



## NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

Jim Greenfield Town Historian 283-6384

Do you know that all the property in North Greenbush was once owned by one man-Stephen VanRensselaer, the Patroon of the Dutch West India Company?

The Van Rensselaer family were wealthy Amsterdam jewel merchants who were given a land grant in the 1600's for property on the east side of the Hudson River, opposite the Company's fur trading post of Fort Orange (now Albany). This territory was called Rensselaerwyck.

Attempts to populate this land didn't really begin until after the Revolutionary War. Families were enticed to settle here by what appeared to be attractive lease terms offered by Van Rensselaer. In order to get around a New York law abolishing feudalism, he termed his tenants' contracts "incomplete sales". Van Rensselaer "sold" property to farmers through "durable leases" whose terms often included 7 years free rent, and after that annual rents of a specified number of bushels of wheat, 4 fat fowls, and a day's service to the Patroon. The wheat and fowls were to be delivered to his Manor House in Watervliet every New Year's day.

Farmers flocked to this land. Many of our Town's early settlers took advantage of these lease terms and established large landholdings (some farms were over 200 acres). All went well until the 1820's when two things happened: the price of wheat dropped dramatically and the soil for growing wheat wore out (seen any large wheat fields in North Greenbush lately?). Farmers couldn't pay their rents. The "Good Patroon" let these rents slide for the most part. However in 1839, Stephen Van Rensselaer died, his estate had large debts and his will instructed his executors to collect the back rents. This is when trouble began.

Many of the tenants couldn't pay the back rents. When they looked at the terms of their leases they found they were stuck. Could they cash in on wood, mineral or water rights on their property? Nope-the lease reserved this for the landlord. Could they sell their property and use their profits to pay off back rents? Not really, the leases called for 1/4 of the sale price to go back to the Patroon.

All this led to the Anti-Rent conflicts from 1839 to 1865. The Van Rensselaer heirs sold their collection rights to Walter Church who used the County Sheriff and even State Militia to collect the rents. Violence ensued and a county deputy sheriff was killed in an altercation near the East Greenbush/North Greenbush border.

Interestingly the Courts always upheld this “feudal” land system. Eventually, Church and the tenants settled the debts, paying only a few cents on each dollar owed. If you have a title search for your land, look and see if Church or Van Rensselaer is mentioned. Some of these titles weren’t cleared until the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

So when we complain about paying our taxes, be glad we don’t have to stuff 4 fat fowls into our SUV and drive to Watervliet in the winter to make our payments.

Suggestions for stories are always welcome. Please call me at 283-6384.