In 1799, They Said 'No' to Taxes

By Kerry Pechter *Wed, Apr 8, 2015*

In March 1799. not far from where I live today, an auctioneer named John Fries led a protest against the first direct tax on American homeowners. Alexander Hamilton wanted him hanged as an example of the consequences of defying the central government.

Tax season always reminds me of the Fries Rebellion of 1799, when, among the woods, hills, taverns, farms, fields and back roads near where I live, a group of German-speaking farmers resisted the first direct tax levied by the U.S. government and were nearly hanged for their trouble.

John Fries, the leader of the protest, was a 48-year-old auctioneer—a 'vendue crier' in 18th century parlance—who lived with his wife and six children in a tiny cottage, still standing, along the road that led from Philadelphia, the nation's capital, to Allentown, Pa., about 50 thinly settled miles to the north.

Fries (pronounced "freeze") was no traitor, as a grand jury would call him. A veteran of the Revolution, he rode with President Washington to help suppress an earlier tax revolt in Pennsylvania—the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794—and had voted for the Federalist Party in local elections.

But because Fries spoke both German and English, and was widely known and trusted, he found himself the de facto leader of a loose band of agitated, lightly-armed and at times inebriated immigrant landowners. They shared a common fear that the Adams administration's decision to tax their homes (to finance the "Quasi War" with France) was a step back to pre-1776 oppression and tyranny.

The Fries Rebellion, also called the "Hot-Water War," the "Milford Rebellion" (for the township where it started) and the "House-Tax War" is mostly forgotten today, even in the increasingly suburbanized region where it happened. But at the time, combatants on both sides believed that the nation's future hinged on its outcome.

Strong drink and stronger words

The Fries affair occurred over just a few days in the second week of March 1799, in east central Pennsylvania's Bucks, Lehigh and Northampton Counties. After local homesteaders thwarted tax assessors from measuring their log and stone residences, a U.S. marshal and

posse traveled from Philadelphia to arrest a handful of supposed ringleaders in Macungie, Pa.

The marshal, posse and prisoners had stopped at a tavern in Bethlehem, and were preparing to return to Philadelphia, when Fries and about 100 men on horses, variously armed with pistols, muskets and swords but mainly barrel staves and clubs, appeared and demanded the release of the prisoners on bail. When the marshal refused, Fries freed them anyway.

Within days, news of the event reached President John Adams and Secretary Hamilton, who decided to crush the armed insurrection, as the Federalist press described it. A small Federal army rode north, captured Fries after a brief chase (they followed his dog, Whisky, to his hiding place), and escorted him and others to Philadelphia to be tried for treason, a capital offense. Hamilton, in particular, intended him to hang, as a warning to anyone else who was tempted to defy the central government.

The most recent, the most thorough, and probably the most sympathetic account of this affair is Paul D. Newman's "Fries's Rebellion: The Enduring Struggle for the American Revolution" (University of Pennsylvania, 2004). In his retelling, the rebellion was characterized less by violence than by drunkenness and verbal threats, and some of those threats may sound funny to modern ears.

When the tax assessors first approached the houses in northern Bucks County, a homeowner threatened to "commit him to an old stable and there feed him on rotten corn." In a confrontation in nearby Quakertown, one of the local residents cried out to an assessor, "Damn you Roderick, we have got you now, you shall go to the liberty pole and dance

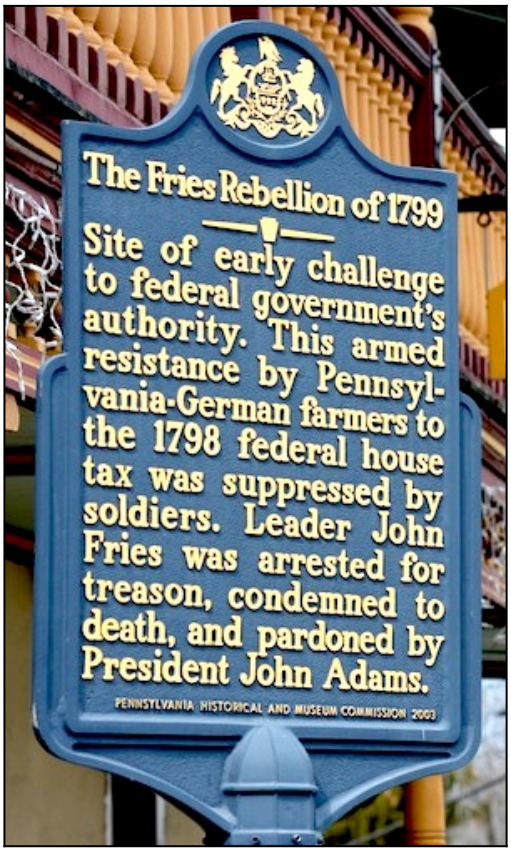
around it!” The government in Philadelphia was denounced as a parcel of “spitz-bube”—a local German epithet for thieves.

Vast amounts of alcohol were evidently consumed during the brief rebellion. It was natural for the protesters to meet at local taverns and public houses, and publicans uncorked quarts of whiskey and tapped barrels of beer for them and the crowds of onlookers they attracted. A few inebriated tax resisters tried to fire small weapons at the tax assessors, but according to Newman they were either too drunk to aim accurately or to load their weapons correctly. In short, nothing as organized or as serious as the earlier Shay’s Rebellion in western Massachusetts or the Whiskey Rebellion was under way.

Four taverns survive

Yet serious issues were at stake. The “house tax” that the Federalist administration attempted to assess was America’s first direct tax. The tax was small (a mere $1 on the smallest houses) and progressive, but it was the first tax assessed directly on people and their possessions, and not on transactions. It was also a tax that defined houses in an arbitrary new way: personal wealth rather than as a personal expense. The tax fell more severely on yeoman farmers, who had improved their land, than on land speculators, who were merely waiting for prices to rise. It reminded farmers of the British Stamp Act, which helped trigger the American Revolution.

And bitter feelings already existed between the Federalists in Philadelphia and the farmers to the north. There were class barriers, language barriers, and cultural barriers, as well as deeply held prejudices, between the wealthy, English-speaking urban Quaker assessors and the largely poor, recently immigrated German-speaking Lutheran and German Reform farmers, who knew each other as “kirchenleute.”



The political divide was just as deep. The farmers were mainly "republicans" (Jeffersonians) who had fought in the revolution 15 years earlier and valued personal liberty above all. The assessors, often Quaker pacifists who sat out the war, were Hamiltonians who favored a strong central government led by elites. The farmers, moreover, sympathized with the recent French revolution, and resented a tax that they knew would help finance a war against the French. The tax was also linked to the policy behind the repressive, anti-democratic Alien & Sedition Acts.

Fries was tried twice and convicted twice for treason (the first trial was declared a mistrial) and sentenced to hang. But Adams, who had known almost from the start that the so-called rebellion was nothing more than an overheated tax protest, pardoned him and sent him back to Bucks County, where he lived until his death in 1820. Fries' nemesis, Hamilton, would die in 1804 in his famous duel with Aaron Burr in Weehawken, NJ, near what is now the west entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel.

You can find several reminders of the Fries Rebellion in my area, if you know where to look for them. A section of Rt. 663 between Quakertown and Pottstown has been designated the John Fries Highway. Just outside McCoole's Red Lion Inn in Quakertown, a large historical plaque succinctly describes the rebellion. There's also a small marker on Allentown Rd. pointing out John Fries' cottage, which is in poor repair but still stands, visible from the road.

At least four of the taverns where the Fries protesters or tax assessors met, conspired and drank are still in active use. Besides the busy Red Lion Inn, there's the restored Sun Inn in Bethlehem (a tony restaurant that's currently between tenants). Also still in use are the Trum Tavern in Trumbauersville (formerly the Jacob Fries Tavern), where two of the tax assessors stopped for dinner, and the Commix Hotel (formerly Jacob Ritter's Tavern), where

the protesters watered their mounts en route from Macungie to Bethlehem.

The Trum Tavern and the Commix Hotels are lively, low-ceiling dive bars where locals go to smoke, drink Yuengling Lager, eat fried oysters and shoot pool. The two establishments are almost indistinguishable from dozens of other 18th and 19th century fieldstone taverns in this corner of Pennsylvania, where original surnames are still common and where, until the late 1980s, a few older people still spoke English with a “Dutch” (Deutsch) accent. After inhaling a pint of Yuengling (and a lot of secondhand smoke) at the Commix one recent evening, I stopped to read a historical plaque nailed to the wall outside. It said, “On This Spot in 1897, Nothing Happened.”