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### The Unique Foundation and Growth of Rensselaer County

Rensselaer County has one of the more unique foundations amongst the other counties in the Hudson River Valley. It did not become its own separate county until 1791 when it was split from Albany County. Rensselaer County was a patroonship that was established by Kiliaen van Rensselaer in 1630 through the Dutch West India Company. A feudal system was created in the area and the county was passed through the Rensselaer family line for more than two centuries. The people needed permission to leave the manor and they needed to trade with Manhattan before looking to trade with the east coast. These laws were mandated by the Dutch West India Company and enforced by the Rensselaer family patroon. Over time, the Rensselaer family patroon became among the richest families in American history. After Stephen van Rensselaer III came to power, best known for his kindness, the rent rates needed to be raised to compensate for his lack of deadlines on payments. This led to the Anti-Rent movement in the 1840's. The tenants highly opposed any raise in price and tried to use violence to oppose the tyrannical rule that was being bestowed upon them. However, when that did not work, they organized together and were able to elect people in the New York legislature that would help eliminate the feudal system that was hampering society. The tenants won and eventually owned their own land to do as they saw fit. Agriculture was not as important in this area because the land was not great for farming. This led to the economy relying on other types of industry such as textile and iron plants. Steam power became one of the primary sources used to operate heavy machinery in the area. In addition, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was created and became a highly regarded

institute for education and learning. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute was the oldest technology school in the United States and since its opening in 1824 has expanded and become one of the most respected institutes in the field of technology. Together, these three factors (patroonship, textile factories, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) contributed to the uniqueness of Rensselaer County's history.

Many of the immigrants who came to the New World were able to own the land they settled on. Also, there were cases of indentured servitude and slavery happening in the Americas at the time. However, one system of living that was not often discussed was the patroonship. Kiliaen van Rensselaer bought a large tract of land from the Dutch West India Company. He was known for being a savvy businessman as well as a wealthy diamond merchant who wanted to make money from the New World. He liked to speculate land and was successful in Holland.<sup>1</sup> His next major purchase of land was in the Hudson River Valley. He did not have a great amount of success and support in the beginning, but in time he had a plan that helped him succeed. He assigned immigrants to different positions and places to work when they came to the New World. This allowed the sparse population to be highly efficient on a large amount of empty land. Kiliaen van Rensselaer assigned Adriaen van der Donck as the leader of Rensselaerwyck and his role was to collect rent from the tenants and make sure that the population followed the law of the land.<sup>2</sup> The reason that this was needed was Kiliaen van Rensselaer never actually set foot in the New World and onto his patroonship. His relatives came over later on and were given direct control over the manor but at the beginning the patroonship was ruled from across the Atlantic Ocean. This setup was important in understanding the comparison of the Rensselaer

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Lewis *The Hudson: A History*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2007), 64

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 72

County to the other counties in the Hudson River Valley during the colonial period of the New World.

The Manor of Rensselaerwyck lasted two centuries for many reasons, the most important one being the social system that was set up by the men in power. The powerful men were appointed by Kiliaen van Rensselaer and held onto the position until their death. They could then pass down their position to their family members. The lower level positions that were locked in society, farmers and servants, were always oppressed by the upper classes of the manor. While the leaders of the patroonship helped the farmers by giving them supplies, they were not able to move up in society regardless of their contributions. The fact that the ruling class of the manor was not voted into power but received it through their bloodline was also significant to the time. This was when they were under colonial rule, not the United States. The manor later dissolved when it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and men across the country had the right to vote if they owned land. After Kiliaen van Rensselaer's death, the ruler always lived in the Hudson River Valley. This allowed them to be more hands on with situations that happened in the future, which had both positive and negative ramifications, especially when it came to the Anti-Rent movement that happened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Besides the fact that the people of Rensselaerwyck could not vote for their leaders, the people of the manor could not trade fur with whomever they pleased. Kiliaen van Rensselaer wanted all of the proceeds to go to him because he knew the fur trade was profitable. "As to Rensselaerwyck, the instruction of the patron to his employees made it very clear that to many of them the fur trade was explicitly off limits and that he considered agriculture much more important. Yet, van Rensselaer clearly regarded the fur

trade as an important source of income.”<sup>3</sup> Kiliaen van Rensselaer wanted to emphasize the point of class distinction between his tenants because he viewed them as a necessary way to get people to work on specific tasks in society and keep the wealth amongst the people in the top positions.

The manor lasted for roughly two centuries, with the van Rensselaer family always being the leader of the patroonship. When Stephen van Rensselaer III came to power, things changed, first was increasing the size of the manor. The Revolutionary War had put expansion on hold and but after it ended, he was able to expand the land and increase his wealth. The additional land acquired was gained through cutting down trees and welcoming more settlers in the area, dramatically improving his wealth and the manor overall. Many people were migrating towards the New York area and he wanted to capitalize this new growth and the new market.<sup>4</sup> He, in time, became the ninth wealthiest man in American history for his efforts on expanding the manor and increasing production of the farms within it. Stephen van Rensselaer III was extremely powerful financially, but was also seen as a man that was kind. Although he rarely sold land outright to people, he let the people who lived in Rensselaerwyck have more moderate lease rates than those who ruled before him. This made him well liked than the previous patroons heads and the people of the community worked more productively because they had more money to invest into the land and businesses around them. Stephen van Rensselaer III continued to make money but at this point in time, many people were criticizing the van Rensselaer family for their feudal structure.<sup>5</sup> Many of the manors in the Hudson River Valley had given their people the land or been lost because of their allegiance to the British crown but

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<sup>3</sup> Jaap Jacobs, “Dutch Proprietary Manors in America: the Patroonships in New Netherland,” in Louis H. Roper, Bertrand Van Ruymbeke, ed., *Constructing Early Modern Empires: Proprietary Ventures in the Atlantic World, 1500 – 1750*, (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2007), 317

<sup>4</sup> Charles W McCurdy, *The Anti-Rent Era in New York Law and Politics, 1839-1865*, (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press), 12

<sup>5</sup> E. B. O’Callaghan, “The Last Patroon,” [www.Newnetherlandinstitute.org](http://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org), <http://www.newnetherlandinstitute.org/history-and-heritage/more-historical-fun/dutch-treats/the-last-patroon/>

the van Rensselaer family continued to rule over everyone. While Stephen van Rensselaer III was known as the “Good Patroon,” the people of the Rensselaerwyck wanted to have their own land like many others in the area. With support from the Republican Party in New York, the people of the Rensselaerwyck Manor started the Anti-Rent movement in order to get their independence from their lifelong leases that were mandated for living on the manor.

The residents of the manor wanted their freedom during the patroonship of Stephen van Rensselaer III but momentum for the Anti-Rent Movement really picked up following his death in 1839. Primogeniture, the right to pass down the estate to the son, was abolished in 1784; two years after Stephen van Rensselaer III took over the manor.<sup>6</sup> He was allowed to keep ruling over the area though because he had gained the estate before the law was enacted. Afterwards though, his family members had problems trying to keep control over the area and oppressing the tenants that lived on the land. While there were some laws that were passed to help the tenants and limit the power of the patroon, the patroon still had a title that was very important in understanding how the court system worked at the time. The tenants were a part of the lower class of society and thus did not have titles. The patroons had titles, which gave them special privileges, one being the ownership of land. The tenants did not have a title and therefore could not suit the patroonship.<sup>7</sup> This was the first step that was tried by the people. They briefly tried violence and staged an attack similar to the Boston Tea Party (dressing up as Native Americans), but those were not successful in the end. Since that did not work, they had to find another way of fighting for their cause. They figured that the best way to do this was to vote people into the government and pass legislation. The two main issues that they used to fight the cause were feudalism and

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, website

<sup>7</sup> Edward Potts Cheyney, *The Anti-rent Agitation in the State of New York*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1887), 57

titles. The courts sided with the owners, saying that they could not reverse the fact that they had titles. This was perceived as the courts overstepping their boundaries by making this claim about the titles. Feudalism was outlawed, however, in 1782 and the tenants claimed that the patroon was ruling the manor in that fashion. The way that they got around this was by making a seven year lease become impossible to pay for at the end, thus attaching them to the land permanently through a contract. This bypassed the laws of feudalism and made the tenants the ones responsible for these actions.<sup>8</sup> They felt that this was an unfair way to conduct business and they wanted to end it. Many other manors in New York were being shut down and the tenants were gaining control over their land and because of this, the people of Rensselaerwyck started to push to get ownership of their land. A time went on and the tenants continued to push for ownership, legislation was finally passed to help the tenants. This happened because the Whigs and Democrats were constantly in conflict with each other and allowed the Anti-Rent party to rise. John Young eventually became the governor and help pass laws that favored the tenants. He pardoned some of the people who were arrested and eventually, the Rensselaer family sold their land and the patroonship that had ruled over the land for over two centuries had come to an end.

The Anti-Rent movement ended in the 1850's and the land was sold during this decade. Afterwards, the county moved in a new direction with the new found freedoms that the people of the area now had. The farmers could now have full control over their land and produce whatever products they pleased. This boosted the economy in the area. The Erie Canal brought more boats through the area and Troy was increasing in size and economically. Also, the Rensselaer and Saratoga train station stop was built in the county in 1835. This brought tourists from southern areas and eventually, additions were built to the train station that allowed it to go to

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy S. Cannon, "Voice of the People: Life in the Antebellum Rural Delaware County New York Area," *www.Oneonta.edu* <http://www.oneonta.edu/library/dailylife/protest/>

Vermont and Massachusetts. Also, as time went on, a few large companies came into the area and established very profitable businesses in the area. The first was Burden Iron Works. This business was able to make 60 horseshoes a minute, a record pace that was not matched by anyone in the country. They used the new railways to ship out parts across the country and were incredibly profitable. Burden Iron Works, due to the new capability of horseshoe making founded some of the reasons why railroads were able to start rapidly developing and being built in the Midwest. Along with this, Bayer Co. was established in Rensselaer County as well. German investors founded the company in the area and it was a major producer for aspirin. They also produced many other pharmaceutical products as well as completed successful business in the area. While there was a takeover of the company's day-to-day operations during WWI, this successful business employed many people and brought some of the most noteworthy chemical patents to the United States.

In addition to this industry, another important component to economic growth of the community was the dye industry. A plant was built in Rensselaer in 1882 in Greenbush. However, this factory's life was short, as it burnt to the ground three years later. A larger factory was built to replace this old one and this one did much better economically. It produced a wide variety of dyes and cornered the market for a brief period of time. However, following another fire in 1902, and the building of other dye plants around the country, they lost their strength on the market. This led to the Rensselaer plant expanding their ideas and dyes in order to attract new businesses. As the years went on, these progressions helped in efforts such as WWII and they were the first company to manufacture ultraviolet absorbers.<sup>9</sup> However, as time went on, the company started to lose money and competitors bought them out. The lasting effects of the

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<sup>9</sup> Leander Ricard, "A History of the Dye Producing Industry in Rensselaer, New York," *www.Colorantshistory.org*, <http://www.colorantshistory.org/RensselaerDyeIndustry.html>

Rensselaer plant are still ever present in the Hudson River Valley as well as many of the buildings still stand today.

Another great part about Rensselaer County was the education that was founded in the area. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute can be traced back to 1824 when Stephen van Rensselaer III ruled over the Rensselaerwyck Manor. The very beginnings of the college came about when Stephen III wanted to create an institute solely for the purpose of teaching and learning about science and technology. This would make Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute the oldest operating technical university in the United States. Stephen van Rensselaer III made Samuel Blatchford his first president of the college and put Amos Eaton on the board of trustees. Both men had great reputations in the field of education and right away students were drawn into the college. Later on, the college had to rebuild the campus due to the Great Fire that had gone through Troy, allowing Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to select a better location and put up more buildings. In 1850, Benjamin Franklin Greene, an alumnus of the college, was hired as the director and preceded to make it into a three-year university with six technical schools.<sup>10</sup> As time went on, the university gained more attention from across the country because of its stance on being a highly regarded technical university that solely concentrated on science and technology. In 1999, the president of the college installed the Rensselaer Plan, which geared a majority of the school's money toward research and other student related activities. This concept has made them one of the best technical schools in the nation and a highly respected university overall. The Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute is a great educational center that brings many people into Rensselaer County.

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<sup>10</sup> "Timeline of Rensselaer History," *www.Rpi.edu* <http://www.lib.rpi.edu/archives/timeline/1859.html>



Rensselaer County's beginnings were much different than many other counties in the Hudson River Valley. While there were other patroonships in the area, none lasted nearly as long as Rensselaer County did. The people of the area were constantly under the rule of the van Rensselaer family. For centuries, they made the lease deals with the tenants at rates that would not be attainable to fully pay out, which made them have to stay on the land in order to pay it off. This was a way around the feudal system that had been outlawed in New York in 1782. The van Rensselaer family became one of the richest in America. After some time, with new laws being passed, it was hard for the family to keep oppressing the tenants. In the 1840's and 1850's, these people rose up, starting the Anti-Rent movement and eventually were able to get their freedom from the patroon. While this was a big step forward for them, they were behind other counties because of the lack of diverse ventures that they had in the area. There were, however, some successful businesses that came into the area. Troy became the de facto center of commerce for the county and iron and dye factories ruled the economic scene. Railroads being built in the Midwest were in need of supplies and the most efficient factory was in Troy, allowing products to be sent out West from Troy to assist in the creation of these railroads. Pharmaceuticals and dye companies employed many of the residents of the area but these countries eventually were taken over by outside competition or move to a different area. The van Rensselaer family lost their patroonship in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but there was one last thing that they left behind and that was education. Stephen van Rensselaer III, the "Good Patroon", laid down a foundation for a university in the area. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute concentrated on science and technology and was the first one of its kind in America. It constantly grew and new schools and buildings were added in addition to faculty, staff and land to the campus. It is currently one of the best technical universities in the country and there is a long history that supports that

superiority. Every county has a unique beginning that sets them apart from others, but what makes the Rensselaer foundation was that fact that the patroonship was intact for more than two centuries and it controlled the way the tenants lived for a long period of time.

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