

Transcript of Lecture Delivered by
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East Hampton in the 17th Century

I

Let's try to discover, if we can, what was distinctive about East Hampton in the seventeenth century. In many respects it was a typical New England town. It was settled by families (not unmarried servants), and they took seriously what one New Jersey diarist of the eighteenth century called the First Commandment--that is, God's first injunction to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply."

They were and they did. The 38 householders who participated in the first land divisions probably spoke for a total of 120 to 150 settlers in the early 1650s. A tabulation for 1687, less than half-a-century later, shows that the population had grown to 502: 223 free white men and boys, 219 free white women and girls, 26 male servants and 9 female, and 11 male slaves plus 14 females. The record does not indicate how many of the slaves were Africans or Indians.

We also learn that 98 of the 223 free white men were able to bear arms (44%), which fits well with the rule of thumb that about half the male population of a well-settled community was under age 16. That estimate leaves only 6% as elderly or disabled. The record also tells us that 116 infants had been born in the previous seven years, of whom 108 had been baptized. Had the other eight (7%) died, or did they belong to dissenting families? We shall probably never know. We are told that 57 deaths had occurred over the same period (did this total include the eight infants?), which means that live births outnumbered deaths by about two to one, an explosive rate of population growth. Only two men called themselves merchants, and we can probably guess who they were--John Mulford, an original settler (or his son Samuel), and Abraham Schellinger, a Dutch immigrant.

The settlers weren't the only ones to increase and multiply. The town's herds and flocks were reproducing at a fantastic rate. In a detailed tax list for 1683--four years before the population survey I've been using--the town had 137 horses, almost 1,000 cows, 151 oxen (nearly a team for every household), and just over 1,000 sheep. According to T. H. Breen in his *East Hampton Histories*, the number of sheep would multiply to more than 16,000 during the 1690s.

What have we learned so far? East Hampton was a community, not yet very stratified, in which a large majority (71 of 97) men on the tax list owned their own farms and participated in the local Congregational church under the long and quite successful pastorate of Rev. Thomas James, who served his people for about half a century. Almost every household had at least one horse and one cow, and most had more. Sheep thrived on eastern Long Island, but not on the mainland where they were easy prey to wolves. The total assessed wealth of the town had increased by a third in just eight years, a rate of growth which, if sustained, would reach over 130% in a single generation. But the 26 men on the rate list who did not own land suggest the beginnings of a class of dependent people. And the huge number of sheep probably

tells us that much of the wealth of this town was generated by women putting in long hours of diligent labor at their spinning wheels. This description does not take any account of the whale industry, which thrived in the town for about 40 years after 1670 and probably generated more capital than any other economic activity.

Life expectancy was probably comparable to what it was in the rest of rural New England, where it was among the highest in the world. Compared with the rest of the early modern world, colonial New England sometimes looks like an organized movement for "Immortality Now!" I doubt that any local resident could brag, as another Long Island woman did to the governor in the 1680s, that she had more than 360 living descendants, or an average of a birthday every day of the year. But I found only two estate inventories in the first volume of town records (one included quite a few books) and only two coroner's inquests, one for young John Talmadge who drowned swimming after helping to bathe some sheep in a pond. Did the town have higher standards of hygiene than most of us attribute to other New England villages at the same time?

II

In a few respects, as most of East Hampton's historians have emphasized, the town did rather better than most other New England villages. I'm not aware of any homicides in the town. Despite occasional alarms caused by mainland Indians or the Dutch, the town never waged war against anybody in the seventeenth century, although the Montauk Indians did go to war against the Narragansetts across Long Island Sound. The town's relations with the Montauks, while probably over romanticized, were more cordial than the norm. In purchasing the land, the founders offered valuable trading goods, including small drills useful in converting sea shells into wampum, and--a big surprise!--24 looking glasses or mirrors. Thomas James, the minister, learned Algonquian, preached to the Montauks, and apparently converted some of them. The rise of whaling after 1670 provided regular employment, and frequently a form of debt bondage, for many Indian men, often (I suspect) as skilled harpoonists. This pattern was unusual but not distinctive. Something quite similar also took hold on Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket.

III

Yet in still other respects, East Hampton appears more contentious and, yes, cruder or coarser than the typical New England town. Backbiting and slander suits frequently disrupted the town. Several sexual scandals alarmed the residents. Daniel Fairfield was accused of seducing both the daughter and the maid of the Reverend James. Four men, two married and perhaps in their forties, and two unmarried young men of about 20, shocked the community in the summer of 1654 by engaging in what seems to have been competitive masturbation. One was put in the pillory, two were whipped, and the fourth scolded. But when continuing rumors implicated a teenager, the magistrates treated the accuser as a slanderer rather than the boy as a probable malefactor. The court specifically decided this sexual offense was not a crime that extended to life and limb. Coming just a few years after New Haven Colony had hanged a Guilford man for public masturbation, the justices were doing their best not to overreact, even though these trials involved behavior that certainly qualified as lewd and notorious by

seventeenth-century Puritan standards.

We see pretty much the same pattern in East Hampton's locally famous witch scare, an event that also places East Hampton well within New England traditions. Although nearly everyone still believed in the devil and probably in witches, nearly all of the actual trials in North America occurred in New England. Two accusations have survived for Pennsylvania, one for Westchester, and one actual trial (an acquittal) for Virginia. At a minimum, a witch trial does show us neighbors willing to entertain deeply unflattering thoughts about one another--that someone had become so vile that she was an explicit servant of Satan. Salem Village, the site of North America's largest and most famous witch hunt, was also a fiercely divided community.

The East Hampton case began in the winter of 1658 when Elizabeth Howell (daughter of Lion Gardiner, probably the most famous man in town), went to bed with what seemed a routine illness, suddenly got worse, and then cried out while delirious that she had been bewitched. She died the next day. Although her mother tried to prevent her accusation from spreading, Goody Simons, a notorious gossip, revealed the name of Elizabeth, wife of a contentious settler named Joshua Garlick. The wife of Foulk Davis (he was one of the public masturbators) then encouraged everyone to dredge up old memories of every hostile encounter with Elizabeth Garlick. Over the previous ten years, several mothers had asked Goody Garlick to nurse their infants, and several of the babies had died not long after. She had also been associated with the nocturnal appearance of a terrifying black cat on Gardiner's Island. Because Elizabeth Howell had also seen a black cat in her delirium before dying, the coincidence looked ominous.

The local justices, who lacked the power to try a capital crime, sent Goody Garlick to Hartford for trial, where she was acquitted on grounds of insufficient evidence. The costs were apportioned among the Garlick family, East Hampton, and the colony government. T. H. Breen thinks the magistrates had little choice but to send her to Hartford for trial but that they probably believed, after hearing all of the testimony, that the real menace to local harmony was Foulke Davis's wife, the gossip, and not Goody Garlick. The court sometimes imposed enormous fines for slander.

I don't know of any judicial proceedings in Connecticut involving East Hampton people prior to this case. The town had submitted to Connecticut rule in 1649 and then tried to back out in 1655. But the Connecticut General Court told them that "it can bee no advantage, but rather the contrary, to there devided, shattered condition, not to have dependance uppon or bee under some settled Jurissd." Obviously Hartford had heard about East Hampton's quarrels. The colony also ordered the town to pay its taxes.

In the Garlick case, the town--for the first time that I know of--surrendered the final power of determination to an outside authority. It recognized a real limit to its own autonomy. A few years later, as Breen notes, the town fathers for the first time called their village "a little commonwealth." East Hampton was coming together as a community, a town with a collective identity, not just a gathering of quarrelsome householders trying to share the same space. Slander trials fell off sharply in the 1660s. Disputes over property took their place in the town

court.

IV

If East Hampton was better off than some towns and also more contentious during the first two decades, it also became--politically--quite outspoken, even precocious, in its dedication to the rights and liberties of Englishmen. Its marginal place as a Puritan island perilously adrift within a larger, non-Puritan colony, helps tell us why.

I classify East Hampton as one of the last in a second phase of New England town founding from 1636 through the 1640s. The first phase, which included Salem, Boston, Dorchester, Roxbury, Braintree, Charlestown, Lynn, and Ipswich, consisted of towns settled directly by people arriving from England. The second phase was composed of towns founded by settlers dissatisfied with their first choice and eager to find something better. In some cases they were driven out, as when Roger Williams fled to Narragansett Bay and established Providence, or when Anne Hutchinson and her admirers settled on Rhode Island and founded both Portsmouth and Newport. Thomas Hooker led a voluntary exodus to the Connecticut Valley, while Theophilus Eaton and John Davenport left Massachusetts to create New Haven. Most of these migrants moved, quite deliberately, beyond the charter boundaries of Massachusetts in quest of greater religious, political, or economic autonomy. They did not bother to get royal patents for their new communities. Many of them drafted "covenants" instead.

Among East Hampton's near neighbors, Southampton and Southold were settled around 1640 by congregations that had formed themselves and chosen a minister on the mainland before migrating to Long Island. Southold's settlers came from New Haven, already the most severely Puritan society in the world, and agreed to govern themselves according to the law of God (the Bible). Only male churchmembers could vote. Southampton attached itself to Connecticut, which never restricted voting to churchmembers and which showed much greater respect for English customs. East Hampton followed the Southampton pattern, although its church was formed after the settlers reached Long Island. The town never had a formal covenant or statement of purpose. New Haven and Southold abolished trial by jury, which has no biblical precedent. East Hampton used juries regularly and allowed lots of men to participate in public life. Yet the town's link with Connecticut remained tenuous until the witch scare. East Hampton and Southampton seldom appear in the public records of colonial Connecticut. In sum, East Hampton, one of the last towns to be established in this second phase, placed a high value on its autonomy even though the settlers faced severe difficulties in maintaining internal harmony and cohesion.

Why, then, did the town pull together more successfully after the mid-1660s? T. H. Breen gives a great deal of credit to the whaling industry and the prosperity it stimulated. No doubt his point is valid. But I would like to suggest another powerful catalyst to internal cohesion. The town faced a new threat to its emerging traditions after the English conquered New Netherland in 1664 and then asserted control over all of Long Island in 1665. The Duke of York's patent also gave him the land west of the Connecticut River, that is, nearly every settled town in the colony of Connecticut, including Hartford and New Haven. But Connecticut's governor, John Winthrop, Jr., met with his New York counterpart in 1665 and

conceded Long Island to New York in exchange for recognition of his colony's authority over its mainland towns. In effect, East Hampton now paid a high price for its earlier autonomy. It had never contributed much to Connecticut. Connecticut lost little by ceding it to New York.

Yet the three eastern towns clearly preferred to be governed by Connecticut, not New York. They protested against the Duke's Laws of 1665 and against the taxation without representation that had been established under that autocratic code. They engaged agents in England to try to acquire their own royal charter from the Crown. When the Dutch returned in 1673, retook New York (they renamed it New Orange in honor of William of Orange), and held it for fifteen months, the English towns of central Long Island and East New Jersey accepted Dutch rule, but the three eastern towns submitted to Connecticut instead.

The reimposition of rule under the duke of York and his new governor, Edmund Andros, again made the islanders uneasy after 1674. When Andros returned to England in 1680, he neglected to renew the colony's expiring revenue act. In 1681 the English merchants of New York City, strongly supported by the English (but not the Dutch) towns on Long Island, launched a tax strike by refusing to pay port duties. The Duke's Court of Assize, which was supposed to be a major instrument of his autocratic control, then met, but instead of arresting the protesting merchants, it tried and convicted the customs collector for usurping power. It also urged the Long Islanders to shut up while it petitioned the Duke to grant the colony an elective assembly. The Duke, under terrible pressure at home during the so-called Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis, at last gave in and conceded an elective assembly.

It met in New York City in the fall of 1683. East Hampton chose delegates "to Joyne with the rest of the [East Riding towns] to give ye Representatives Instructions to stand upp in ye assemblie for ye Maintenance of our priveledges & English liberties." The assembly passed the New York Charter of Liberties of 1683, a document that tried to guarantee representative government to the colony forever. Most Long Island and East Hampton historians give the major credit for this achievement to the English towns on Long Island. They certainly supported the change, but in my opinion the strongest momentum behind the Charter came from New York City. The Quaker migration to the Delaware Valley had terrified the English merchants of the city, who were afraid William Penn's new colony would drain their own of English settlers and leave them to be swamped by the Dutch. Penn and his first assembly had agreed on their own Charter of Liberties in March 1683. The New York Charter of Liberties was the northern colony's answer seven months later.

This eternal achievement lasted all of two years. In 1685 Charles II died and was succeeded by his Catholic brother, the Duke of York, who became King James II. For twenty years the English settlers of New York had been agitating for the liberties that would make them as happy as New Englanders. James now declared, in effect, that he had found a new way to accomplish this objective. He would make New Englanders as miserable as the English settlers of New York.

James disallowed the Charter of Liberties and restored autocratic government in New York. Because the law courts had recently annulled the Massachusetts charter, he united all of the New England colonies into what he called the Dominion of New England, and he sent Sir

Edmund Andros to America to govern this enormous province autocratically--without an elective assembly. In 1688 Andros added New York and the Jerseys to the Dominion.

England's Glorious Revolution finally resolved this crisis. William of Orange invaded England in November 1688, most of the English army defected to him, James fled to France, and Parliament declared William and Mary joint sovereigns of the kingdom. Boston overthrew Andros in April, and this disaffection soon spread to--you guessed it--the eastern towns of Long Island. But once again the decisive action came from New York City. This time the Dutch settlers took the lead. They rose at the end of May, took possession of Fort James, renamed it Fort William, and put Jacob Leisler, a militia captain, in charge of the colony. The eastern towns supported him at first, but then--as during the Dutch reconquest of 1673--they again explored the possibility of reuniting with Connecticut. In East Hampton, Samuel Mulford--who was becoming the town's most prominent spokesman--remained a strong advocate of Leisler, however.

New York's uprising ended tragically. In 1691 William sent New York a new governor who tried and executed Leisler for treason, an act that poisoned the colony's politics for the next ten or twelve years. During these struggles, Samuel Mulford became an active participant in provincial politics. Between the Glorious Revolution and 1720, he spoke out often and eloquently on behalf of his town and the liberties of Englishmen.

V

To sum up, East Hampton's early history was distinctive but not quite unique. In most respects the community was a typical New England town, a little more prosperous than many, more accommodating than most toward the Indians, but also more fractious and fragile than most, at least during the first two decades. East Hampton also provides an interesting case study of what could happen when a non-Puritan province tried to absorb a strongly Puritan village. Its absorption into New York made the town far more articulate and outspoken in defense of English liberties than most mainland towns.

The town also became absorbed into the Atlantic economy, especially through whaling but also through piracy, an activity that has left only fascinating hints in the surviving records. The town had considerable success in resisting the formal demands of empire. Despite constant pressure from New York City and the government of New York, it did most of its trading with Boston and Connecticut. During the Revolution, when most of Long Island went loyalist, East Hampton stood firmly for the American cause. This pattern leads me to my final point. When did the people of East Hampton at last feel comfortable being New Yorkers rather than Yankees? You tell me. Long after the Revolution, I suspect, and maybe not until the twentieth century.