



*By David Osborn
Site Manager, St. Paul's Church National Historic Site
April 2013*

1864: Substitutes Serve in Place of Draftees

In the late spring of 1864, heavy casualties in the Virginia Overland Campaign and the perception that the military drive was stalled led to diminished support for the Union war effort in Eastchester, the town comprising the St. Paul's parish. The clearest reflection of this sentiment was assistance provided by the town to young men selected in the Civil War draft who chose not to serve. The draft had been controversial since its inception, sparking the infamous New York City riots of July 1863. While Eastchester never experienced that level of lawless insurrection, the community strongly opposed President Lincoln's call for more troops in 1864. This mirrored a reluctance to supply additional men in many Northern communities which were Democratic, and registered a further expression of the inconsistent support for the war that characterized the St. Paul's area.



Eastchester used public funds to hire substitutes for local men selected in the 1864 draft, held in a small hotel in the town.

The town created a committee to retain the services of substitutes for local

draftees who declined to serve. Public support for these draftees indicated a lack of confidence in the Lincoln war policies, and sympathy for men of modest means who did not want to fight. Small towns like Eastchester also feared losing additional able bodied men to the army. They were willing to expend public funds to retain their residents on the home front as farmers and laborers who sustained the local economy. Officials and townsmen did not see their actions as draft dodging; the town, after all, met its quota of troops. Rather, local leaders understood this as a compromise between fulfilling their national obligations and securing the needs of the town. The program of hiring



The small town flavor of Eastchester is reflected in this 1860 image, showing the small brick general store at center.

substitutes to serve in place of town residents was probably also designed to avert serious protests against the draft, since the town had experienced some unrest in response to the conscription of July 1863.

The ability to hire a man to serve in the army in place of a draftee was incorporated into the enrollment act, stipulating a payment of \$300. In practice, it was a market-driven enterprise, and the cost, or fee paid to the substitute, could vary widely depending on the location and timing, possibly reaching \$1,500. Even the usual range of \$250 to \$350 was an enormous sum for most working men, equal to a year's wages. Though abuses of the system were widespread -- with many substitutes accepting the fee and quickly deserting -- the practice of substitution appealed to many capable men who for various reasons had difficulties entering the army through standard means.

One member of the town committee was Judge Joseph D. Fay, a parishioner who is buried at St. Paul's. Judge Fay's panel made several visits to the heavily populated neighborhoods of lower Manhattan, location of surpluses of available young men. The town obtained 13 substitutes at \$285 each and two substitutes at \$300 each. Eastchester had previously paid commutation fees of \$300 for each of five draftees for whom no substitute could be found. This total public expenditure of \$5,805 would be about \$80,000 in today's money, a sizable figure for a small town.



Granite burial stone at St. Paul's for Judge Joseph D. Fay, who was also a Mason.