“No wonder the times were troublesome:”
The Origins of Fries Rebellion, 1783-1799
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In early 1799, a crowd of people from Bucks County in southeastern Pennsylvania assembled to await the arrival of the tax assessor, who had come to count the windows in local houses as a way of assessing a new federal tax. When the assessor approached their settlement, the crowd blocked his way. “We will have liberty!” the people shouted in German and broken English. The crowd then “dammed the house tax” and other federal revenue laws. They “dammed the Congress, and damned the President and all the friends to government because they were all Tories.” They stated that they were “determined to oppose the laws” because the government was “laying one thing after another and if we do not oppose it they will bring us into bondage and slavery.”

The purported leader of this growing insurgency, John Fries, agreed with his neighbors that the people must confront state and national officials. “If we let them go on,” Fries declared, “things would be as in France” where the people were “as poor as snakes.”

Similar scenes were repeated throughout the German-dominated counties of southeastern Pennsylvania. In Northampton County, one man cursed the leaders in the nation’s capital for creating hardship for ordinary people. “No wonder the times were troublesome,” he lamented, with all of the “dammed acts they made” in Philadelphia. He asserted that a group of men should be assembled from the county to “storm the town.” Another Northampton County man stated that he was “prepared for the opposition” to a government that promised to make them all “famished like the Irishmen.” This man offered to contribute seven swords he had at home to the “fight against the law.” Some of this man’s neighbors pledged that they would “rather die than submit” to these new taxes, stating that “they had fought against such laws” in the Revolution and they would fight again. These same sentiments were expressed by the inhabitants of nearby Berks County, where crowds declared that if any assessor or federal army came to enforce this tax law, “they should be shot like flies because [Berks County] had ten men against the law to one who is in favor of it.”

Such feelings ran so strong in southeastern Pennsylvania that even some members of the clergy shared them. One minister named Jacob Eyerman urged his parishioners “not to suffer the direct tax law to be put into execution that it was too hard.” He preached that “Congress and the government only made such laws to rob the people, and that they were nothing but a parcel of damned rogues.” He warned his congregation that if they allowed the law to be imple-
mented, the people of Pennsylvania "would be as bad off as they were in Eu-
rope." Eyerman then clutched his minister's robe and swore that, before he 
saw his parishioners submit to this law, he would hang his "black coat on a
nail and fight the whole week and preach for them Sundays."  

For nearly two centuries, historians have generally dismissed these strong
statements as the ranting of a deluded people. Generations of scholars have 
asserted that the German inhabitants of southeastern Pennsylvania were a pros-
perous people who had little cause to complain about their material circum-
stances, especially in such emphatic terms. These historians insist that, far 
from creating economic distress for the population, government policies had 
been quite beneficial to the inhabitants of southeastern Pennsylvania. The 
problem, according to these historians, was that Pennsylvania Germans were 
so isolated in their ethnic neighborhoods that they remained unable to under-
stand the good intentions of their English-speaking government. Many writ-
ers have even concluded that these Germans were simply too ignorant and 
iliterate to perceive reality correctly. Such assumptions have led many histori-
ans to conclude that the popular grievances raised by the people of southeast-
ern Pennsylvania were little more than paranoid fantasy.

Recently, a new generation of historians has attempted to rescue the 
people of southeastern Pennsylvania from such condescension. These scholars 
have taken popular grievances more seriously and attempted to understand 
them within the broader context of the republican ideology of the American 
Revolution. The result is an important new interpretation that views the in-
surgents of 1799, not as ignorant and paranoid, but as people acting in a 
manner consistent with the Revolutionary struggle of the 1760s and 1770s. 
In particular, these historians see the people of southeastern Pennsylvania de-
fending the notion that property ownership was central to protecting the health 
of the democratic republic. These scholars argue that the people of Pennsylva-
nia believed that property ownership made citizens economically indepen-
dent and, therefore, free to vote as they pleased. Hence, a broad distribution 
of property was seen as a way of preventing democracy from being corrupted 
by dependents whose votes were influenced by those to whom they were fi-
nancially beholden. These historians assert that, in 1799, many people in south-
eastern Pennsylvania saw the new federal taxes as a threat to the idea of an 
independent citizenry. Taxes like the one on windows in houses struck at the 
most intimate forms of private property. As one scholar asserts, the window 
tax, by putting a levy on peoples' homes, seemed to German Pennsylvanians 
to "tax liberty itself." Thus to these scholars, Fries Rebellion was an effort of 
southeastern Pennsylvanians to defend themselves against what they believed 
to be an unconstitutional assault on the Revolutionary heritage.

Yet, while this new work represents an important corrective, in some 
fundamental ways, it bears a striking similarity to the earlier interpretations.
In particular, the new interpretation upholds the assumption that southeastern Pennsylvanians were a prosperous people who faced no actual material hardship from government policies. For these scholars, the threat in question is almost exclusively one of principles and constitutional rights. They argue that people in 1799 were concerned about a threat to the concept of property rights, not the actual loss of property. They offer no evidence and give no suggestion that government policies induced economic hardship for the people in southeastern Pennsylvania in the present or in the immediate past. To these scholars, popular insurgency—whether it took place in the 1760s and 1770s or the 1780s and 1790s—was purely about the right of the government to impose taxation, not its economic impact on ordinary citizens. Thus these scholars can conclude that, "as in 1765, it was not the 'burden' of taxation that the German Americans protested in 1798, but the constitutionality of the levy."6

This new interpretation raises a question: if the people of southeastern Pennsylvania were merely concerned about the constitutionality of taxes, what are we to make of popular assertions that government policies had induced, and were continuing to create, economic distress? Unaccompanied by evidence of government-imposed material hardship, the words and actions of German Pennsylvanians still leave them appearing prone to paranoia. Statements that the government was trying to "rob the people" and leave them "as bad off as they were in Europe" or "famished like the Irishmen" or "as poor as snakes" seem, at best, extreme exaggerations. When these same German Pennsylvanians promise to back their words by retrieving old swords from storage, exchanging a minister's robe for battle garb, and shooting federal soldiers "like flies"—outside the context of any actual (current or past) threat to their economic wellbeing—it can only appear as provincial hysteria.

However, if we place this popular resistance within a broader economic context, the words and actions of these Pennsylvanians begin to appear more rational than they do paranoid. Replacing assumptions about enduring economic prosperity during the 1780s and 1790s with analysis of the actual experience of the people of southeastern Pennsylvania makes it clear that the fears they articulated were very real.

Contrary to the assumptions made by many modern historians, southeastern Pennsylvanians did not enjoy uninterrupted prosperity during the post-war decades. Indeed, during this period, they often faced severe economic distress. Moreover, these hard times were produced (much as German Pennsylvanians alleged they were) by the fiscal and monetary policies of state and federal leaders. Pennsylvania's elite, in an effort to create financial policies that were beneficial to large-scale creditors, withdrew from circulation the paper currencies that ordinary people used to repay their debts. At the same time, this elite saddled the population with heavy taxes primarily designed to re-
ward speculators in the Revolutionary war debt. The end result for the people of Pennsylvania was often the forced sale of their lands and possessions at county sheriffs' auctions. It was this context of long-term economic hardship that gave meaning to the words and actions of the insurgency in southeastern Pennsylvania. These German Pennsylvanians were responding—not merely to abstract concepts—but to tangible threats to their liberty and independence.

It is important to note at the outset that this new context changes how the so-called Fries Rebellion is understood by significantly raising the stakes involved in the confrontation. Seen in this way, the insurgency becomes more than an uprising of provincial paranoids or even a conflict over a constitutional issue. In a larger sense, it emerges as a popular challenge to a system of government that routinely favored the interests of the elite at the expense of ordinary citizens. The people of southeastern Pennsylvania took action because their lands and possessions had been foreclosed—and thus their independence diminished—to provide a financial windfall for affluent citizens. They perceived themselves as having made profound sacrifices, not for the common good, but to satisfy the venal desires of the wealthy. They were angered by taxes because they believed the money the government collected was being paid to wealthy speculators. They were distressed by government land laws for precisely the same reason. They saw the government depriving ordinary settlers of title to their property so that land speculators could acquire vast holdings on which they paid only a nominal tax, or no tax at all. It was the belief that political leaders had acted in such unconstitutional and unethical ways that produced nearly two decades of protests in southeastern Pennsylvania which culminated in the traumatic events of 1799. Let us turn, then, to the closing years of the Revolutionary War so that we can begin retracing the path that brought the people of southeastern Pennsylvania to this showdown with federal authorities.

At the end of the Revolutionary War, the people of southeastern Pennsylvania, like citizens in the rest of the state, found themselves in a dire situation produced in large part by the financial policies of the state and national government. Perhaps the greatest problem was that, as the war drew to a close, political leaders in Pennsylvania began withdrawing paper money from circulation. The policy was strongly advocated by state elites who had become wary of paper money after its swift depreciation at the end of the Revolutionary War. Moreover, elites advocated such a contraction of the currency because they stood to benefit financially from a smaller circulation of paper money. Since these men were the primary creditors in the state, greatly reducing the supply of available currency provided them with a better return on the money they loaned within Pennsylvania. At the same time, a limited supply of money made it easier for these men (many of whom were merchants) to repay over-
seas debts. Thus withdrawing paper currency from circulation allowed elites
to earn more when they loaned to Americans and to pay less when they bor-
rowed from European sources.

These profits, however, came at high price. In Pennsylvania, govern-
ment-issued paper currency had sustained the economy for nearly a century,
accounting for an estimated three-quarters of the entire money supply. In
places beyond Philadelphia, this paper currency was often the only form of
money to which most people had access. Thus reducing the amount of paper
currency in circulation drained Pennsylvania's economy of its lifeblood. The
results were catastrophic. As Pennsylvania elites removed paper currency from
circulation, interest rates (typically no more than 6 percent per year) soared
during the mid-1780s to as high as 5 to 12 per cent per month! Needless to
say, while these conditions meant sizable profits for creditors, they exacted an
enormous toll on the majority of the population, especially the ordinary farm-
ers and artisans who had to borrow to make a living. Unable to acquire the
funds necessary to pay their outstanding debts, southeastern Pennsylvanians
found themselves in a financial bind.

Pennsylvania leaders made things even more difficult for ordinary citi-
zens by their efforts to fund the war debt. During the 1780s, most of what was
considered the debt from the Revolutionary War consisted of various IOUs
that the government had issued to farmers, soldiers, and merchants during the
war. From the moment Congress issued these certificates, they were never
worth more than a fraction of their face value. Even before the end of the war,
the scraps of paper that would form the war debt rapidly accumulated in the
hands of wealthy individuals who purchased them from farmers or soldiers for
pennies on the dollar. As a result, the vast majority of this paper came to be
held by a small but influential segment of the population. Indeed, by 1790,
over 96 percent of Pennsylvania's $4.8 million in war debt certificates was in
the hands of just 434 people. The top twenty-eight investors (nearly all of
whom were Philadelphia merchants, lawyers, and brokers) owned over 40
percent of the entire Pennsylvania war debt. Despite the fact that these cer-
tificates had never been worth close to the values printed on them—even at
the time they were issued—the wealthy men who held this paper wanted it
redeemed at its full face value. These men also demanded a yearly interest
payment of 6 percent on the full value of the certificates. This meant, for
example, that a speculator who had purchased a $100 face-value war bond
probably for between $10 and $17, and perhaps for as little as $4, wanted a
yearly interest payment of $6 and, in time, the entire $100 principal. And
what must have been bitter irony for many citizens, the money to pay this
windfall would come from taxes levied on the very soldiers, farmers, and arti-
sans who had originally received these near-worthless certificates as compensa-
sion for their war efforts.
It was these twin pressures—a dwindling supply of money combined with new taxes to pay the war debt—that created hardship for the people of Pennsylvania. Citizens without access to money were called upon to pay debts, mortgages, and now the new taxes to pay the war debt. Despite their best efforts, many people remained unable to acquire enough paper money or specie to pay their outstanding obligations. As a result, Pennsylvanians—by the thousands—endured visits from the county sheriff who came to their homes to confiscate goods or to auction their land. It is impossible to determine the actual number of people who faced foreclosure in the counties that comprised "Fries Rebellion" (Bucks, Berks, Montgomery, and Northampton) due to the decay and disappearance of relevant court records. Nevertheless, evidence from neighboring counties, while often extremely fragmentary, provides a hint of the distress experienced by southeastern Pennsylvanians. In nearby York County in 1783, the sheriff carried out at least 560 orders to foreclose families. By 1786, the number of foreclosures in York County had risen to 750, a figure representing 12 percent of the taxable population. In 1784, the sheriff of Lancaster County delivered 760 notices of foreclosure. In 1788, he delivered another 750. In that same year in Northumberland County, the sheriff processed 540 orders, or enough to foreclose approximately 25 percent of the county's taxpayers. In the backcountry county of Westmoreland, between the years 1782 and 1792, the county sheriff served a remarkable 6,100 separate orders to foreclose goods and land. By matching the names on these notices to individual taxpayers, it becomes evident that more than 43 percent of the families in Westmoreland County experienced the foreclosure of their possessions or land.12

Seen in this context, fears about being driven into poverty were hardly the result of mere paranoia. The threat to property and, consequently, to popular ideas about liberty was very real.

This widespread distress caused the people of southeastern Pennsylvania, like citizens everywhere in Pennsylvania, to challenge openly state policies that favored the interests of elites at the expense of ordinary citizens. Accordingly, during the 1780s and 1790s, Pennsylvanians organized themselves to oppose government policies through a wide array of strategies designed to protect property and independence. Over time, whole neighborhoods and even entire county governments united in collective efforts to frustrate elite policies. These protests all sent the same unmistakable message: if government policies were going to favor the elite and hurt the public, then people in southeastern Pennsylvania were going to do whatever they could to stop the perceived injustice.

The most frequent and effective way that communities in southeastern Pennsylvania protected themselves was closing-down sheriffs' auctions by enacting "no bid covenants."13 When a county sheriff auctioned foreclosed prop-
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Property, groups of people often surrounded the auction site and refused to bid. If someone tendered a bid, the assembled crowd typically chased the offender from the auction. In Berks County—where at least seventy-seven men from Bethel Township signed into writing their pledge to “bind and engage themselves together as one man” to stop foreclosure—a person violated the covenant simply by remaining home when the sheriff’s auction began. These men agreed that if anyone failed to turn out when another citizen needed assistance, this man would “have his goods seized without fail” and, from that moment on, he would be “deemed an Enemy to the Liberties of this Country.” This kind of organization in the service of local standards of morality ensured that the covenant in Berks County remained remarkably successful at halting the confiscation of property. One Berks County officer reported in 1786 that he had continually confiscated property from those who had not paid their taxes and “Exposed it to Public Sale according to Law, but no Buyers appear so that I could not get one single Shilling that way.”

This was the intention of the covenants: property that went unsold simply remained in the hands of its owner.

Such no-bid covenants were not limited to Berks County; they emerged in nearly every county in the state. In southeastern Pennsylvania, the Commissioner of Taxes for Bucks County complained that, while the sheriff and tax collectors held auctions, “they cannot sell.” He observed that no one would bid on auctioned property “especially where the Goods belong to the Persons who used to pay freely when they could.” “It is in vain to expose the Goods of Inhabitants for Sale, for there are none to be purchasers,” agreed tax commissioners in neighboring Northampton County, who were undoubtedly referring to the combined effect of no bid covenants and a moneyless economy. Indeed, the practice of stopping auctions was so widespread during the 1780s that Pennsylvania’s Comptroller General was forced to report to the General Assembly in 1786 and again in 1788 that people had successfully organized themselves to stop sheriffs’ auctions all throughout the state.

As these covenants evolved, they often expanded to include officers at every level of county government. Across southeastern Pennsylvania, local tax collectors, judges, and constables refused to perform duties that led to the foreclosure of their neighbors. For example, in Northampton County during 1786 and 1787, few county officers seemed willing to do their jobs. The county treasurer said his problems began with the tax collectors serving under him who stalled their efforts to wrest money from the population. From his perspective, however, this was not the worst of it: “I have observed generally the collectors, slow as they are, make more progress in the collection than is done between the Justices and the Constables.” He observed that “each of these officers seek in the first place to Indulge their neighbors” by refusing to process foreclosure orders. Another Northampton county tax official named
Robert Levers witnessed the same leniency from county officers who would not enforce the law due to "the great scarcity of money in the County." Although Levers demanded that the collectors who worked for him settle their accounts, these men continued to approach their work "indifferently." When he pestered the county sheriff to prosecute these collectors, the debtor-friendly sheriff told him that "from the scarcity of money among the people he cannot do anything for me." Levers wrote and rewrote orders to county justices and attorneys demanding that they take action against those who owed the state money, "but no prosecutions took place." Levers even scoured the county to find witnesses to give depositions against those who had failed to pay their taxes, but came home empty-handed every time. "Few like to be deemed informers," he penned state leaders in frustration. Still feeling he had a strong case, Levers brought delinquent taxpayers to trial anyway. But here too his efforts were thwarted, this time by grand jury members who refused to issue indictments against those who could not pay their taxes.

Though dependent upon collecting taxes to make their living, many county revenue officials joined the covenants themselves by indulging their neighbors with leniency. Tax commissioners in Northampton County implored state leaders to give the public time, noting that "Money has not yet began to circulate at this distance from the Capital." They insisted that in this moneyless economy, "it is Inability alone, & not a backwardness of Disposition that has prevented the payment of all we are in arrears." Likewise, Bucks County tax commissioners informed state leaders that their constituents suffered under an "absolute scarcity of Money." These men proclaimed that, under the conditions created by government policies, it was both "hard and impolitic to execute the Rigours of the Law upon the Collectors" who were hamstrung by government policies that denied taxpayers access to money.

Other county officers acted (or failed to act) out of fear. "I would not wish to incur blame," explained the treasurer of Northampton County in 1787, "either by being charged with neglect of duty on one side or by strictly proceeding according to Law." This officer worried that if he performed his job as directed, it "will be the Beginning of Troubles, for many People have not the money & if their Effects are sold it might drive them to desperate measures." The county treasurer knew that he had reason to be concerned about retribution from the citizens of Northampton County. After all, two years earlier a group of men had beaten fellow official Robert Levers for too diligently collecting taxes. In 1785, a group of men had broken down the door of Levers' home, threatened and assaulted him. His attackers, who included men described as "yeomen" as well as three neighbors who carried the title of "gentleman," made it clear that further efficiency in revenue collection would not be appreciated—a message that the Northampton County treasurer heard and understood.
Fear of retribution from many the community ultimately caused county revenue officials to quit their positions; fear also made it difficult to fill the vacancies. The Commissioners of Bucks County explained that the unworkable nature of the job made “Men think an Appointment of this kind hard.” These officials observed that revenue officers could not collect money easily due to the “Poverty of the People.” If they failed to collect, then state officials promised to sue them for the “Loss of any public Money” on their ledgers. If they decided to push collection to the point of inducing foreclosure, then they were “liable to be carried off or destroyed by the Hand of Violence.” Accepting a position thus “exposes their Persons and Properties to certain Danger, against which they have it not in their Power to guard.” The commissioners concluded that such “obvious Considerations” had induced many collectors to “choose a Fine” for refusing the appointment rather than accepting a job they could not complete.21

Robert Levers of Northampton County—the tax official who had been frustrated by collectors, constables, judges, and grand juries as well as beaten by his neighbors—took things one step further. When Levers could not collect taxes in the face of mass opposition from his community, state officials sued him to recover the deficits on his ledger. Knowing that this lawsuit would throw his wife and their six children into “a state of wretchedness,” Levers devised a plan to save his home and possessions. He quickly transferred to his children legal title to all his property. Thus, when state officials foreclosed him, they found a man who owned nothing. In the spirit of the community covenant protecting Northampton County, Levers’ actions left his property, now legally in the possession of his children, beyond the reach of state officials.22

Even when county revenue officers overcame their fear of retribution, communities throughout southeastern Pennsylvania found other ways to keep their covenants intact. One of the most successful of these strategies was closing roads to prevent the wagon of the county sheriff or an outside bidder from hauling away foreclosed tools, furniture, or livestock. In Bucks County in 1786, people cut trees across several roads and in others they piled wooden planks, timber, and iron. In 1788 and 1789, Berks County citizens dug ditches in the road large enough to halt any wagon or coach. The inhabitants of Berks County also cut trenches between roads and nearby waterways to cause impassable floods in the highway. People in Northampton County flooded their own roads in 1793—two years after they had built large fences across the highway. Once closed, many of these roads stayed blocked for many months because the officers responsible for clearing the highways refused to clear them. In their efforts to extend the no-bid covenants and keep foreclosed property in the possession of its owner, these people jeopardized their own lines of communication and transportation. To save their property, many southeastern
Pennsylvanians were willing to close the very roadways they used to get their goods to market and obtain needed supplies.  

The people of southeastern Pennsylvania also kept neighborhood covenants intact when the authority for paying the war debt passed to the Federal government. They simply shifted the focus to the new federal excise tax on distilled spirits that Alexander Hamilton had devised to pay a portion of the yearly interest to those who had speculated in war bonds. Although the protests against the federal excise tax did not compare to the organized resistance in Pennsylvania’s western counties (site of the “Whiskey Rebellion”), people in southeastern Pennsylvania were hardly silent on the matter. In 1792, Bucks County crowds used force to compel at least one federal excise collector to refrain from his duties. In the neighboring county of Northampton, similar opposition managed to cause considerable “delays and impediments” in the collection of excise taxes. In 1794, when the federal government ordered the militia of Northampton County to quell resistance in the western counties, several militia officers refused to march and, instead, condemned the United States and its use of force against its own citizens. In several towns in southeastern Pennsylvania, citizens gave a cold reception to the federal army passing through on its way to subdue the western counties. A captain from New Jersey explained that in Norristown in Montgomery County “we found many people very much in favor of the rioters” in the western part of the state. He reported that the inhabitants in the town of Reading in Berks County were also “full of prejudice against our happy government, and very unfriendly to our cause.” In both cases he dismissed this anti-government sentiment in the same terms adopted by subsequent generations of historians—as the ranting of the “most ignorant and uninformed part of society.” Filled with ethnic, and indeed racial, prejudice against Germans, the captain later expressed delight when he and his men finally left southeastern Pennsylvania and had “again got among white folks, or Christians.”

It is important to pause here and note that popular opposition in the decade before Fries Rebellion was not simply confined to protecting property by resisting tax collection. Indeed, during the 1780s and 1790s, many southeastern Pennsylvanians considered tax resistance as but part of a larger effort to keep wealthy individuals from using government for their own benefit. Certainly, these people were upset about tax policies, but they were also concerned about the way government issued money, provided credit, granted charters, and administered land policy. In each of these areas, ordinary Pennsylvanians saw the government supporting the private interests of the elite at the expense of the public at large.

To understand this broader critique, it is useful to revisit the 1780s and 1790s and briefly retrace the steps we have just taken, this time tracking a different area of popular dissatisfaction with government: the administration
of state land policy. This focus on land policy in the decade preceding Fries Rebellion deepens an understanding of the resistance in Pennsylvania by demonstrating the expansive idea of the “public good” held by people throughout southeastern Pennsylvania. It provides clear evidence that, contrary to the way previous generations of historians have portrayed them, these people were not provincial in their outlook; they were not merely concerned about policies that damaged their own families or communities. To the contrary, the ways that these Pennsylvanians responded to land issues revealed that their conception of the “public good” expanded well beyond localized concerns. These people considered state land policies dangerous whenever they benefited wealthy land speculators at the expense of ordinary settlers, regardless of where the settlers lived. Indeed, during the 1780s, the citizens of southeastern Pennsylvania grew worried, and occasionally engaged in resistance, even when they perceived elite policies to be threatening people well outside of their own particular neighborhood covenants.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this broad idea of public good was the resistance by militia units in southeastern Pennsylvania when state leaders ordered them to march against settlers in Pennsylvania’s Wyoming valley in the mid-1780s. At its core, the situation in the Wyoming valley was a dispute between competing land speculation companies. Since the late 1760s, both Connecticut and Pennsylvania claimed the Wyoming territory as their own, each colony selling the rights to the land to different groups of speculators. For Pennsylvania the list of people who acquired title to speculative lands read as a who’s who of wealthy and influential families from Philadelphia. The list included among its largest holders: merchant/banker/political leader Robert Morris, State Comptroller General John Nicholson, banker/jurist James Wilson, and Philadelphia merchants William Bingham and Henry Drinker. Indeed, Philadelphians were so heavily invested in the Wyoming territory that these land speculations became known as the “Philadelphia Fever.” Having made enormous financial outlays covering hundreds of thousands of acres, these men stood to gain or lose considerable amounts of money depending upon whether Pennsylvania secured or lost title to the disputed lands.

When this territorial controversy became heated in the 1780s, the settlers who actually lived on the land (mostly the so-called “Connecticut claimants”) found themselves caught in the middle. Since settlers had purchased their land titles from the Connecticut-based Susquehanna Company, Pennsylvania state officials wanted them removed. The Connecticut claimants naturally were determined to keep the land. When surveyors working for Pennsylvania land speculators began marking off “Pennsylvania” territory in ways that encroached on their farms, the Connecticut claimants drove these men away. When gangs of men hired by Pennsylvania speculators arrived to protect the surveyors as they marked off the land, violence erupted. To quell these distur-
bances, in the summer of 1784 and the spring of 1785, Pennsylvania state officials ordered militia units from the neighboring counties to march into the Wyoming valley and subdue the Connecticut claimants.\(^3\)

In southeastern Pennsylvania, many militia units met the orders with adamant refusals. Their stated reasons were clear. Pennsylvania militiamen objected to risking their lives on a public mission that they felt served only the private interests of land speculators. For example, in August of 1784, when the state commander assigned with the task of coordinating the Wyoming attack arrived in Northampton County, he discovered that few soldiers were willing to fight. "Upon our arrival at Easton," he reported, "we found neither the temper nor preparation of the militia such as we had expected to find them." Instead, at each militia muster, "we everywhere met the same following objections: "that it was the quarrel of a set of landjobbers—that the whole County was not worth the life of a single man, or the labor of the many who were now called out to quiet it—and that they were drawn forth not merely to support the Laws but to extirpate the whole race of Connecticut claimants."

When he ordered Northampton County militia captains to call their units together, "not more than one third of the number appeared at the place of Rendezvous & among these but very few declared themselves to be perfectly willing to go farther."\(^3\)

The same fate met efforts to organize an expeditionary force in Bucks County in the spring of 1785. Here militiamen concurred with their Northampton County neighbors by stating in a petition that it was their "understanding that the Occasion of those Orders arose from a dispute about private property." These men indicated that they were "Sensibly touched with abhorrence of the Idea of Staining their hands with the blood of their Countrymen & fellow Subjects, on such an occasion." In the event that state leaders missed the reference to "subjects" and its implicit challenge that the elite was using government in aristocratic ways, militiamen declared that they felt bound only to follow the democratic Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776. Since they believed the orders from state leaders were not "Consistent with the Idea we have of Justice & the Principles of Our Constitution," these men "determined unanimously not to submit to those Orders." Furthermore, the militiamen were explicit that they would refuse to follow any subsequent orders from state leaders that "we apprehend to be inconsistent with the Very Spirit of our Laws & [state] Constitution."\(^3\)

So strong was their belief that an attack on the Connecticut claimants was unjust, that the Bucks County militiamen declared their willingness to confront state authorities if they pushed the matter. In a petition, the militiamen stated that they would not pay any fines that the state imposed on them for refusing to march against the settlers from Connecticut. And they promised that, if the state leaders attempted to fine them, these politicians would
“Endanger the Peace & well being of this part of the State.” In a thinly-veiled reference to armed resistance against the state, they warned that attempts to enforce the fines would “perhaps be attended with very serious Consequences which we Sincerely wish may be avoided.” If pushed far enough, these men were willing to fight state authorities rather than march for the private gain of the wealthy.33

The way state authorities handled matters involving land in the decade after these incidents only deepened the belief that government leaders worked for the interests of speculators over ordinary citizens—a conviction that ultimately found expression in Fries Rebellion. During the early 1790s, in particular, southeastern Pennsylvanians witnessed a government that favored elite land speculators in virtually every legal or financial decision it made. Perhaps the greatest aid to the elite came with the judicial reforms that followed the ratification of the new state Constitution of 1790. The changes established a more friendly legal environment for land speculation by placing the interpretation of land laws in the hands of commercially-oriented state supreme court justices, many of whom were land speculators themselves. These judges routinely produced legal interpretations that favored the interests of land companies over settlers in gaining title to Pennsylvania lands. Indeed, in some cases, state supreme court justices rewarded speculators by openly thwarting legislation designed to assist settlers in gaining title to backcountry lands.

In the most infamous of these decisions, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court nullified a 1792 law designed to make it more difficult for speculators to acquire large tracts. On its face, the law appeared to be a dramatic victory for small landholders: it limited each land purchaser to four-hundred acres and required buyers to provide evidence of physical settlement before the state land office issued a title for the property. Despite the apparent clarity of the law, however, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court permitted speculators to acquire vast tracts of land under a series of loopholes. One of these decisions held that the four-hundred acre cap applied only to ordinary settlers who occupied the land “by means of labor.” Speculators who tendered money as a down payment were free to purchase “any quantity whatever.” The court also allowed speculators to violate the residency provisions of the statute by giving a broad interpretation of a clause in the law that provided extra time to families who had been driven from their homes by Indian attacks. Under the court’s interpretation, every speculator qualified as a victim of Indian attack whether or not they had ever set foot on the property in question.34

The pro-speculator policies of the state land office reinforced the impressions that ordinary citizens drew from the rulings of Pennsylvania’s high bench. The state land office, itself filled with speculators, continually allowed those purchasing large tracts of land to acquire property without having to comply with the financial rules that governed the lives of the average land-
holder. Rather than requiring full payment for real estate in a timely fashion, Pennsylvania land officials allowed speculators to claim and hold the rights to millions of acres merely by placing a small down payment on these tracts. The degree of financial latitude the office provided to speculators was often remarkable. By 1794, Pennsylvania land speculators had acquired approximately ten million acres of land. Of this total, they had paid for only 720,000 acres, or scarcely 7 percent. Speculators had failed to meet payment requirements on 93 percent of the Pennsylvania lands they held.35

Leniency also characterized the efforts of Pennsylvania leaders to collect taxes on these speculative holdings. At a time when the Pennsylvania General Assembly was foreclosing ordinary taxpayers across the state because they could not pay their taxes, it offered clemency to land speculators. In 1786, state assemblymen passed a law to relieve the “inconveniences” facing land speculators by prohibiting county officials from selling any large unsettled tracts on which taxes had not been paid. Each successive time that the law was scheduled to expire, the General Assembly promptly voted to extend the ban on sheriffs’ auctions of these speculative tracts, despite the fact that little if any of the back taxes had been paid. On March 24, 1791—just twenty days after Congress passed Alexander Hamilton’s excise tax to fund the war debt certificates—the Pennsylvania Assembly gave delinquent land speculators their sixth consecutive extension for nonpayment of taxes.36 As late as 1793, county officials (mostly from Pennsylvania’s western counties where the lands were located) continued to write heated letters to state leaders wondering why land speculators were being given such a reprieve. Some county officers were so aghast at the special favor the state assembly displayed for land speculators that they refused to settle the accounts of ordinary taxpayers until political leaders compelled elite speculators to pay all their back taxes.37

Thus by 1799, the administration of state land policy strengthened the belief of many southeastern Pennsylvanians that their government acted to benefit the wealthy at the expense of the public at large. Whether these people received orders to march against their fellow citizens, had trouble securing title land they occupied, or witnessed land speculators receiving tax relief while they searched for money to pay the collector, the people who acted in the so-called “Fries Rebellion” had catalog of bad experiences with land policy to fuel their opposition.

Indeed, these developments taken together with the decade-long struggle to avoid foreclosure by the county sheriff had convinced people in southeastern Pennsylvania—long before 1799—that their government had betrayed them. From the vantage point of the average Pennsylvania, the evidence was hard to ignore: the shortage of paper currency, heavy state taxes to pay speculators in the war debt, the federal excise tax designed for the same purpose, and the blatant favoritism shown to land speculators by state supreme court
judges, land office officials, and political leaders. All these factors combined to make southeastern Pennsylvania seem to be a very different kind of society from the one these people had fought a revolution to secure.

Indeed, rather than living in a land of independence (where increasing numbers of citizens achieved economic autonomy), southeastern Pennsylvanians found themselves surrounded by the specter of dependency. During the postwar decades, wealth had accumulated at the top of society and fallen among the lower 80 percent of the population. The drop in wealth among ordinary citizens had been sufficient to create conditions where, by 1799, approximately 54 percent of southeastern Pennsylvanians did not even own land. With a majority of the population falling into the category of dependents, the ubiquity of tenant farmers and landless workers assaulted popular beliefs about how a free society should be structured (with land ownership becoming more rather than less common). Even as the economic situation in southeastern Pennsylvania improved over the grim years of the 1780s, people in the late-1790s lived with the legacy of financial hardship. Searing memories like those of mass property foreclosure undoubtedly remained fresh and vivid.

These memories and experiences shaped how many people in southeastern Pennsylvania understood the new federal taxes of 1798 and 1799. Citizens saw the new taxes operating in the same way that government policies had during the previous two decades. They perceived these taxes to be eroding the economic autonomy necessary to sustain the republic. Moreover, they believed that ordinary citizens were enduring this burden so that the elite could prosper. Thus to the people who would form Fries Rebellion, the new taxes were another episode in the long and distressing pattern of government rewarding the wealthy at the expense of the public at large.

Accordingly, the debate in southeastern Pennsylvania in January and February 1799 surrounding the new taxes was ripe with references to past transgression and how the new laws continued past injustices. For example, a mid-January newspaper editorial on the new taxes linked them to the rewards received by speculators in the Revolutionary War debt. "Joe Bunker" noted that "it was a hard case" that he had to "pay a tax on his hard earned property" when a neighbor who had speculated in the war debt "paid no tax on 10,000 dollars which he bought off a number of Soldiers who were obliged to sell their notes at 2/6 in the pound." "These are strange times," Joe Bunker observed, "when the Speculator goes free and the industrious farmer is become the object of taxation."39

Likewise, at the height of the so-called Fries Rebellion, many southeastern Pennsylvanians focused their anger, not on the new window taxes, but on the 1791 federal excise tax designed to pay speculators in the Revolutionary War debt. At a Northampton County meeting in early 1799 to prepare a petition against the new tax laws, one resident entered the room and asked if
the document contained anything "against the excise upon spirituous liquors." When the people framing the petition answered "no," the man replied, "then throw the petition into the fire and erect Liberty Pole and let us fight." Shortly thereafter, this man and his neighbors erected a mast-like liberty pole on his land. Meanwhile in Berks county, the inhabitants of Greenwich township told a federal excise officer that if he continued to collect the tax, "they would tie him fast to the liberty pole and keep him there till he gave an account of the money on duties they had paid on stills."

Other people in southeastern Pennsylvania concentrated their ire on the new taxes to fund the impending war with France, explaining that they believed these laws continued the pattern of government providing benefits to the wealthy. "A Citizen of Montgomery County" blamed the "increase of heavy taxes" on "characters amongst us. . . . who care not what becomes of the public good so that they can make their own fortunes"—people he identified as "the rulers of the people, speculators, swindlers, and traders." In an effort to "support luxury," government leaders had once again given their elite "flattering" rewards while leaving ordinary farmers, "the source of wealth and strength of our country," in a "gloomy silence."

Some writers in 1799 were angered that the government distributed the current package of rewards through new war bonds that paid a high yearly interest rate, complaining that this was the same means that had created fortunes for speculators in the Revolutionary War debt. These writers flatly asserted that it was wrong for Congress to offer five million dollars in new war bonds that paid a steep annual interest of eight percent. They declared that the government had no business offering a yearly "tribute to the amount of 100,000 dollars" in interest payments to "usurious nabobs" who hoped to increase their wealth through "the House and Land Tax" on ordinary citizens. "So much for Tory disinterestedness and love of country," said one writer of wealthy investors who would not buy government bonds unless they carried a high premium. This man concluded that the "gentry ought to be ashamed" of its self-interested attempts to saddle the public with new taxes for their personal gain.

Many southeastern Pennsylvanians also asserted that the new taxes were unequally distributed: the public at large shouldered the burden, while the wealthy paid little. People from York County published a petition condemning the window tax as yet another way that the government allowed land speculators to escape taxation. "It is now well known," the petition declared, "that the owners of houses in Pennsylvania will pay much more in proportion to the value of their property than the holders of uncultivated lands." Other Pennsylvanians worried that new impost taxes weighed heavier on ordinary citizens by driving up the price of necessities imported from abroad. "Who pays these taxes [on imported goods]?" asked one writer. "The merchant who
has employed his capital in the carrying trade? No—he lays the tax upon the
freight. The merchant importer? No—he lays it upon the articles he sells. The
retailer? No—he imitates the merchants” and raises the prices of the items in
his store. This writer concluded that the weight of import taxes was carried by
ordinary citizens: “The consumer—the farmer, the mechanic, the laborer, they
and they alone pay.” Thus, the taxes on imported goods acted in the same
regressive ways as the other taxes: taking money from ordinary citizens to
enhance the wealth of “the unproductive classes of the community, the mer-
chants, the doctors, the agents, the counting house clerks, and revenue offic-
ers.”

Finally, from the perspective of the people of southeastern Pennsylvania,
the entire situation was made worse because federal laws prohibited the public
from complaining about these perceived injustices. These people condemned
the Alien and Sedition Acts that Federalist politicians had passed to limit criti-
cism of the government’s war efforts because they saw these laws as part of a
larger effort to channel money to the wealthy. To them, these new prohibi-
tions on free speech fit seamlessly with the new federal tax laws. As a tax
assessor noted, the people of Northampton County “connected” the new taxes
with “the Stamp Tax & Alien and Sedition Acts and said they had fought
against such laws once already and were ready to fight for it again.” This per-
spective was shared by a crowd in Bucks County that had opposed the assessors
of the house tax because they feared government leaders were attempting to
“bring us into bondage and slavery.” Just as this crowd “damned” the house
tax, Congress, and the President, they also “damned the alien law and sedition
law.” They claimed that, in Bucks County, they could “raise 10,000 men if
they should be wanted to oppose the sedition and alien laws . . . and fifty other
damned laws.”

It is within this broad social and economic context that the strong words
and actions taken by the people of southeastern Pennsylvania must be under-
stood. Seen in this larger context—one that includes the decade-long struggle
of Pennsylvanians against a Revolutionary government they perceived to be
undermining their independence—the rhetoric produced during Fries Rebel-
lion begins to make more sense. Statements that the government was trying to
“rob the people” and leave them “as bad off as they were in Europe,” or “fam-
ished like the Irishmen,” or “as poor as snakes,” were not the result of para-
oxia. Instead, they were the culmination of more than a decade of economic
hardship generated by government policies.

Yet, in a larger sense, the significance of this rendering of Fries Rebellion
is not merely to show that the people of southeastern Pennsylvania were more
rational than paranoid about a tax protest. The real importance of under-
standing Fries Rebellion within this context is that it demonstrates the nar-
rowing of democracy at the end of the American Revolution. Few people in
southeastern Pennsylvania would have agreed with the conclusions of many modern historians that the Revolutionary settlement of the 1780s and 1790s made "the interests and prosperity of ordinary people—their pursuits of happiness—the goal of society and government." To the contrary, these people felt betrayed by the Founding Fathers. They did not see a system of government that favored the interests of ordinary Americans, one that provided them with increased independence and financial autonomy. Instead these Pennsylvanians believed that Revolutionary leaders had created a government that rewarded wealth and made economic independence for the public at large increasingly difficult to obtain.

Moreover, the actual experiences of the people of southeastern Pennsylvania generally supported their complaints that the government created by the Founders narrowed democracy by making the independence of ordinary people more insecure. For too long historians have ignored the specific economic context in which the average citizen in Revolutionary America lived. This rather staggering omission has allowed many historians to conclude that the revolution favored the interests of ordinary Americans over the elite—without ever providing a sustained analysis of the actual material benefits bestowed by the new government. Instead, most historians have derived their conclusions about the state of the economy and the rewards of the Revolution from the writings and ledgers of a handful of the nation's most prominent citizens. Needless to say, this process has largely masked the hardships induced by elite financial policies. And by doing so, it has excluded from the scope of analysis the experiences that led many ordinary Americans to perceive the Revolutionary settlement of the 1780s and 1790s as a retreat from the ideals of 1776. It is only by making a fresh and sustained assessment of the words and actions of ordinary Americans—within the context of their daily struggles—that we will obtain a more comprehensive, and indeed a more accurate, interpretation of the American Revolution.
Notes

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1. Testimony of Cephas in Thomas Carpentter, ed., *The Two Trials of John Fries on an Indictment for Treason* (Philadelphia, 1800), 76-77. Deposition of Israel Robert, no date, Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, Rawle Family Papers [Cited hereafter as Rawle Papers], Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia. Due to blurred print in the original document, it was unclear whether the word in the last quote was "snakes" or "shakers."


3. Testimony of Jacob Eyerly and John Sneider, *Two Trials of John Fries*, 222-223; Deposition of Jacob Snyder, Northampton County, Oct. 7, 1799, Rawle Papers.


7. The shortage remained even when the Pennsylvania General Assembly printed approximately £150,000 in new paper currency in 1785. Of this sum, only £50,000 was distributed in ways that ordinary Pennsylvanians could access (through a state loan office that permitted citizens to borrow funds by offering land as collateral). This amount was several times smaller than the outstanding tax burden for Pennsylvania in 1785 which was approximately £550,000 (£102,000 in state money and £448,000 in specie). Ordinary citizens also had difficulty obtaining the remaining £100,000 of the new paper currency because the General Assembly issued all of this money to speculators in the Revolutionary war debt as a yearly interest payment. Accordingly, most of this new currency did not pass beyond Philadelphia. Indeed, within one year of being issued, the entire £100,000 emission was deposited in the Philadelphia bank accounts of just sixty-seven people. For the limited benefits ordinary Pennsylvanians derived from the currency emissions of 1785, see R. Terry Bouton, "Tying up the Revolution: Money, Power, and the Regulation in Pennsylvania, 1763-1800" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1996), 154-171. For unpaid Pennsylvania taxes in 1785, see Pennsylvania Comptroller General, *State of the Accounts of the Several Counties for their Taxes . . . 1785* (Philadelphia, 1785).

8. While there exists an extensive literature on colonial monetary policy and its effects on the economy, little research has been done on the effects of the constrictive policies of the 1780s. For colonial Pennsylvania's system of paper money and land banks, see E. James Ferguson, "Currency Finance: An Interpretation of Colonial Monetary Practices," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 10 (1953), 153-180; and


11. In Pennsylvania during the 1780s, speculators managed to secure the passage of several laws providing them with yearly interest payments in specie or paper currency. Bouton, "Tying up the Revolution," 81-171, 217-221.

12. York County Execution Dockets, York County Courthouse, York, Pennsylvania; Lancaster County Execution Dockets, Book 2, Lancaster County Courthouse, Lancaster, Pennsylvania; Northumberland County Execution Dockets, Northumberland County Courthouse, Sunbury, Pennsylvania; Westmoreland County Execution Dockets, Westmoreland County Courthouse, Greensburg, Pennsylvania. For an explanation of the methodology used with execution records, see Bouton, "Tying up the Revolution," 15-16, notes 4-6.


14. Petition, Sept. 18, 1780, Records of the Supreme Court, Eastern District, Court Papers, box 1, Berks County, 1780, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission [hereafter PHMC], Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. This covenant from Berks County is apparently the only one surviving from the period. If other written covenants existed, they were likely destroyed to protect participants from prosecution for treason—the very charge faced by the men who signed this document.

15. Jacob Rosencrantz, Berks County, to John Nicholson, Sept. 1, 1786, box 4, folder 1, General Correspondence [Cited hereafter as GC], Records of the Comptroller General [Cited hereafter as RCG], PHMC.


17. Jacob Armdt, Jr., Northampton County,
to John Nicholson, Apr. 21, 1787, box 4, folder 17, GC, RCG; Aug. 25, 1786, box 3, folder 16, GC, RCG.
18. Robert Levers, Northampton County, to John Nicholson, Feb. 15, 1786, box 3, folder 6, GC, RCG; Oct. 13, 1786, box 4, folder 6, GC, RCG; June 14, 1787, box 5, folder 2, GC, RCG.
22. Robert Levers, Northampton County, to John Nicholson, Oct. 13, 1786, box 4, folder 6, GC, RCG; Aug. 25, 1786, box 3, folder 16, GC, RCG; Feb. 16, 1786, box 3, folder 7, GC, RCG.
23. For fences across roads, see June, Sept., Dec. 1791, Northampton County Quarter Sessions Papers, Archives, Northampton County Courthouse, Easton, Pennsylvania; May 1793 Bucks County Quarter Sessions Papers, Bucks County Historical Society, Doylestown, Pennsylvania. For trees across the road, see Sept. 1786, Bucks County Quarter Sessions Papers. For flooded roads, see May 1788, Berks County Quarter Sessions Dockets (PHMC Microfilm); Apr. 1793, Northampton County Quarter Sessions Papers. For ditches in roads, see May 1789, July 1789, Berks County Quarter Sessions Docket; Nov. 1795, Bucks County Quarter Sessions Papers.
26. September 1794, Lancaster County Quarter Sessions Papers; Nov. 1794, Northampton County Quarter Sessions Papers.
28. For the wide array of issues on which ordinary Pennsylvanians believed the government favored the elite, see Bouton, "Tying Up the Revolution," 172-222.
30. Documents related to these events are contained in Henry Martyn Hoyt, Brief of a Title in the Seventeen Townships in the County of Luzerne: A Syllabus of the Controversy between Connecticut and Pennsylvania (Harrisburg, 1879).
32. Petition of Sundry Inhabitants of the Township of Lower Milford in the County of Bucks to President of the Supreme Executive Council, Apr. 15, 1785, Records of Pennsylvania's Revolutionary Government, reel 22, frame 39; and Richmond Township, Bucks County, 1785, Records of Pennsylvania's Revolutionary Government, reel 22, frame 496.
33. Ibid.
36. The stated reason for these delays was to account for the confusion produced by Indian wars and conflicting land titles. "An Act to Relieve the Owners of Unimproved Lands from the Inconveniences They are Subjected to by the Present Mode of Enforcing the Payment of Taxes Assessed Thereon," Sept. 11, 1786, in James T. Mitchel and Henry Flanders eds., Statutes At Large of Pennsylvania from 1682 to 1801 (16 vols., Harrisburg, 1896-1915), vol. 12, 264; "An Act to Suspend for

37. William Hepburn, John Weitzel, Daniel Montgomery, Commissioners Northumberland County to Christian Ferbiger, Mar. 5, 1791, box 1, folder 5, GC, Records of the Treasury Department [Cited hereafter as RTD], PHMC; John Giffen, Robert Clarke, Benjamin Lodge, Commissioners Westmoreland County to Christian Ferbiger, May 3, 1791, box 1, folder 6, GC, RTD; Andrew Swearingen, Washington County to Christian Ferbiger, Jan. 30, 1791, box 1, folder 5, GC, RTD; William Meetkerke, James Brice, Zachariah Gapen, Washington County to Christian Ferbiger, Feb. 17, 1793, box 1, folder 4, GC, RTD; Ephraim Douglas, Fayette County to John Nicholson, Jan. 14, 1793, box 10, folder 4, GC, RCG; James McCready, James Bradford, Thomas Marquer, Commissioners Washington County to John Nicholson, Oct. 25, 1788, box 6, folder 87, GC, RCG.


40. Deposition of Frederick Seiberling, Northampton County, Jan. 28, 1799, Rawle Papers.

41. Deposition of Philip Kremer, Berks County, Feb. 13, 1799, Rawle Papers.


43. *Aurora*, "Millions for Defense, but not a Cent for Tribute!," Feb. 21, 1799. Emphasis in original. Other writers asserted that Congress had grossly underestimated the cost of the war and, hence, it would have to issue more war bonds and expand the "ruinous system of borrowing at eight percent interest," or else "the land tax must be greatly increased." *Aurora*, February 25, 1799. Emphasis in original.


47. Testimony of Cephas Childs, *Two Trials of John Fries*, 76-77; Deposition of Israel Robertson, no date, Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania, Rawle Papers.