

*A Little Bit of History:
The Anti-Rent Wars
by Frederick Wickert*

I live in the small town of Gilboa, NY in the southern tip of Schoharie County in the Catskill Mountains. I want to tell you about some American history that took place here, that I will wager is not taught in our schools in this country.

During the 1700's the lands early settlers cleared and lived on were not owned by them. They were owned by a few aristocrats called Patroons. The farmers cleared and plowed the land, and they paid taxes and rent.

After the Revolution and independence an entrenched feudal aristocracy controlled much of the land all over eastern New York State. Included were the lands of Gilboa and Schoharie County.

By the 1830's Schoharie Valley farmers recognized the system of rents built into their leases took much of their income. The land owners not only received a portion of their crops to sell on the market, but also a portion of the farmer's profit of what he sold. In addition, the farmer was responsible for all the taxes on the land that he did not own.

This sort of system called feudalism was coming under attack in Europe and the farmers of Schoharie County also believed the aristocracy had to go.

Steven Van Rensselaer, a direct descendant of the Albany Patroons ended up owning most of the land on both sides of the Hudson River. Few persons who provided goods and services for this stately gentleman would insult him by demanding direct payment for their goods and services. For most of his life he accumulated enormous debt, to be paid only upon his death. He was as lax in collecting the rents from his tenants as he was in paying his debts.

When he died in January of 1839, he left his estate to his two sons. Those who had provided goods and services to him came out in droves, seeking to be paid. All rents and other debts owed to him by his tenants came instantly due in full.

By the fall of 1839 tenants were up in arms. Their fathers had signed two and three lifetime's leases in the 1700's. They felt their obligations had more or less ended with the Revolution and independence. By the time they paid state and county taxes, then the high rents demanded by the landlords, they had nothing left for their labors. From their perspective, the only fair solution was for them to buy their farms. Van Rensselaer refused to sell. By that time courts had issued writs seeking payment of rents and threatening eviction.

These farmers and their parents had cleared the land, built the buildings, fought the Indians and fought the British to defend them. They were not about to give them up without a fight. The Sherriff was ordered to collect these rents or evict if necessary. The Albany Sherriff travelling alone trying to serve the writs found his wagon damaged. A month later several men threatened the life of the Undersheriff. Soon he was being followed by a small crowd of Anti-rent agitators. Farmers and sympathizers began setting tar barrels afire in the road and made life generally miserable for the Sherriff and his men.

In 1840 violence spread throughout the region. The Sherriff began operating with as many as 500 men and the Anti-renters began dressing up as Indians and attacking the Sherriff's forces. It became known in history as the "Anti-rent Wars."

One major incident known as "The Battle of Blenheim Hill," had the local Sherriff and a posse going to arrest several Anti-rent leaders. When the leaders were not found, the Sherriff arrested several teenaged boys who shared anti-rent sympathies, but had done no wrong. They were jailed in Ira Roses Tavern in Gilboa, in a makeshift Sherriff's headquarters. Several people outside were fired upon by Sherriff's deputies.

A full scale attack was planned against the tavern, but cooler heads prevailed and an out-of-town attorney was sent for. The attorney pointed out to the Sherriff the boys had done nothing illegal and should be released. The Sherriff did release them.

In 1846 a convention to rewrite New York's constitution was held. This brought about the death knell to feudalism, abolishing all feudal tenures, setting a 12 year limit for leases, and making the taxes the responsibility of the land owners and not the tenants. In only two decades most of the land was transferred to the farmers living there. Feudalism in the new America was over.

Somehow, in this day and age, I don't think refusing to pay your rent will have a similar outcome.