

The Anti-Rent War

While walking from Ithaca to Kingston, I discovered the Anti-Rent War. As a farmer and citizen of New York State, I was appalled that I did not know the story of this conflict that changed the history of New York and the United States.

In 1839, most farmers of the Catskill region were tied to a feudal land system in which they did not own their land. A feudal "patroon" system, initiated by the Dutch, adopted by the English, and fine tuned by Alexander Hamilton after the American Revolution, ruled the land of the Catskills. Farmers did not own the land on which they they worked and built their homes and farms; instead, they owned the title to endless leases on land which was owned by a few large landowners. In perpetuity, farmers of the Catskill region owed these landlords a fixed annual rent. The farmers were responsible for all taxes on the land, but had had no right to the timber, minerals or water power on the property. Should a farmer choose to sell his title to a lease, the landlord was owed a quarter of the sale price (quarter sale).

In 1839, a large landowner in Albany County died. To settle his estate, back rents of farmers had to be collected, despite the national depression of the time. The farmers of Albany County refused to pay. They organized themselves into Anti-Rent associations which politically pleaded the farmers' desire to buy the land of their farms outright, rather than pay a perpetual rent. The farmers' defense for not honoring their contracts with the landlords was the farmers' claims that the landlords did not have legitimate titles to the land. Anti-Rent associations quickly swept through nine counties of the Catskill region: Albany, Rensselaer, Columbia, Green, Ulster, Sullivan, Schoharie, Delaware, Otsego. Members of these Anti-Rent associations included not only farmers, but their friends and sympathizers.

The landlords refused to test their titles in court or to offer their land to the farmers at a fair market price. Instead, they sent land agents and sheriffs into the hills and mountains of the Catskills to conduct court ordered sales of farmers' properties to pay the rent. Land agents and sheriffs, however, seldom made it to their destinations. When spotted, tin horns blared from one farm to another to warn of the approach of the rent collectors. The law would be met by fifty to a thousand armed Anti-Renters; dressed in calico, hooded, and disguised as "Indians". The "Indians" would relieve the land agents or sheriffs of their papers and turn them back without conducting a sale. If a sale did take place, the Indians would be present, making it unlikely that a person would bid for the farmer's possessions. If animals were sold, they would be shot after leaving the property. The farmers would be compensated by the Anti-Rent associations. Sometimes the land agents were tarred and feathered.

The "Indians" were the backbone of the Anti-Rent Rebellion from 1841-1845. On August 7, 1845, in the township of Andes in Delaware County, shots were exchanged between the "Indians" and a sheriff and his deputies trying to conduct a sale of a farmer's cattle for back rent. Undersheriff Osman Steele was killed.

The County Sheriff and a deputized posse of 150 men wreaked havoc in Delaware County as they searched for Anti-Renters suspected in the murder. The Governor of New York declared Delaware County in a state of rebellion and called in 300 troops of the state militia. Two new prisons were built in Delhi to hold all the Anti-Renters that were arrested. After a month, 94 Anti-Renters were indicted for murder, 148 for other crimes.

The County Sheriffs of the other Anti-Rent counties were also emboldened to pressure the Anti-Renters. Anti-Renters throughout the Catskills burned or hid their "Indian" disguises and distanced themselves from their "Indian" past.

The trial in Delhi of the Anti-Renters indicted for Osman Steele's murder resembled more an inquisition than a court of justice. New York State's Attorney General prosecuted these trials. The trial judge instructed the jury that mere presence in disguise at the scene of the crime made the accused guilty of murder. Not guilty pleas were met by death sentences by the judge after the jury convicted the accused. Guilty pleas were reduced to manslaughter and these prisoners received seven year sentences.

In November, 1845, less than a month after the trials in Delhi had come to a close, elections for New York's Legislature took place. Though the "Indians" were shattered, the farmers were united under the Anti-Rent Party. Many people, some of whom had previously not sympathized with the Anti-Renters, had been appalled by the heavy hand of the law. The Anti-Renters won many seats in the Legislature. By 200,000 votes, a call for a New York Constitutional Convention carried.

In 1846, the Legislature for the first time passed a law taxing the rental income that landowners received from their tenants. The Legislature also passed a law forbidding a landlord to sell a farmer's possessions to pay rent.

At the New York Constitutional Convention in 1846, New York's Constitution was changed so that quarter sale contracts and land leases over 12 years were prohibited. New York's elected Attorney General and elected Judiciary dates back to this Constitutional Convention.

In November of 1846, the Governor of New York lost his bid for reelection and a new Governor of New York was elected on the promise that he would pardon all the imprisoned Anti-Renters. He kept his word.

Over the next decade, most farmers of the Catskill region gained possession of the land they had built their homes and farms upon by buying it from their landlords. The profits and protections of New York's feudal land system had been destroyed with the lead of pencils at the ballot box.

The first Homestead Act was sponsored by a Congressman from the Catskills. The opening of western public lands to farmers, and not land speculators, was a direct result of the Anti-Rent War and the national political attention it received.

Henry Christman's beautifully written book, *Tin Horns and Calico*, offers a detailed history of the Anti-Rent War. The hills and hollows, dingles and dells, mountains and farms of the Catskills will never look the same once you've read it.

Memorials serve to unite the present with the past. There is no memorial to the Anti-Renters. These farm families bravely challenged the law because of their conviction to a principle that most Americans hold today: the people that work and live off the land should own it. Perhaps NOFA-NY, New York Farm Bureau or another organization will erect a memorial that will honor the Anti-Renters. This story of New York farmers and their friends uniting to fight oppression deserves remembering.