

The Tragic Story of the Ward Family :

One OF Many Eastchester Families Torn Apart by the American Revolution

First of a Three-Part Series · 1754 to the Summer of 1776

By Richard Forliano, Eastchester Town Historian

There are too many instances today of once close friends, neighbors, and even family members no longer speaking due to current divisive issues. The current polarizing situation pales compared to the alienation, hostility, suffering, and violence that permeated Eastchester and surrounding lower Westchester communities immediately before, during, and at least a decade after the American Revolution.

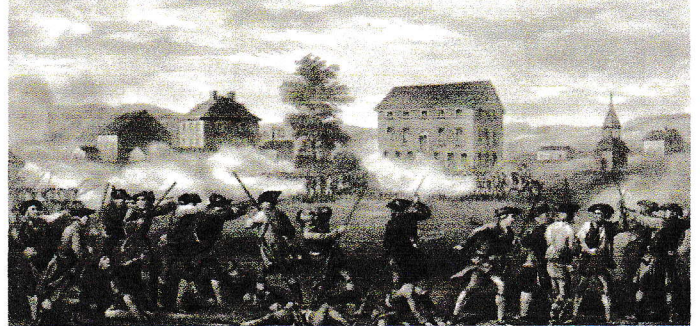
The well-documented story of the Ward family highlights the painful choice that many individuals in Eastchester were forced to make of whether to support the Tory position of remaining loyal to the British Empire or the Patriot cause of doing whatever was necessary to maintain their basic rights. By the time the opening shots of the American War for Independence were fired on that village green at Lexington, Massachusetts on April 19, 1775, it had already become increasingly difficult to avoid making, what would later prove to be, a life-changing decision of whether they would side with the Loyalists or the Patriots.

At this time, Edmund Ward, Junior, age 46, and his younger brother, Stephen, age 44, were considered two of the more important people in the town of Eastchester. Eastchester town records show that on December 3, 1700, their father, Edmund Ward, Senior, signed a deed with three indigenous chieftains acquiring 7,000 acres of land that today comprise the present town of Eastchester. For his efforts, the elder Ward received prime farmland which, upon his passing, was transferred to his two sons, Edmund and Stephen. The Native Americans received some guns, coats, cider, and other farm tools. Soon thereafter, the Native American presence in Eastchester would no longer exist.

In 1754, the same year that the French and Indian War broke out, Edmund, Jr., and Stephen drew up a deed of division. The elder Ward son, Edmund, received 300 acres of the best Eastchester farmland today, including all of Bronxville Manor, Siwanoy Golf Course, and the land just west of the Hutchinson River. On this property, Edmund Jr. built an attractive farmhouse that he would share with his wife, Phebe Fowler Ward, his six sons, and six enslaved people.

The land that Stephen acquired consisted of less fertile land on rockier soil. Stephen also received the White Plains Road house known today as the Ward House or Ward's Tavern. His property included land on both sides of White Plains Road in present-day Bronxville and Tuckahoe, extending up to Mill Road.

Friction between the two brothers proved to be inevitable. As a result of his inheritance Edmund Junior, the elder son, became one of the richest farmers in town, selling his livestock and crops at a considerable profit in New York City. His marriage to Phebe Fowler connected him to one of the most respected and powerful Loyalist Eastchester families. Edmund sided with the majority of people in lower



After months of tension over the closing of the Port of Boston and the imposition of martial law, the first shots of the American War for Independence were fired on April 19, 1775.

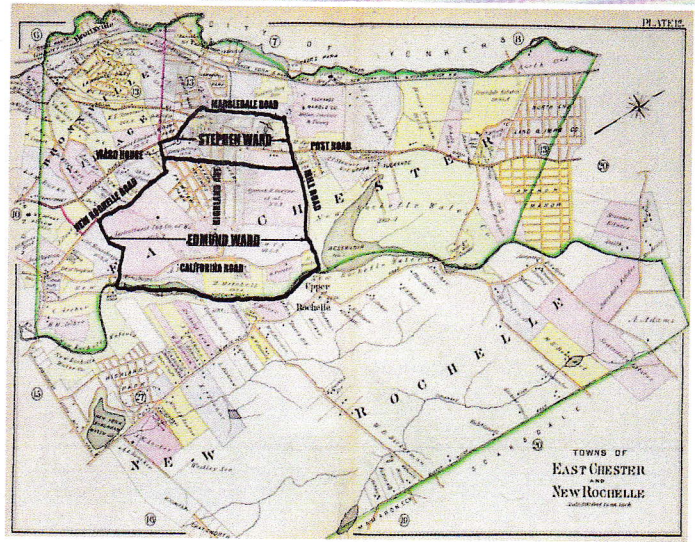
Westchester by making the then more popular decision of working within the framework of the British empire. This Loyalist position maintained that it was more important to maintain their individual prosperity and tranquility than to engage in open warfare in a dispute over taxes and rights. Soon after being elected Eastchester Town Supervisor, Stephen Ward came to the realization that more aggressive methods were necessary for the opposition movement against Britain. As the political tremors of the crisis between the Colonies and Britain heightened with open warfare taking place in Massachusetts, Stephen Ward, along with a committed group of Patriots, took a more militant stance. To Stephen Ward and an increasingly committed minority of militant Patriots, it had become obvious that a corrupt faction had taken over the British Parliament, and they were intent on suppressing the basic English liberties that colonists in America had been allowed to practice for over a century. In early October of 1775, the Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia, a de facto and to the British a semi-legal government for the soon-to-be-declared United States of America, issued a directive to "arrest every person...whose going at large may...endanger the liberties of America." This Committee of Public Safety was led by future Founding Father John Jay from Rye, who enlisted Stephen Ward and Samuel Crawford as members.

A month after that directive issued by the Continental Congress was made, Isaac Sears, a leader of the New York City Sons of Liberty who was notorious for inciting anti-British riots, invaded the town of Eastchester with cavalry from the colony of Connecticut. Sears kidnapped the town judge, Jonathan Fowler, along with Eastchester's only minister, Samuel Seabury. Both men, along with a local mayor, were imprisoned in the nearby colony of Connecticut. All three men were put on trial in New Haven for their Loyalist beliefs. Fowler and the local Mayor recanted their Loyalist's sympathies but not Seabury.

It is most likely not a coincidence that Judge Jonathan Fowler had served for 12 years as Eastchester Town Supervisor, along with being a direct relative of Stephen Ward's sister-in-law, Phebe Fowler Ward. Stephen Ward's silence on the treatment highlights both the intensity of his commitment to the Patriot cause and possibly his disdain for his brother's connection with the Loyalist majority.

In the summer of 1776, that same Committee to detect Conspiracies imprisoned Stephen Ward's brother, Edmund, for his Loyalist sympathies. Edmund Ward would spend seven long months in a brutal New England prison from which he would escape. After his escape, Edmund reached the safety of British lines, where he spent the rest of the war in New York City "at his own expense" in relative comfort. There he sat in eager anticipation of what he and other Loyalists anticipated to be an eventual British victory when he would return to his former station in life. Phebe Fowler Ward and five of his six sons were left to care for themselves for over 7 1/2 years on their once prosperous farm.

In the next article, the harrowing experiences of the American Revolution will be described through the words and deeds of three men and three women who lived through this terrible ordeal.



Recently Constructed Map of the lands owned by Edmund and Stephen Ward before the American Revolution based on recently uncovered primary sources that have been uncovered. The Ward House or tavern is located on the property of Stephen Ward: Courtesy of Nick Zanzano and Rich Forlano.



A house presently standing in Scarsdale was similar to the house that Edmund and Phebe Ward lived in. Courtesy of the Westchester Historical Society

Brutal conditions in a New England prison during the American Revolution. Courtesy of Journal of the American Revolution.



In 1778, the original house of Stephen Ward, also known as Ward's Tavern, was destroyed by the British but was rebuilt by Stephen Ward's son Jonathan Ward in the 1790s, following the original plans as much as possible. Courtesy of the Eastchester Historical Society



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