

“Down with the Rent!”

The Anti-Rent Rebellion of New York State

A press photo is available at: j.mp/downwithrent

Full Press Release:

On Date, Time, Place, Cost, Etc

“Down With the Rent” is a concert of New York State’s hidden history. This is a performance of authentic songs and stories written and sung by Anti-Rent protestors in the 1840’s. At the time Rensselaerwyck ,now, Albany County on the west side of the Hudson River, and Rensselaer and Columbia counties on the east side of the Hudson River, belonged to Stephen Van Rensselaer III, who inherited 726,000 acres from his Dutch ancestors. He was a man highly regarded in political circles and among his many aristocratic friends, who also owned other large tracts of land in the Hudson Valley. The semi-feudalism contract he designed for his tenant farmers after the Revolutionary War was the reason for the anti-rent rebellion when it was enforced by his sons after his death in 1839. This concert is a unique look at the anti-rent rebellion through the lyrics of the songs and historical narrative.

Eight able singers and musicians present the 2 hour performance. They are Greg Artzner, Terry Leonino, John Roberts, George Ward, Greg Clarke, Bill Spence, George Wilson and Toby Stover.

The concert was compiled and directed by Andy Spence. Most of the songs were only verse when printed in the newspapers of the day. Some were sung to favorite tunes of the day, and many have had music written specifically for this production by George Ward.

The History

The story starts 175 years ago. Stephen Van Rensselaer III, the Dutch landlord, owned 726,000 acres, then known as Rensselaerwyck, and today known as the counties of Albany, Rensselaer, and Columbia, New York. He gave veterans of the Revolutionary War land to farm free of charge for seven years, after which they were called into his office for a "durable lease". The lease was not what the farmers expected, as it prevented them from obtaining clear title to their land. Thereafter it was called an "incomplete sale" and to keep the farm the farmer's had to pay a yearly wheat rent, four fat fowls, and a day of labor repairing the roads. There was also a "quarter sale" clause which stated the landlord would get one-fourth of the sale price of the property if the farmer sold, or, he could take it back in its entirety. Many could not pay the rent and so for 40 or more years many farmers accumulated a large back rent. *In the song, "A Great Revolution,"*

"When honest old Holland sent forth her Dutch band, He offered them, gratis, large farms of wild land. Seven years passed; he told them what they least did suspect, They must pay him great rent, or them he would eject."

The Anti-Rent rebellion began in 1839 after Stephen Van Rensselaer III died. In his will he divided 726,000 acres between his two sons, Stephen IV, west of the Hudson River and William, east of the Hudson River. He admonished them to cover the \$400,000 accumulated back rent. Not wanting to pay it themselves they sent the sheriffs into the land to collect the back rent from the tenant farmers. In the Helderbergs the farmer's organized into an Anti-Rent Association and disguised themselves in calico robes and Indian masks. They assembled at every farm where the sheriff tried to collect, and demanded that the sheriff destroy the eviction notices or be tarred and feathered. In the song "*Landlord's Lament*" Van Rensselaer says:

"I used to get rich through the poor toiling tenants, And I spent all their earning in pleasures satanic, But now, I confess, I'm in a great panic, Because I can get no more rent!"

The Anti-Rent Association was made up of groups of tenant farmers who met in 1844 and 1845 on the Fourth of July in great celebration of resistance. At these gatherings songs were sung and speeches were made. The leader of the tenant farmers was a doctor, Smith Boughton, an able speaker and leader. Disguised as a "Calico Indian" he was called Big Thunder. He was arrested and put in the Hudson, NY jail in 1844. This song written by Mortimer Belden speaks of the horrible conditions in the jail.

"We are prisoners in jail, our cases are hard, For they look all around to keep on their guard, Our feet fast in irons chained down to the floor, They are pretty sheriffs, what can they do more In these hard times."

On the fourth of July, 1845 at an anti-land monopoly celebration held in New Salem, Albany County a handbill was circulated around the crowd. The following song, titled "*We Will Be Free*" was sung.

"Hail-patriots hail the sacred day! Our fathers broke the tyrant's sway. Let earth resound with notes of glee!, It is our nation's jubilee! Then shout brothers shout! Oh, shout brothers shout! Let sound the horn, upon the morn of Independence Day! Huzzah! Huzzah! We will be free from feudal rents and tyranny, Huzzah! Huzzah! We will be free from feudal rents and tyranny".

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