

Was Schaghticoke Part of the Patroonship of Rensselaerswyck?

In my column-by-column history of the town, I'm about to enter the 19th century and the industrial revolution. In the last column, I discussed the construction of the Old Northern Turnpike- a good transportation network is essential to development of both industry and commercial agriculture. I just need to finish up the story of the distribution of the land of the town.

One of the unique historical aspects of Albany and Rensselaer Counties is their past as parts of the VanRensselaer patroonship. The Dutch West India Company made huge land grants to feudal lords, known as patroons, who were required to encourage settlement on their property in the new world. The settlers were their tenant farmers, subject to the governance of their lord. Rensselaerswyck, established in 1629, was the most successful of the patroonships. Covering most of current Albany and Rensselaer counties and part of Columbia and Greene counties, it survived for over 200 years. The tenant farmers had to pay yearly rent and service to the patroon. The system came apart after the Anti-Rent Wars from 1839-1845. Many people who write to me about their family history assume that Schaghticoke was part of the patroonship, but no.

Schaghticoke was settled in its own unique way among the towns in Rensselaer County. Some sections of town were part of different land grants, but one section, the Albany Corporation Lands or "Old Schaghticoke", was land owned by the city of Albany and originally rented in fifty acre parcels to tenants beginning in 1707. Over the years, these parcels were added to and rents were changed. The original rent was 37 ½ bushels of "good merchantable winter wheat" per year, due in January or February, plus two to four fowl. After about 1760, rents began to be paid at least partly in cash. I have spoken of this land before. It was around the area of the Knickerbocker Mansion.

Back when the City of Albany had its Tricentennial Parade in 1986, I had a float in the parade to commemorate Schaghticoke's connection with the city. I drove the town's old pick up truck with a couple of my children in colonial costume in the back, accompanied by land rent of the 18th century- some winter wheat, given by Mike Dellarocca, and a few chickens in a crude cage, given by Val and Pauline Kalbfliesh- they never would take them back!

By 1800, the city of Albany had rented all the farms it intended to. About 2,500 acres of its lands remained uninhabited. According to the minutes of the Common Council of the City of Albany in 1801, trespassers were constantly taking timber off the unrented land. In 1802 and 1807, the City sold the vacant land in parcels of about forty acres each. Most of it was sold to people who were already tenants of the City. They were almost all of Dutch heritage, families like the Knickerbockers, the Vieles, and the VanVeghtens. Throughout the years, there was a lot of buying and selling of leases on the original property, but almost all within the original families who had settled the area.

The records of the city of Albany are full of the problems they had collecting the rents. In war years, which were frequent in the 18th century, the city just didn't expect to be paid. In other years, the tenants complained of various hardships, from poor harvest, to damage to buildings, or death of the farmer. The city often cancelled portions of rent in response. At times the tenants paid the wheat but not the fowl. One of the most delinquent rent payers was the tenant with the greatest amount of land, John Knickerbocker. Sometimes tenants would be faithful rent payers for a while, then become delinquent. Unlike the tenants of Rensselaerswyck, the Schaghticoke tenants only owed rent, never service.

Though the city of Albany did receive financial benefit from the rents, by 1810 the Common Council decided it just wasn't worth the trouble. They voted to allow the Schaghticoke tenants to terminate their rents and own their land outright. John Knickerbocker, Jr. was the first tenant to take advantage of the new law. He paid \$2,056 in four annual installments for his property. Rent terminations continued through the century, with some tenants still paying rent until 1875 or later. Because Albany adopted this policy, it avoided the trouble that Rensselaerswyck had when its tenants rebelled beginning in 1839. The transition to land ownership, though long, was uneventful in Schaghticoke.

Bibliography: Kloppott, Beth, "History of the Town of Schaghticoke"
Bielinski, Stefan, "Rensselaerswyck", an online article