

Chapter 5
LAND AND FREEDOM,
1844 – 1846



Every anti-renter knew that the leasehold system denied him his freedom. What a free society would be like was another matter. As anti-rent lecturers crisscrossed New York's leasehold estates in the fall of 1844, estate residents everywhere entered a long discussion about the kind of freedom they sought. They drew on ideas about property voiced by earlier tenant rebels and sustained by tenants' use of common lands. But their new economic circumstances led them to transform these traditions. By examining how these legacies changed, we can begin to understand the ways in which leasehold farmers' increasing integration into a capitalist economy shaped their social and political ideals.

Agrarian traditions and economic change were not the only forces to influence the anti-renters' notions of freedom. Whig and Democratic party activists were leasehold tenants' most influential teachers on social and political issues, and anti-renters drew heavily on their ideas and models of organizing. But the anti-renters proved critical and independent students, turning party teachings to new uses and combining them with ideals and practices drawn from other traditions. Their innovations reveal a great deal about a critical but understudied issue in antebellum politics: the ways in which the Jacksonian rank and file received, interpreted, and made their own the teachings of party leaders.

**The Anti-Rent Associations:
Institutions and Leaders**

By spring of 1845, the anti-rent movement had become a commanding force on New York's manors and patents. Anti-rent lecturers convinced tenants in 11 counties to form anti-rent associations and Indian bands, swelling the number of movement supporters to between 25,000 and 60,000. In the leasehold hill towns of Albany, Rensselaer, Delaware, Columbia, and

Schoharie Counties, where the movement was the strongest, a majority of estate residents embraced the cause, turning the anti-rent movement into a broad, multiclass coalition. A Rensselaer county activist wrote that the movement enjoyed the support of "all classes of our citizens, mechanics, laboring men, and professional men, as well as farmers." Anti-rent petitions, he said, were "signed by men of wealth and influence as well as by those occupying a more humble position in life."¹

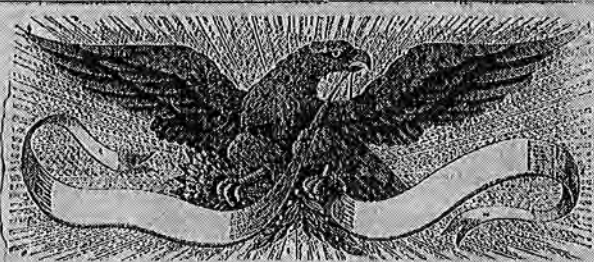
This new strength depended largely on institutions and practices that anti-rent leaders borrowed from political parties and reform associations. Modeled on temperance and other voluntary societies, the number of anti-rent associations exploded. In April 1845, the *Albany Freeholder*, the first movement journal addressed to citizens throughout the leasehold district, opened its doors. In its first year, the newspaper's readership jumped from 270 to 2,700. Three other anti-rent newspapers began publishing over the next 14 months. In establishing a movement press, the anti-renters followed the example of Whigs, Democrats, and evangelical reformers.² Drawing heavily on the rituals of the major parties, town and county leaders complemented the work of the anti-rent press with an endless round of meetings, dances, liberty pole-raising, and rallies. Every Fourth of July between 1840 and 1847, hundreds of wagons, bedecked with banners, converged at a central location in each anti-rent county. On arriving, tenants joined a long procession, typically led by a brass band and followed by local Revolutionary War veterans, the officers of the day, 27 ladies dressed in white to represent the states of the Union, and the rest of the participants. The celebrants then heard the Declaration of Independence, listened to anti-rent speeches and songs, passed resolutions, and ate a picnic lunch. In the evening, they retired to a local inn for dinner, more music, and patriotic toasts. But for the special message of the speeches, songs, and toasts, these proceedings were identical to the Independence Day celebrations of the Democrats and Whigs.³

This creative borrowing from reform associations and political parties was just one part of an eclectic political style. Drawing on a varied set of political traditions, anti-renters built a movement with three distinct wings, each with its own leadership and message: the anti-rent associations, the "Indians," and the Anti-Rent/Equal Rights party. Leadership in the associations—and the power to shape their message—fell to male, property-owning, mature heads of household, many of whom had experience in party politics. Of 430 activists from the leasehold towns of Albany and Delaware counties, all were men. Of the 191 who could be found in the 1850 federal census, 96 percent headed their own households. Most were mature: by 1845, 61 percent of the activists had reached their fortieth year. As in 1839, the majority made their living on the soil, but now farmers were joined by a disproportionate number of doctors, lawyers, merchants, and manufacturers. Still, farmers predominated far more among the anti-renters than they did in the Whig and Democratic parties (see Appendix, table 9).⁴

Whatever their calling, anti-rent leaders were drawn most heavily from the

ATTENTION! ANTI-RENTERS!

AWAKE! AROUSE!



**A Meeting of the friends of Equal Rights will
be held on** *Monday Evening at Westerlo*

in the Town of *Westerlo* **at 7 O'clock.**

**Let the opponents of Patroony rally in their strength. A great
crisis is approaching. Now is the time to strike. The minions of Patroony are at
work. No time is to be lost. Awake! Arouse! and**

**Strike 'till the last armed foe expires,
Strike for your altars and your fires—
Strike for the green graves of your sires,
God and your happy homes!**

**The Meeting will be addressed by PETER
FINCKLE and other Speakers.**

Figure 5.1. An Anti-rent broadside, probably from 1845. The screaming eagle, the rhetoric of wakefulness, and the call to defend homes—all appealing in martial tones to an implicitly masculine audience—were drawn from Democratic rhetoric and iconography. Courtesy, New York State Library.

prosperous property owners of their towns. Of the 33 anti-rent leaders who could be traced in the 1840 tax list for the town of Westerlo, 7 (21 percent) were among the top 20 percent of property holders in town, and another 13 (39 percent) fell into the second wealthiest fifth. Only two activists (6 percent) were among the second poorest fifth of property owners, and none fell into the bottom fifth. A small but significant number of landless men took up leadership of the Albany County movement, however. One leader listed his occupation as a laborer in 1850, and 13—12 percent—were farmers who

lived in households in which no one owned any land. Thus anti-rent association leaders represented a far broader spectrum of wealth than did Whig and Democratic activists (see Appendix, table 10).⁵

As they had in 1839, many association leaders came from the ranks of Whig and Democratic activists. Sixty-four leaders (22 percent) had served as delegates to Democratic county conventions or had joined county committees of vigilance; another 37 had served as Whigs. In all, about 35 percent had experience as party activists on the county level. As in 1839, the leaders of the tenants' movement had learned how to build grass-roots organizations, convey a political message, and create a successful political culture from the Whigs and Democrats.⁶

In most ways, then, anti-rent leadership in 1845-1846 remained much like that of 1839. With slightly more inclusiveness, the anti-renters replicated the preexisting political leadership of the northern Jacksonian countryside, which fell to property-owning men accustomed to commanding the labor of the women, children, and servants in their own household, and who were presumed to represent the interests both of those dependents and of less prosperous neighbors. With a preponderance of substantial farmers, merchants, manufacturers, and professionals in their ranks, anti-rent leaders were far more likely to benefit from the new, more capital-intensive, wage-dependent, and market-oriented economy on the estates than were their followers. In addition, they had been trained in political leadership by the Whig and Democratic parties, and they had learned most of their political and social principles from party leaders. Through speeches, resolutions, and letters to the editor, these men, more than any other group, gave public voice to the grievances of the tenantry. To a significant extent, they shaped those grievances according to their special experience and political convictions.

Rank-and-file anti-renters were not entirely without influence over the message of their movement, however. Consent was one thing; enthusiastic support and the willingness to make personal sacrifices was another. To inspire the latter, anti-rent activists had to appeal to the values and yearnings of ordinary tenants. Moreover, such tenants held their leaders to strict standards of conduct. On two occasions, local officials elected on the anti-rent ticket violated community norms—one by buying land from his landlord, the other by compelling his neighbors to pay for water from a local stream to which he had mill rights. In both instances, townspeople began a campaign of rumor and innuendo against their leaders, causing such damage to the officials' reputations that they felt compelled to defend themselves in the movement press. Similarly, when an association officer in Columbia County used anti-rent principles to justify his refusal to pay the rent on a store he was leasing from a neighbor, local association members rebuked him, "telling him that that was not the principle on which they as an association acted." When the storekeeper then turned against the movement, his neighbors ostracized him, "letting him . . . work alone—eat alone—sleep alone—and drink

alone."⁷ Though leaders enjoyed significant latitude in shaping the anti-rent message, their followers provided the raw materials from which they would forge that message and set important limits on its final shape.

Agrarianism Transformed

In dialogue with rank-and-file anti-renters, association leaders forged a clear vision of the good society. In doing so, they simultaneously extended and narrowed the agrarian ideas of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century tenant rebels. Since the 1750s, insurgents on New York's leasehold estates had insisted that landownership was the only sure basis for human freedom. The anti-renters of the 1840s placed this idea at the center of their movement. Participants at a Grafton meeting put it most succinctly when they resolved, paraphrasing the words of the prophet Micah, "That it is for the manifest good of a republic that every farmer should be able to sit under his own vine and fig tree, with none to molest, or make him afraid."⁸ But the anti-renters expanded on this idea. Since the early 1830s, Democratic leaders had attacked the special privileges that government bestowed on banks and other monopolies as a licence to expropriate the fruits of producers' labor and as the source of artificial disparities of wealth and power. These disparities, they argued, threatened republican government. Most tenants were Democrats, and they drew on their party's teachings to forge a full-scale attack on land monopoly.

In typical Democratic style, tenants traced landlords' monopoly over land to special privileges bestowed by the government. Landlords, they insisted, were "an aristocracy encouraged and protected by law" which "enjoy privileges denied to other men." Landlords' special privilege originated in the colonial-era "court gifts" of land that "exclude the poor and industrious from opportunities of labor except at the rich man's discretion." This privilege was wrongfully perpetuated when the revolutionary-era government confirmed the proprietors' titles "when all [were] convinced" that neither they nor their ancestors "ever had a shadow of a right to such land." And it continued to be protected by the present government. The anti-rent state convention of 1844 complained that a cluster of special privileges—the common-law rule that prohibited tenants from legally challenging their landlords' titles, the lease clause that allowed proprietors to seize tenants' personal property without a hearing, and the state's failure to tax rent income like income from mortgages—made the landlord "highly privileged above any other class of citizens" and subjected tenants to "feudal slavery . . . inconsistent with a code of equal laws."⁹

Once bestowed and protected by law, land monopoly empowered proprietors to "withhold from the people their dearest rights," the most important of which was the right to the fruits of their labor. The labor theory of value—the notion that labor creates all wealth—had been commonplace in Amer-

ican economic thought since the late eighteenth century and was implicit in the tenants' defense of their property in their improvements. Now, inspired by urban workers' use of the theory to attack economic inequality, the anti-renters harnessed it to their assault on patroonery. Joseph Hoag of Delaware County wrote that "the idea that a man must be compelled to toil, and still be under the stern necessity of remitting to another the effects of his labors to support him in opulence and luxury, is revolting to every principle of American liberty." From this principle, militants denounced not only rents but landlords' ability to seize tenants' improvements through eviction and the quarter sale. Association members believed that estate lands had been "literally worthless" before they were settled; tenants' labor in felling trees, building houses, barns, and fences, and breaking cropland had given the land its value. That wealth, militants reasoned, should remain in the hands of its producers.¹⁰

Anti-renters believed that proprietors' ability to strip others of the fruits of their labor gave them an unnatural degree of power, which threatened tenants' personal liberty. Proprietors subjected entire communities to their whim and stripped tenants of the personal dignity due them as laborers and as citizens of a republic:

There are thousands in our midst denied all equality, and ground down by hirelings, below the dignity of serfs. Their farms, their hard earnings, their all, are held at the option of a man brought up in luxury, clothed in fine linen, whose hands were ne'er soiled by a day's labor. These laboring men scarce breathe in his presence; his mandates are those of a Dictator; and thousands must plod their way yearly with trembling steps and enter the halls of his lordship, bending and bowing . . . to solicit the favor of enjoying their property.¹¹

Land monopoly also endangered republican government. Tenant-made wealth gave landlords inordinate influence in government, allowing them to corrupt officials and procure special legislation. Worse still, the proprietors' power over their tenants undermined the very foundation of republican government—an independent citizenry, free from the political will of others. "Juno, Jr." of Livingston Manor warned that the landlords' ability to eject tenants from their homes was "a powerful instrument in the hands of one man for bending his fellow man to his own will, and making him subserve his own selfish, political or mercenary purposes."¹²

These social evils—artificial concentrations of economic power, cultural subordination, corruption of the political process—were the very evils that radical Democrats attributed to monopolies. Anti-renters also added their own grievances to the list of monopoly's fruits. Foremost among these was economic insecurity. Landlords' power of eviction allowed them to strip tenants of the property accumulated over a lifetime and to subject them to a life of poverty and humiliation. It also threatened what tenants saw as their

"right" to a home in a familiar place, connected to kin and community. Ejection from their homes, wrote "A Democrat, Old Style," robbed farmers of "their only means of subsistence and [left] them to become wandering vagrants in the country."¹³ This theme of poverty and rootlessness echoed sadly throughout the speeches, letters, and songs of the tenants' movement. A poem about an ejected tenant family, read "with great effect" at a Fourth of July celebration in Delaware County, conveyed the depth of the tenants' fear of this fate:

That for which we'd long been striving
All our hopes for years to come,
Torn away—our wives and children,
Turned abroad without a home.

Restless, wayworn, faint and weary
Wanderers since that fated day,
Often forced to change our dwellings;
Thus we thread our cheerless way.¹⁴

In addition, anti-renters denounced landlords' restraints on their freedom to trade. They saw the right to enjoy the products of their labor as inseparable from the right to sell those products. They objected to the quarter sale precisely because it infringed on their right to sell their improvements. As one farmer put it, "the tenants have not the liberty to trade on their own earnings."¹⁵ Similarly, the residents of Livingston Manor denounced as "unrepublican" the provisions in their leases that required them to sell their surplus at the proprietor's stores and to take their grain to the landlord's mills. The notion of commerce that many anti-renters defended seems not to have included trade in search of speculative advantage. Rather, they defended an older notion of trade as an exchange of equivalents between producers. A Columbia County anti-renter wrote to *Young America*, a journal of the New York working-class movement, that with the impending defeat of the landlords, "your mechanics in the cities might soon get village sites, where they could come among us and manufacture their articles, for which we would exchange our produce, saving between us the expenses of *rent* and *transportation*."¹⁶

Thus the anti-renters claimed several "natural rights"—the enjoyment of the fruits of their labor, personal dignity, independence from the will of others, economic security, freedom to trade—and denounced the landlords' monopoly of the land for violating them. These rights, they insisted, could be realized only when every man held property in land. Universal landownership would place all who labored on an equal footing, freeing them from the personal humiliations that were the lot of the poor. It would guarantee independence, dignity, prosperity, and the freedom to trade, as one poet affirmed:

The farmer now delights to plow
A ray of hope is on his brow
He knows that soon his tasks and toil
Will be upon the RIGHT OF SOIL

Avaunt ye Tyrants! Then no more
Shall we keep wheat for thee in store;
But ev'ry grain raised by our toil
Shall be our own, by right of soil,
To eat, to save, to sell or sow,
Though Princely Lords say yes or no!¹⁷

Universal landownership would also ensure the independence of the citizenry and, through them, guarantee the survival of republican government. "In all free governments," the Delaware County anti-renters resolved, "it is essential that the people themselves be free. They cannot be free unless independent. . . . To be completely sovereign, they must individually be the lords of the soil they occupy, and hold it freely, subject to no superior but the people themselves."¹⁸ Finally, universal landownership would guarantee to all a home in a specific place, where they could be connected to previous and future generations. A Columbia County tenant declared: "We will defend the homes of our fathers, where (if any where) we and our children have a right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'"¹⁹

The anti-renters' association of land and freedom was familiar to conventional Democrats. Drawing on a tradition that reached back to Thomas Jefferson, the followers of Jackson had long insisted that "a well educated, industrious and independent yeomanry are the safest repository of freedom and free institutions."²⁰ But with important constituencies among urban employers, workingmen, and landlords, few Democrats could safely argue, as the anti-renters did, that landless men were unfree. More concretely, the anti-renters' demand that the legislature abrogate the common-law rule barring them from challenging their landlords' titles in court flew in the face of the Jacksonians' reverence for vested rights and strict construction of the federal Constitution; the majority of Democrats considered the proposed law to be both unconstitutional and socially dangerous. Most importantly, the anti-renters directed the Jeffersonian tradition against existing concentrations of property, raising fears of an all-powerful state disturbing existing social relations and trampling on the rights of property. If successful, they might set a precedent that could be used against slave property; their movement thus posed a potential threat to intersectional harmony within both parties. Nor did it help that most landlords were Democrats.

While they took Democratic teachings in a new and threatening direction, most militants dropped the radical ideas of their agrarian forbears. Like the anti-renters of the 1840s, earlier insurgents had challenged landlords' titles and insisted that landownership was the only sure basis for individual free-

dom. But they had also offered their own definition of property rights, declaring that occupation and improvement conveyed ownership of land. This idea offered a powerful challenge to the existing distribution of property, providing a blueprint for ensuring that every white male who worked the land would own a piece of it. The Roxbury Anti-Rent Association embraced this idea in 1844: "The rentees hold that the land they occupy is their own, on account of what is called *legal* possession: that is, being actually on the land, and by enclosing it, while the Patroon's possession is by *proxy* only." But most anti-renters eschewed this line of reasoning. When Dr. John Cornell proposed placing the Roxbury insurgents' language in the platform of the Blenheim Hill Anti-Rent Association, his fellow activists rejected his motion. Instead, they, along with most other tenants, simply claimed that estate titles were fraudulent. To most tenants, passage of a law allowing them to "plead title" during prosecutions for rent was the key demand of the movement. This attack on landlords' titles posed a bold challenge to the leasehold system, but it could not protect tenants from having to buy their farms from the state if they succeeded. More importantly, it could not ensure universal access to land. Although anti-renters denounced the leasehold system for allowing a few men to expropriate the labor of thousands of producers, few challenged the definitions of property that made such landholdings possible. Thus "Clermont" of Columbia County stated that large landed estates "tend . . . to make the many . . . serfs and vassals of the few," but insisted that the tenants "do not ask for a division of the lands. They say if the lords do, in fact, *own* the lands as they claim, they alone have a right to dispose of them."²¹

The chasm between most anti-renters' social vision and their specific proposals grew out of their leaders' attempt to come to terms with agrarian traditions in the context of a changing economy. Amid endemic conflict between tenant owners of unimproved land and neighbors who saw that land as "the commons" and extracted resources from it, any suggestion that labor could establish a right to land risked dividing the movement. The spread of landlessness, wage labor, and subtenancy also rendered agrarian notions of property dangerous, for such ideas might spark conflict between the prosperous and the poor over the distribution of land. Instead of defending the right of the propertyless to land, leasehold activists looked upon them with fear and disdain. "Tossed about from place to place without any permanent local habitation," one insurgent wrote, the landless showed "a general selfishness, laxity of morals, and an indifference to the institutions and improvements of their neighborhood . . . and in fact the country at large."²² This attitude helped legitimize an unbroken silence over the existence of the landless among leasehold militants; nowhere in the movement press was their existence acknowledged. Questions of whether they had a claim to land or whether their relationship to their employers undermined the independence, dignity, and equality due them as citizens went unasked.

Members of the anti-rent associations thus entered their conflict with landlords poised between older, agrarian ideals and newer realities. In remaining

silent about common rights and the presence of the landless, most anti-renters gave mute assent to the existing distribution of land in their communities and to the practices that made some community members the employees of others. While they mobilized agrarian ideals against the landlords, they were unwilling to apply those ideals to themselves. Their social vision thus remained ambiguous, evasive, and contradictory.

The Face of the Savage

The anti-rent associations showed one face to the public; the anti-rent "Indians" displayed another. Where association members adapted the ideas and style of evangelical reform and the second party system, the Indians drew on an older tradition—that of anonymous violence and the charivari. Where the associations stressed the evils of patroonery as a system and strove to enact systemic remedies, the Indians voiced local concerns and aims, punished and rewarded individual behavior, and conducted a strategy of local defense. In so doing, they gave voice to a second side of the tenants' class identity and to a different conception of politics.

The Indians first appeared in public in early 1841. When the sheriff of Albany County tried to distrain (seize and sell) tenants' property to satisfy their rent obligations, bands of men, "disguised in skin and other grotesque dresses," "entirely frustrated" the lawman and sent him back to Albany. Anti-renters in Schoharie and Rensselaer Counties organized disguised bands in 1842 and 1843. When tenant leaders from these three counties began organizing throughout the leasehold district in 1844, they established Indian bands wherever they went. "We resolved to adopt the same kind of protection that was resorted to by the people of Boston when the tea was thrown overboard into the water of its bay," Smith Boughton later recalled. "We then raised in the various counties a large force of men completely disguised to prevent the landlord[s] from executing their threat." By early 1845, some 10,000 men had joined the Indians.²³

The "tribes" that anti-rent lecturers helped create shared a distinctive organization. Each was neighborhood-based, banding together about a dozen neighbors. These bands were coordinated on a town, county, and regional level, with "chiefs" for each stage of organization. Each was a secret society, with each member's "paleface" identity known only to the members of his neighborhood tribe. Initiates took an oath to "support the constitution of the Anti-Rent Association and stand by each other as long as life lasts" and to "swear by the uplifted hand—and by the penalties of your life—that you will reveal no Indian secret whatsoever." Although association leaders helped found them, each tribe was independent and self-governing. Delaware County association officers administered the oath to initiates, bought calico and sheepskin for their disguises, and paid for their dinners. Everywhere else, association leaders eschewed all official connection with the tribes. Whether

"paleface" activists associated with them or not, each tribe elected its own officers and "transact[ed] their own business according to their own laws."²⁴

These ersatz aborigines also included a distinctive membership: young men. While the bulk of Delaware County association activists were in their 30s and 40s in 1845, 56 percent of that county's Indians were under the age of 30 (see Appendix, table 11).²⁵ Their youth placed them at the bottom of their communities' hierarchies of wealth and occupation. Only 11 of 73 Indians (15 percent) who were tried and convicted in the Delaware County courts were listed as farmers in their 1845 indictments, while 55 (75 percent) were listed as laborers. By 1850, many had come of age and chosen new occupations. A majority who remained in Delaware County until 1850 became farmers. Still, 29 percent remained as laborers in 1850, while no association activists held that occupation (see Appendix, table 12). Among those who became farmers, former Indians included far more land-poor husbandmen than did association activists (see Appendix, table 13).²⁶

Although some Indians could count on overcoming their relative poverty as they grew older, the long-term economic prospects of many were significantly poorer than those of association activists. The vigilantes were foot soldiers, not leaders; they thus came from a broader spectrum of the leasehold towns than did association activists. More importantly, most came of age when land was becoming less plentiful and more expensive, the capital costs of farming were rising, and increasing numbers of mature men were turning to wage labor and subtenancy to survive. As a result, a substantial number of them remained poorer and pursued humbler callings than did association activists. Nonfarmers among association activists tended to follow high-status callings that were likely to prosper in the new economy: merchants, manufacturers, and professionals. Most Indian nonfarmers, on the other hand, made their living working for others, as laborers and journeymen artisans (see Appendix, table 12). While not statistically reliable, available information suggests that many Indians' low occupational status outlasted their youth. Half of the 10 Indian laborers in 1850 were 30 or older, and four headed their own households—an indication that their humble status was due to chronic landlessness rather than youth. Similarly, a third of the former Indians who headed their own households and who were listed as farmers owned no land, indicating that they, too, were joining the growing class of landless and land-poor. Even when they acquired farmland, many former Indians remained significantly poorer than land-holding association activists of roughly the same age (see Appendix, table 14).²⁷

In short, the Indians drew heavily from two inextricably linked groups: young men and the landless and land-poor. A few had achieved a measure of prosperity, and many more would achieve it within a few years. A handful of others were older men whose prospects of achieving economic independence were already dim. But the majority were young men whose prospects were uncertain. These men suffered under a double handicap: the landlessness and dependence to which their youth temporarily subjected them, and

the propertylessness and submission to which changing economic circumstances might condemn them permanently. Most Indians were unlucky enough to be present at the meeting of two systems of exploitation: an older (and still vigorous) one based on gender and age, and a newer one that was beginning to graft itself upon the old—that of class.²⁸ While association activists were drawn from those groups most likely to have been the beneficiaries of recent changes in commodity markets, the distribution of land, and labor practices, the Indians included those who most keenly felt the dislocations and insecurities brought about by those changes.

Despite their special social makeup, the anti-rent braves represented the views and aspirations of a broad segment of leasehold residents. When the Albany County Indians tarred and feathered deputy sheriff Chauncey Rider in 1841, a crowd of about 100 undisguised tenants attended. Upon discovering that the Indians had forgotten to bring feathers, one observer ran home to get some. Similarly, when the Columbia County Indians stopped Sheriff Henry Miller from serving process in late 1844, some 500 observers cheered them on. Non-Indians also celebrated the braves on newspaper mastheads, on banners and transparencies, and in songs.²⁹

The popularity of the natives resulted partly from their adherence to a tradition with deep roots in the hill towns of the estates. The Indians were an extension of the charivari—or, as it was called in the leasehold district, the “skimeton.” This was a ritual crowd action, practiced widely throughout rural Europe and North America, and universally carried out by boys and young men. Sometimes, as Bryan Palmer suggests, they served as “ritualized methods of enforcing community standards and morality.” Men and women who violated the unwritten moral code of their communities—especially those who breached sexual and marital norms—were visited by crews of grotesquely disguised young men and treated to the intimidating “music” of kettles, pans, horse fiddles, sea shells, cow bells, tin horns, and “rather low songs.” Frequently, offenders found their property destroyed or were subjected to a complex ritual of threats, physical intimidation, and assault. More often, skimetons were elaborate pranks played on newlyweds. Brides and grooms were “saluted” with strange spectacles and raucous noise until the groom agreed to treat the crowd to liquor.³⁰ In their membership, their rituals of intimidation, and their disguises, the Indians were identical to the bands of young men who “serenaded” newlyweds and wrongdoers.

Perhaps even more than charivari revelers, about whose inner life we know little, the anti-rent Indians created a fantastic ritual world. Upon being sworn in, each brave created a new identity for himself, taking on an “Indian” name like “Rainbow” or “Pompey.” Each learned to speak in a “native” dialect, which one observer described as “our common vernacular, mouthed with a strange intonation, with an occasional sprinkling of Dutch.” Each was initiated into the rites of his tribe—dramatic entrances into public gatherings with war whoops and gunfire; dramatic and dangerous displays of horsemanship; an exotic, winding frolic known as the “snake dance.” And each

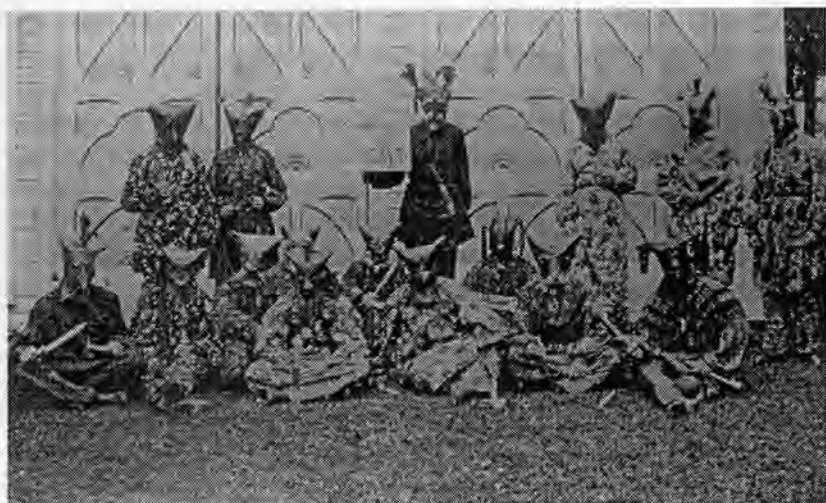


Figure 5.2. Costumes of the anti-rent Indians. This photograph was probably taken at an anti-rent reunion or reenactment during the 1870s or 1880s; the costumes are consistent with descriptions and graphic depictions of Indian disguises from the 1840s. From David Murray, ed., *Delaware County, New York: History of the Century*. Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

crafted a costume that conveyed both membership in a tribe and an individual "Indian" identity. The basic design of the costume was standard: a long hunting shirt or a calico gown and pantaloons; masks of leather or glazed muslin with holes for the eyes, ears, and mouth and with peaks, like animal ears or devil's horns, at the corners. Each brave embellished this uniform according to his individual style with brightly colored paint, false whiskers made from horses' tails, brass rings, strings of beads, and "parti-colored patches [and] furs." A farcical oversupply of weapons completed the outfit. An observer at a gathering of the Rensselaer County tribes in 1844 saw "some carrying swords, knives, bits of scythes, and threatening looking cheese knives, others clubs and muskets, while all had pistols in their belts."³¹

Unlike charivari revelers, however, the main purpose of the Indians was political. Like the Democratic Callumphantian bands of New York City and Baltimore, the Molly Maguires of Ireland and Pennsylvania's coal fields, and the Ku Klux Klan of the Reconstruction South, these masked bands turned charivari into a weapon of social conflict. In this struggle, the Indians served several strategic purposes. Most importantly, they prevented landlords from collecting rent and lawmen from evicting tenants or conducting distress sales. When landlords or their agents appeared on the estates, local Indians chased them away, put their homes to the torch, and "besmeared" their carriages "with human filth." Lawmen who sought to serve distress warrants or eviction notices were taken captive and forced to surrender their legal papers. In confronting sheriffs and their deputies, the natives were careful to distinguish be-

tween friend and foe. They knew that even sympathetic sheriffs had to serve process to avoid charges of official negligence, and they treated such lawmen to a jovial ceremony. When Columbia County Sheriff Henry Miller arrived in Copake Flats to serve distress warrants, he was met by some 200 Indians who escorted him, to the accompaniment of a marching band, to the farm where he was to serve his first warrant. There the braves brandished their weapons and threatened violence to Miller, publicly forcing him to give up his legal documents. They then marched him back to the local tavern and treated him to brandy. Raising his cup to the sheriff, the chief Big Thunder told the assembled natives that Miller "was as good an anti-renter as any of them." The natives gave him a rousing three cheers, bought him dinner, and sent him home.³²

Lawmen who earnestly sought to evict tenants or seize their property experienced no such delights. When Sheriff Batterman of Albany County tried to serve process on delinquent Helderberg tenants in the summer of 1844, the Indians, rather than providing him with dinner and applause, shot his horse. When he returned with three deputies two weeks later, the vigilantes seized him, tied him up, and told him that they would let him go if he promised to return to Albany immediately. Batterman refused. The braves then tore his clothes, seized his pistol and papers, clubbed him in the face, and treated him to a dose of tar and feathers. Then they turned to Batterman's terrified deputies, promising them the same treatment unless they shouted "Down with the Rent!" and carried the sheriff back to Albany with his feathers intact. The deputies gave the required oath and, with their humiliated employer in tow, beat a hasty retreat.³³

As the Albany County braves' treatment of Batterman attests, the Indians were ready to use violence if lawmen refused to surrender their papers and leave the area. But they were careful to keep their violence within strict bounds. They knew that the death or serious injury of a lawman might bring troops to the hill towns. They accordingly depended more heavily on threats, indignities, and ruses than on physical assault. Batterman's battering was exceptional; the braves usually accomplished their purposes without laying a hand on lawmen. The vigilantes often assembled before a scheduled distress sale and carried away the tenant's livestock before it could be sold. At other times, they intimidated potential purchasers—or entered the bidding themselves, driving up the price of a single item until nightfall forced the sheriff to call off the sale. Whatever their tactics, the braves' opposition to lawmen protected community members from dispossession and, in doing so, minimized outside pressure to abandon the rent strike.³⁴

Just as important was the Indians' second tactical aim: to ensure local support for the anti-rent movement. Tenants who violated the ban on doing business with the landlords were subjected to harsh punishment. When Abraham Decker of Schoharie County leased a timber lot from his landlord in the spring of 1841, local braves stripped the lot of its best timber, mutilated Decker's horses, damaged his barn, pulled down his fences, and tarred and

feathered him. The vigilantes meted out similar punishments to landlords' local subagents, tenants who aided lawmen, and community members who sympathized with their landlords.³⁵

With these methods, the Indians silenced the opponents of the anti-renters, creating the appearance of unanimity in support of the movement. They ended payment of rents and prevented the dispossession of tenants with equal success. "An agent dare hardly show his face in the infected district," according to one observer. John O'Brien, a landlord's agent on Scott's patent, complained that "it would be in vain to attempt to Collect Rents within our Patent so long as disguised men were allowed with impunity to resist all sales . . . the resisters have uniformly succeeded in preventing the sales."³⁶

In addition to their strategic service, the Indians served a critical ideological function. Nowhere was this more clear in their claim to be "Indians." On the one hand, this claim reinforced their tactical aims. By taking on this disguise, estate youths protected themselves from identification and arrest. Just as important, they drew upon the racist myth of the bloodthirsty savage, pervasive in literature, folklore, and Democratic rhetoric, to terrify their enemies and keep waverers in line. Their elaborate displays of weaponry, their violent public rituals, and their grotesque disguises reinforced this savage image. At the same time, they helped perpetuate the fiction of white tenants' respectability by projecting responsibility for their lawlessness and savagery onto another race.³⁷

On the other hand, the "Indian" identity reinforced, in the grotesque language of the charivari, the associations' celebration of independent, patriarchal, commodity-producing households. The braves claimed to be the aboriginal inhabitants of estate lands, who had long since given way to white settlement by moving to new lands beyond the Rocky Mountains. The landlords' fraudulent monopolization of their former domains, they insisted, compelled them to return and re-establish their title. Shortly after forming anti-rent associations, Delaware County insurgents "issued a Proclamation" that "as the land did not belong to the landlords they having no title" and since the state would not challenge the proprietors' claims, the land "must of course belong to the Indians." The tenants then "proceeded at once to clothe and equip the Indians in great masses." Lawrence Van Deusen, editor of the *Guardian of the Soil*, confirmed that the Indians were claiming title to their ancient home. "Leaving the question of *title* to be settled between the *Lords* and the '*Indians*,'" he wrote, "the farmers will pay rent, if they *must* pay rent, to the successful party." But the Indians did not wish to remain permanently on their eastern domains; rather, they wished only to rid them of the landlords and once again vanish to make room for legitimate white settlers: "It is presumed, however, that if the '*Indians*' succeed in establishing *their* title, they will immediately retire to their home beyond the Rocky Mountains—or somewhere else."³⁸

By claiming title through an appropriated "Indian" identity, anti-renters underscored the fraudulence of the landlords' titles and made a better claim

to the land than any white person could make. Just as important, they appealed to a second and equally ubiquitous image—that of the “vanishing Indian,” noble but doomed to extinction in the face of a superior white civilization—to underscore the superiority of freehold farming to landlord rule. In countless antebellum novels and plays, white audiences learned to think of Indians as noble savages, blessed by simple virtue and primitive wisdom. These attributes did not make Indians equal to whites; indeed, fictional aborigines nobly accepted their ultimate extinction, “forecasting,” as Robert Berkhofer argues, “the wonders and virtues of the civilization that was to supersede the simplicity and naturalness of aboriginal life.” The myth of the happily displaced aborigine legitimated white expansion (including the treaty violations and violence that made it possible) by identifying white civilization with “progress.”³⁹ The anti-renters turned this myth to their own purposes. By contending that the “Indians” wished to liberate their ancient home from landlord rule, they made clear that communities of freehold farmers were the genuine embodiment of American progress and the true heirs to the red man’s donation.

While serving the strategic and ideological aims of the anti-renters, the Indians gave voice to aspirations and a style of politics that were silenced elsewhere in the movement. The anti-rent associations and electoral organizations spoke in a language of natural rights; they sought to create a republic of freeholders by enacting impersonal, universally applicable laws. The Indians, too, embraced the doctrine of natural rights and affirmed the primacy of electoral and legislative politics. But they simultaneously acted on a locally oriented, corporate tradition in which each community enforced its own unwritten code of conduct. The braves drew on the belief, sustained by gossip, ostracism, church discipline, and charivaris, that each community had a right to defend itself against those who violated its moral code. In attacking landlords, lawmen, and up-rent tenants, they simultaneously enforced their communities’ moral code and redefined that code to outlaw behavior that aided the landlords or weakened the anti-rent movement. As the huge crowds of paleface supporters attested, many community members endorsed the Indians as the legitimate enforcers of community norms.

Just as important, the Indians continued to give voice to a personalist and particularist worldview that their associations and electoral organizations had abandoned. Where paleface leaders spoke of universal principles and a vision of justice that applied indiscriminately to all white men, the Indians sought to protect the specific kin and neighbors who made up their communities. The prophet of the Rensselaer County tribes assured his “white brethren” that the Indians “were not contending for their own rights merely, but for the benefit of their neighbors also; that they were blood connexions of many who stood around them.” They enforced a conception of justice that took into account the individual character and standing of the individuals with whom they dealt. They nursed abiding grudges against particular lawmen and treated them with special harshness. One such lawman was Bill

Snyder, an Albany County deputy sheriff notorious for his abusive language and bearing toward tenants. When the Helderberg Indians captured Snyder and gave him a thrashing in September 1841, a Helderberger immortalized the fight in a song, "Big Bill Snyder," that was sung throughout the leasehold district. Anonymous letters bore witness to similar grudges. One threatened a landlord's agent with "TAR AND FEATHER" and "A DOSE OF PISTLS PILS" and closed with the telling line: "THE PUBLIC FEELING IS AGAINST YOU."⁴⁰

The braves also served the special needs of the young, landless men who joined their ranks. Above all, participation in the tribes was fun. H. Scott recruited Barbour Stafford to his local tribe by telling Stafford that "it was nothing but fun & almost every boy was joining it." Only after establishing this did Scott add that "it was a good cause." The tribes provided farm boys with an opportunity to fraternize with other boys, to vent aggression, and to engage in an exotic and fun ritual. They also afforded occasion for feasting and drinking. As with skimetons, Indian ritual demanded that outsiders treat the braves to food and liquor. The landlord Anthony Livingston convinced a tribe that had cornered him to let him leave town by "furnishing refreshments." The Earle family of Andes set out "wheat bread and butter, . . . veal, pork," and an entire calf "cooked in pieces" for the tribes that came to stop a distress sale on their farm.⁴¹

On a deeper level, the Indians helped their members cope with their subordinate and insecure status in their communities. As we have seen, many farmers and artisans were adopting a new ethic of temperance and self-restraint, new forms of time-discipline, and new "businesslike" methods—and imposing these new habits on their (mostly young) hired laborers. The opportunity to take on an "Indian" identity permitted these same laborers to abandon this regimentation and self-restraint: to feast and drink; to dance, run, and ride their horses with abandon; to vent anger—in short, to act like savages. And it allowed them to do so without calling into question their own (white) respectability, for they projected their uncivilized behavior onto a distant race.⁴²

"Indian" identity also permitted young laborers to affirm their manhood at a time when it was in question. Lacking the usual badges of manhood—property, dominion over wives and children, the vote—the natives claimed their manhood in different ways. Their overwhelmingly martial tone—their fantastic display of weapons, their war whoops, their elaborate threats, their feats of horsemanship—flaunted their manhood. So too did their stance as selfless protectors of their (implicitly female) communities, as a song penned in their honor affirmed:

From rocky mountains we are come,
To free our lands from slavery,
Never again to see our home
Till we execute our bravery.

Your pleasant homes you shall enjoy,
We boldly have avowed it,
Your peace the tyrants would destroy,
But we will not allow it.

Our tawny arm is stretched out still,
To shield you and protect you,
Our dearest blood we'll freely spill
We never will neglect you.⁴³

The benefits of "Indian" identity went even further, allowing those who appropriated it to reverse the usual channels of subordination and receive "marked deference" from their superiors. When a Rensselaer County brave died in 1844, some 2,500 undisguised men, women, and children attended his funeral. The procession to the ceremony conformed to the Indians' hierarchy of honor and authority. Five chiefs rode in front, 96 braves followed on horseback, and the palefaces brought up the rear. Upon arriving, the war chief gave the order to dismount, crying out, "Let some of the white men tie your horses." Several spectators "seized the horses with great alacrity." When ordered to be silent, the crowd hushed. Even the officiating ministers obeyed the command of the braves. The Indians' ritual world could serve the same function as an early modern carnival, allowing those near the bottom of the social scale to overturn their subordination and, for a moment, lord it over their superiors.⁴⁴

In one respect, the natives upheld the economic interests of the young and landless: by defending the right of community members to take resources from common lands. When a subagent for Robert L. Livingston confiscated the timber that trespassers had cut from the "landlord's commons" in Woodstock, a band of Indians tarred and feathered him and threw him from a low ridge. Similarly, the Rensselaer County Indians assaulted a tenant who tried to haul away the timber that trespassers had cut on a timber lot he owned. In doing so, they defended a practice that allowed all community members, even those without land, access to natural resources.⁴⁵

The Indians did nothing to pit their interests against those of their older and more prosperous neighbors, however. Although they were the objects of exploitation in two overlapping systems of labor and authority—the family and wage labor—they never challenged, or even pointed out, that exploitation. Rather, they sought to protect the former system and to affirm their own masculine worthiness within it. Their defense of common rights was not a challenge to the inequalities prevalent in leasehold communities but an attempt to preserve a practice that helped young men to acquire the money needed to become full members in those communities. Like the anti-rent associations, the Indians sought to defend an idealized version of household production; they asserted their special needs and interests *within* that system of production, not against it.

Exclusions

For all its egalitarianism, the anti-renters' social vision was highly exclusive and hierarchical. Male insurgents defined themselves in universalist terms: as producers and as republican citizens. Their movement, they insisted, was in essence a struggle for the right of all producers to the fruits of their labor and for the right of all citizens to dignity, independence, and political power. But not everyone qualified as a citizen or a producer. Male association members sustained a myth that they alone did the work of the farm or workshop in order to provide for dependent, nonproducing women and children. "Why is it," asked Joseph Hoag, "that while their father labors assiduously from early morn till late at night . . . he cannot have the satisfaction of seeing his family benefitted by his constant toil . . . ?"⁴⁶ Similarly, when male anti-renters spoke of "citizens," they meant men. At a Fourth of July celebration in Kortright, Erastus Root proposed a toast to this "large and respectable convocation of my fellow citizens." He then continued: "The ladies, too, add grace and dignity to the meeting." For such men, the moral attributes held to be the foundation of republican government—virtue, independence, and patriotic courage—were distinctly masculine. One movement leader warned his readers that if they failed to defend the republic from land monopoly, "you are *not* acting either a *just* or a *manly* part toward those countless millions whose bondage or freedom . . . is staked upon the momentous issue. Meet the necessity like a man. Come to the rescue of our institutions while there is still time."⁴⁷ To the anti-renters, the capacity and the duty to sustain the republic through engagement in public life rested in men alone.

Male activists did, however, accord women a role in redeeming the republic. A movement song expressed it best:

Come join the anti-renters,
Ye young men bold and strong,
And with a warm and cheerful zeal,
Come help the cause along.

Oh, that will be joyful, joyful, joyful
When Patroonery is no more!

Come join the anti-renters!
Ye men of riper years,
And save your wives and children dear
From grief and bitter tears.

Oh, it will be joyful, joyful, joyful
When Patroonery is no more!

Come join the anti-renters!
Ye dames and maidens fair,

And breathe around us in our path
Affections hallowed air.

Oh, it will be joyful, joyful, joyful,
When women cheer us on.⁴⁸

Just as male anti-renters depicted men's economic labors as support for the women and children in their families, so too did they see men's public labors—including the anti-rent movement itself—as protection to dependent women and children. But women did have a role: to cheer their men on. Drawing from notions of republican womanhood and newer ideas from the cult of domesticity, men in the movement believed that women were to do so primarily as wives and mothers. The anti-renters of Schoharie county noted that anti-rent women were "too proud to nurse a slave" and proclaimed that since they were to be "the mothers of the coming generation, we have faith . . . that under their tuition, a sentiment will go forth that will sweep the last vestiges of Patroonery from the land." Similarly, an anti-rent speaker told the young ladies at a Delaware county meeting to "discard all who are not friendly to equal rights." To the married women in the audience, he recommended that if their husbands' efforts on behalf of the cause flagged, they "crowd so close to their heels that they will be compelled to go ahead." Women were to inspire moral restraint as well as patriotism in their men. One anti-rent speaker noted with pleasure the presence of so many ladies in the audience, for "their presence will aid me in preserving that order and decorum so necessary in all public assemblies."⁴⁹

Just as they expected females to play an auxiliary and indirect role in public life, male insurgents did not expect women to enjoy directly the rights for which they fought. Land, the cornerstone of the anti-renters' good society, was out of the reach of the vast majority of farm women, and no anti-renter challenged the inheritance practices and property laws that kept the soil out of female hands. Similarly, militant tenants did not think women deserved the equality and self-determination for which men fought. Nor did anti-rent men imagine that women had a claim to the fruits of their labor superior to that of their fathers or husbands. In the eyes of male tenants, women were not autonomous social actors; they were subordinate members of their fathers' and husbands' households. The rights for which the anti-renters fought were to rest in men, as the representatives of households; women would enjoy the benefits of these rights *through* their men.⁵⁰

Despite their exclusion from the rights anti-renters sought to secure, tenant women had an enormous stake in the movement's success. The money they earned by making butter, cheese, and eggs, as well as the money they saved by gardening, sewing, canning, spinning, and weaving, accounted for a significant portion of the property that the anti-rent movement sought to defend. Overdue rents and landlords' demands for repayment threatened their security, prosperity, and place in a stable community as much as men's.

Thus women participated in the movement and, like their men, usually did so in ways that reflected broader gender conventions. Occasionally, they brought their domestic skills to the aid of the movement, as when the ladies of Berne presented a banner to the Albany County association, "most chastely and beautifully decorated with roses, and inscribed 'A Free Soil—Bern is Coming.'" Similarly, women took oaths as Indians—"not indeed," one male activist said, "that they might be permitted to wear calico and bear arms in this crusade against their foes, but that they might be the honored dress makers and ornamenters of masks for their husbands, sons or lovers, the brave heroes." More frequently, women performed an ornamental role. Anti-rent Fourth of July processions often included 27 ladies dressed in white to represent the states of the Union. When Ira Harris, an immensely popular anti-rent leader, toured Delaware county, "the ladies" greeted him at several towns, "waving their white handkerchiefs to greet him onward in the great work he has just begun."⁵¹

Still, a significant number of leasehold women acted less like cheerleaders for activist men than like independent actors in a collective effort. In the process, they sometimes violated the gender conventions celebrated by the anti-rent movement. When posses poured through Columbia, Schoharie, and Delaware Counties in search of Indians in 1845, tenant women acted as sentinels, blowing tin dinner horns to warn the braves when lawmen approached. They also hid the fugitives and ran their farms when husbands had to flee. In many places, they took over the tasks their "Indian" brothers and sons had performed. In Columbia County, women "behaved very rudely" toward the posses, "hooting and following most abusively at them." In New Scotland, they destroyed the wagon of a deputy who conducted a distress sale.⁵²

Many female anti-renters saw in the movement an opportunity to extend their sphere of public action and to voice their own grievances with the leasehold system. In 1845, women began writing to the anti-rent newspapers, passing their own resolutions at anti-rent meetings, and separately petitioning public officials. Most correspondents noted that it was unusual for women to address the public on political matters, and many denied that they wished to intrude upon male prerogatives. But, they said, the leasehold system and the actions of its defenders had so endangered the well-being of their households and their communities that they felt compelled to speak. A "Farmer's Daughter" asked, "how long shall our children go unfed, unclothed, uneducated,—how long shall we be required to live in log cabins—how long deprived of churches . . . ? As long as Patroonery is permitted to exist." In May of 1845, when *posses comitatus* were sweeping through Delaware county to arrest anti-rent Indians, several women from the county petitioned a member of the state assembly to ask for an end to martial law. "We know that legislation is not woman's province," they wrote, but martial law had subjected "the female part of the community" to "unparalleled indignities."

Our husbands are driven from their homes . . . ; our defenseless houses are broken open in the dead of night and ransacked at will. Even the paraphernalia of female apparel has been rudely rummaged over, for the amusement of unprincipled young men. . . . It is intolerable, indeed, to see our floors and carpets trampled over by the dirty feet of the sheriff and his posse. . . . Women have been dragged from their beds in some instances, and otherwise grossly insulted.⁵³

Here was a version of anti-rentism that purported to grow organically from women's duties as wives and mothers. Female anti-renters aimed not at changing those duties but at fulfilling them; doing so required that they intervene in public life.⁵⁴ But they affirmed only those responsibilities that were celebrated in male anti-renters' mythology. They emphasized their duties as housekeepers and nurturers of children rather than their production of commodities: gardening, spinning, weaving, and dairying. Along with other antebellum white Americans, male and female anti-renters rendered women's productive work invisible.⁵⁵ Similarly, even as women acted as sentinels and harassed lawmen, they echoed their husbands' depiction of them as defenseless, passive females who needed the protection of men. Nor did they challenge the assumption that land, independence, equality, and the full fruits of their labor were to benefit women only through their men, as subordinate members of male-headed households.

Women were not the only group in leasehold society to be excluded from the community of producers. Anti-rent activists never acknowledged the presence of landless and land-poor men in the hill towns, nor did they address their right to property. A similar disdainful silence hung over the rights of the handful of African Americans who lived in the leasehold towns. Anti-renters paid scant attention to these residents; when they did mention their black neighbors, they used them as a dusky mirror by which to measure their own degradation. Like white antebellum wage earners, the anti-renters saw black people as "anti-citizens"—objects who represented all the dangers of servility and degradation in a republican society. One militant wrote that, after 25 years of petty humiliations at the hand of his landlord, he finally understood the degrading nature of the leasehold system when he was forced into the company of African Americans. While attempting to speak to his landlord, he was sent to the basement to eat with the house servants: "I had the blushing honor to eat with the negroes!" It is doubtful that many anti-renters saw such people as candidates for membership in their society of freeholders.⁵⁶

Ironically, it was the Indians who made the racial exclusions of the movement most clear. The natives' promise to withdraw to their home beyond the Rocky Mountains affirmed the inevitability of Indian removal and the settlement of American lands by exclusively white communities. And it perpetuated the myth that the Indians cheerfully accepted their fate. Behind this myth lay the belief that "progress" was an exclusively white affair, one that re-

quired the disappearance of aboriginal peoples. Like most antebellum white men, the anti-renters did not listen to actual native peoples or to African Americans; rather, they created an image of racial others that served their own purposes. In doing so, they gave voice to a class identity that was unmistakably white. In promoting their egalitarian class agenda, the anti-renters simultaneously helped advance the multiclass cause of white supremacy and Indian removal.⁵⁷

The anti-renters thus offered a clear vision of freedom. To them, a "free" society was one of independent proprietors, where male producers commanded family labor and met one another as equals in the marketplace and in politics. In such a society, every adult white man would enjoy the fruits of his labor, independence, political and cultural equality, economic security, free trade, and a secure place in a stable community. Beneath this equality lay numerous inequalities and exclusions. The anti-renters sought to abolish "unnatural" class hierarchies and to retain those based on the "natural" distinctions of gender, age, and race. Just as important, as landlessness, wage labor, and conflicts over the commons escalated, most militants abandoned those conceptions of property rights that provided a way to achieve their vision of freedom, embracing instead ideas about property that implicitly buttressed land monopoly.

Anti-renters articulated their vision of freedom with two voices: one that spoke the universalist language of natural rights, popular sovereignty, and party politics; one fluent in the local, corporate language of the skimmeton. These two voices should remind us that politics for the antebellum producing classes was not simply a matter of partisan enthusiasm and voting. Instead, people who worked with their hands engaged in several kinds of "politics" at once, with each strategy and style displaying a distinct political identity and serving a particular set of material and strategic needs.⁵⁸

This is not to say that the anti-renters or other members of the producing classes eschewed electoral politics. They fervently believed in the redemptive power of the ballot box and the petition, and they looked to them for the final solution to the leasehold crisis. It was in the arena of electoral and legislative politics that the fate of the anti-renters' vision of freedom would be determined.