



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

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The Greenbush Anti-Rent War

How about a story containing history, violence, sensational legal trials and a mention of sex? Sound interesting? This is the story of William Witbeck and his fight to retain his land in Greenbush.

The farmers in this area leased their land from the Van Rensselaer family which had owned it since the 1600's. Families would pay yearly rent for the right to work the land. In the early 1800's Stephen VanRensselaer stopped collecting rents, but when he died, his will required payments of back rents.

His son tried collecting these rents, but meeting resistance he sold these collection rights to third parties, one of whom was Colonel Walter Church.

This is where Witbeck comes in. Church obtain a judgement which allowed County Deputy Sherriff Willard Griggs in 1869 to bring a posse to Witbeck's land to evict him.

A fight broke out and someone shot Griggs who later died. After several trials Witbeck and his sons were indicted and sent to jail. An interesting fact is that spouses were able to bring food and freely visit jailed prisoners. On one such visit, Mrs. Witbeck found her husband being visited by his very pregnant mistress. She soon divorced him.

Because of the notoriety of this affair, the final trial was moved to Saratoga County. Both sides had their "dream team" of attorneys but the final decision was not guilty.

Although the trial was over, Witbeck's legal problems continued. He sued to get his land back and argued that he had indeed payed the back rent and court costs. However the courts ruled that he was too late and Witbeck lost his farm.

What happened after that remains a mystery. Witbeck just disappeared. His wife and sons are buried in the North Greenbush Bloomingrove Cemetery and one wonders whether Mr. Witbeck's ghost haunts the place asking his wife to forgive him and demanding that the courts give back his farm.