Book Review


In 1799, the Department of the Treasury sent out a swarm of commissioners to execute the federal Direct on dwelling houses, land, and slaves. The Direct Tax required the measurement of every dwelling house in the nation and the valuation of every tract of land. This piece of legislation, though resented by many of those called upon to pay, produced a remarkably rich set of records documenting the material life of rural Americans. In 1994, Harry C. Adams compiled and analyzed the Direct Tax lists for the northern half of Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Adams Apple Press has published the results in *The Direct Tax of Pennsylvania*. The volume is of particular interest because it covers Lower Milford Township, the home of John Fries. Fries and his neighbors took part in the second insurrection against the authority of the United States government, Fries' Rebellion of 1798-99.

Adams' volume presents the tax lists from twelve townships, including Lower Milford, in an easily read format. Each entry includes the name of the owner, name of the occupant, names of adjoining property holders, the measurements and materials of the dwelling and outbuildings, the acreage of the plot, and separate valuations for the house and the land. The entry for John Fries describes him as the owner and occupant of a 14' x 16' log house and a barn of double that size. Fries' homestead encompassed thirteen acres, and had a total value of $205.00. The table for each township is preceded by a brief synopsis of the settlement of the township, the ethnicity of its residents, and the relative value of its lands. Adams supplements these tables with a brief discussion of the construction of the most common types of houses in the area. Some lovely illustrations accompany this discussion of early architecture in the region. The volume concludes with a name index and a list of name variations.

Adams also includes brief historical discussions of the Direct Tax and of Fries' Rebellion. These are somewhat less satisfying than the rest of the volume. They are not as well edited and the author does not identify the sources on which he relied. Adams describes Fries as "a local leader of considerable influence" and as a Captain in the Continental Army. That seems an overstatement. Fries was a vendue crier. As measured by the Direct Tax assessment, he was one of the poorest men in the community. Fries was well known and apparently well liked, and he did serve as a Captain in the militia during the Revolution. He was not, however, a man of influence, or even the undisputed leader of the tax resistance in Lower Milford.
Adams' volume will be useful to those interested in the architectural and agricultural history of the region. It will also be useful, if read with care, to those interested in Fries' Rebellion and the political turmoil that afflicted the country between 1798 and 1800. One could only wish for a similar volume on Northampton County, where the rebellion was centered.

Robert H. Churchill, Rutgers University
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