed. Divided loyalties between Patriots and Loyalists divided families, pitting father against son and brother against brother.

The present town of Eastchester was founded 18 years before the Quakers came to Philadelphia. Few communities struggled harder or suffered more than the colonial inhabitants of East Chester. When people see the sign, Eastchester, Birthplace of the Bill of Rights, they should not forget the site of Anne Hutchinson and her family tracking through the wilderness. They should understand that the town in many ways still tries to follow the tenets of the Eastchester Covenant written in 1665; that the first edition of Zenger's paper depicted the refusal of Eastchester farmer to allow a rigged election to colonial assembly. And last, the inhabitants of the town of Eastchester suffered as much as any community in the war that led to the birth of the nation.