

Faded Laurels

*The History of Eaton's Neck and
Asharoken*

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with

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1. The First Europeans

Theophilus Eaton

In 1590, Theophilus Eaton was born in Stony Stratford, England. He was the eldest child of Rev. Richard Eaton, the rector of a church at Coventry. Although he was encouraged to become a minister at an early age, Theophilus went against his family's wishes and studied to become a trader.

By 1620, Eaton had become a well known merchant and was soon appointed an agent of King Charles I at the Court of Denmark. Years later, he returned to England and married Ann Yale, who was the daughter of the Bishop of Chester.

In 1637, Theophilus and Ann Yale Eaton left England to lead a group of traders to Boston. The expedition was considered the wealthiest and most capable contingent to leave for the "new world." Accompanying the Eatons was John Davenport, a close companion and prominent clergyman. Weeks after their arrival, Eaton and Davenport explored the surrounding coast in order to establish a settlement. In the spring of 1638, land was purchased from the "Indians" for 13 English Coats, and the Colony of New Haven was founded.

In 1639, Theophilus Eaton was elected as the first governor of New Haven, a position he held until his death. As both a wealthy merchant and vested official, Eaton was able to acquire vast tracts of land around the colony from native inhabitants. One such grant, made in 1646, was for land around what is now Huntington from the Matinnecock tribe. This grant was the first between natives and Europeans concerning Long Island's north shore, and included Eaton's Neck.

Although the travel-minded governor visited and explored all parts of his domain, it is unknown if a settlement was ever attempted at Eaton's Neck. It is assumed, however, that Governor Eaton and his travelers were the first Europeans to explore Eaton's Neck, and possibly what has become the Township of Huntington.

In 1658, Theophilus Eaton died, and his vast holdings passed to his son, Theophilus Eaton, Jr. The following year, on March 28, 1659, Theophilus Jr. deeded all his New England interests to his sister, Hannah E. Jones. Hannah lived in New Haven, and was married to William Jones. During this transfer, the original grant obtained by Governor Eaton from the Indians in 1646 for parts of Long Island was misplaced. From 1659 to 1662, no attempt was made by William or Hannah to settle the Neck.

On December 22, 1662, William Jones of New Haven sold Eaton's Neck to Captain Robert Seeley, the chief military officer of Hartford. The deed of transfer read:

"William Jones of New Haven in the Right of my wife, Hannah E. Jones, daughter of Theophilus Eaton, Esq., late Governor of New Haven colony, deceased, unto whom the lands herein mentioned were given or granted by Rusurocon, Sagamor of Cutunomack in the presence of sundry Indians...."

The Seeley deed was important for several reasons. It named "Rusurocon" as a tribal chief and made reference to the misplaced Indian grant of 1646. The deed also assigned the first monetary figure to be associated with Eaton's Neck (50 pounds consideration for the sale).

Huntington vs. Seeley

Shortly after acquiring the title, Robert Seeley sold the neck to George Baldwin. The sale occurred on July 29, 1663 — before any payments had even been made by Captain Seeley to William and Hannah E. Jones. Perhaps Seeley was eager to sell the neck so soon after purchasing it because of the threat of a lawsuit by the Township of Huntington.

The Town had been founded on April 2, 1653, when by deed "Raseokan, Sagamore of Matinnicoke" and thirteen other Indians sold their lands to the first settlers. Three years later, in July, 1656, Huntington's inhabitants obtained a second deed. It included "the necke called Eatons Necke, Crabmedos," and all lands east to the Nissequogue River. This deed, which came to be known as the "Eastern Purchase," conflicted with the misplaced Indian grant to Governor Eaton in 1646. As a result, the Town's settlers believed Eaton's Neck to be their property, and viewed Seeley and Baldwin as trespassers.

With a lawsuit looming and Baldwin becoming increasingly concerned over the integrity of the title to Eaton's Neck, Captain Seeley requested and obtained a certificate on August 17, 1663 from the Indians. The certificate affirmed that Resorokan had granted the neck to Theophilus Eaton in 1646.

During the latter part of 1663, George Baldwin built and fenced in a home on Eaton's Neck near the present day sluice. It is believed that this same structure was modified by future owners, and eventually became known as "the manor house," or "Cherry Lawn."

On February 7, 1664, the Town sent men to Eaton's Neck and informed Baldwin that he "was there Contrary to the townes mind and that he should not remaine." When Baldwin refused to leave (he believed his deed from Captain Seeley was valid) the settlers of the town served Seeley with a summons for trespass. Part of the action read:

"... which is to our great Damage the Defendant having nothing of the townes Right by their Lawful purchas hee proceeded and gave possession to the man that fenced in and built upon that hee was there Contrary to the townes mind"

The Town's suit was heard twice by "Juryes at the Courts of Sessions upon Long Island," but both times the Town lost. After the second verdict in December, 1665, the inhabitants of Huntington appealed their case to the colonial governor. On May 3, 1666,

Governor Richard Nicolls issued a warrant for "rehearing the cause betweene the inhabitants of Huntington and Capt. Ceely." This third and widely publicized trial was held September 27 - October 2, 1666 before the governor's Court of Assizes on the "Island of Manhatans."

The attorney for the town was John Rider, who argued that the Eaton family had no rightful claim to the land since they had "never beene in possession or given any consideration for it."

The attorney for Captain Robert Seeley presented the Indian certificate dated August 17, 1663 affirming that Resoroken granted the neck to Theophilus Eaton in 1646. It was also noted that the certificate was witnessed by "four Christians." The defense attorney then attacked the town's "Eastern Purchase" on two points. The first being that the date was vague, since the deed read "on or about the last day of July 1656," and secondly because it lacked Christian witnesses.

At the end of the trial, Governor Nicolls and his council issued the following verdict:

"The Court doth Decree That the two former verdicts given in by the Juryes at the Courts of Sessions in the East Riding of York Shire upon Long Island do stand good, and that the Land in question called Eaton's Neck be adjudged to ye Defendt. That the Plts. do pay or cause to bee paid the sum of ten pounds to the Person or Persons who received the Damage in moving fence Pluck't up by them. And that the Plts. do pay or cause to be paid the sum of ten pounds more to the Defendant for the damage he hath sustained by them, and likewise that they Pay the Costs of the Court, and charges.

By order of the Governor and the Court of Assizes."

After the verdict, the inhabitants of Huntington were so bitter that the following proclamation was issued at a town meeting held October 17, 1666:

"Agreed by the inhabitants of Huntington that no inhabitant shall sell, let, or set any of their lands, commonage to any person or persons who shall be proprietors of the neck...."

The Nicolls Patent

On June 22, 1667, George Baldwin received an official patent for Eaton's Neck from Governor Nicolls. This grant ratified the sale from Seeley to Baldwin in 1663, and established clear title to the Neck as far as England was concerned. In the patent, "Eaton's Neck" was defined as everything north of what is now Duck Island Road. Everything south of this was considered the Town's as per the Eastern Purchase.

On July 11, 1668, George Baldwin sold the Neck with "all the dwelling houses, barns, outhouses, land, wood, meadows, pastures, marshes, ..." to Alexander Bryan and his son, Richard. The Bryans were merchants from the town of Milford in the colony of Connecticut. As expected, the boundaries used to describe the Neck in the Baldwin-Bryan deed were the same as those used in the patent from Governor Nicolls. On August 8, 1668, the deed was recorded in New York with a sale price of 200 pounds.

Unlike past owners, the Bryan family retained the Neck for a long period of time (1668 - 1711). During their ownership, they also purchased land in Huntington and served as officials in Huntington Town government. This did much to end many of the bitter feelings harbored by town inhabitants toward Eaton's Neck.

The Dongan Patent

On August 2, 1688, the Governor of New York, Thomas Dongan, issued a royal charter to the inhabitants of Huntington. The patent covered lands around the present day Town of Huntington, including part of East Beach (from what is now #105 Asharoken Avenue to about Duck Island Road). As a result, the town held title to much of East Beach until 1890, when Ida A. Smith purchased the Town's interest. Today, all title searches in this vicinity of Asharoken trace their origin back to the Dongan Patent.

The Lordship and Manor of Eaton

In colonial times, royal manors were established throughout New England for cultured, wealthy landowners. These aristocrats were often involved in mercantile and trade, and kept their money in English banks. On Long Island, a total of six royal manors were created, Eaton's Neck being one of them. The monarchy supported the concept since the owner or "Lord" of the manor typically became a loyal agent of the crown.

In 1686, Alexander and Richard Bryan petitioned "Thomas Dongan, Lieutenant Governor and Vice Admiral of New York and its dependencies under his majesty, James the Second" for a manorial patent. On August 23rd of that same year, the request was granted, and all "tenements, buildings, fences, orchards" and gardens on approximately 1500 acres were made "into one Lordship or Manor — and the same shall henceforth be called the Lordship or Manor of Eaton."

Manor life often revolved around the main house, which served as both the office and living quarters for the landowner or "Lord of the Manor." It can only be assumed that the original structure built by George Baldwin was modified by the wealthy Bryans and became the manor house. Baldwin did not possess the tremendous capital needed to construct such a dwelling, and "Cherry Lawn" was a marvel for its time. It was built with high ceilings, large windows, Dutch ovens, rooms for servants and a full basement. The structure was entirely put together with wooden pegs (metal nails and spikes were unavailable) and every timber had to be cut by hand since power equipment did not exist. And yet Cherry Lawn remained the most stately home on Eaton's Neck for almost 200 years, until C. H. DeLamater's "Vermland" surpassed it in 1863.

Manorial life around Cherry Lawn consisted of livestock, gardens and vast fields. The grounds were tended by servants, while the fields and livestock were maintained by tenant farmers. Although most Manors in Westchester, Connecticut, and Long Island had African slaves, it is unknown if this practice of using slave labor ever occurred at Eaton's Neck.

The tenant farmers were required to pay a percentage of their yearly harvest to the Lord of the Manor as rent. Likewise, every year the Lord of the Manor was required to send a duty to the crown. In the case of the Manor of Eaton, the Dongan patent specified that "four bushels of good winter wheat or its monetary equivalent" was to be paid at New York every 25th of May. The Colonial Governor then sent a duty to the crown for the entire province.

In 1710, Alexander and Richard Bryan decided to sell the Neck to John Sloss, a wealthy merchant from Fairfield, Connecticut. To accomplish this, two articles had to be drawn up: one to transfer the royal patent and one to transfer the land. On November 22, 1710, the Manorial Patent issued by Governor Dongan in 1686 was transferred to John Sloss. Several months later, on September 11, 1711, the land itself (approximately 1500 acres) was deeded, except for Duck Island which the Bryans chose to retain. The purchase price for the Neck and manorial patent totaled 1,650 pounds.

After ten years of ownership, John Sloss passed away. His will, probated on March 2, 1720 in Fairfield, Connecticut, read as follows:

"I give unto my three daughters Sarah, Ellen, and Deborah all my Manor of Eaton on Eaton's Neck lying upon Long Island in the Province of New York. . ."

Although the will of John Sloss specifies three daughters, only Ellen and Sarah eventually owned and utilized Eaton's Neck. Ellen was married to the Reverend Noah Hobart, while Sarah appears to have never married. In 1754, the Manor of Eaton was transferred to Ellen's only child, John Sloss Hobart.