

## The “Hot Water” Rebellion of 1798

by Ann Bartholomew

In 1798, the federal government of the new United States levied its first direct tax on the property of American citizens. In eastern Pennsylvania, assessors were largely Quakers and Moravians recruited by the administration of President John Adams to assess their neighbors, primarily first- and second-generation German immigrants of the Lutheran and Reformed faiths.

Pennsylvania-German settlers here in Macungie Township protested the assessment, believing that the tax was illegal and was to be used for purposes contrary to the goals of the Revolution they had supported. Among their leaders was Captain Henry Jarret, Justice of the Peace for Macungie Township, which included present-day Lower Macungie.

The protest was the last of three populist uprisings against federal authority in the early republic. The first two, the Shays and Whiskey rebellions, were both armed insurrections. The protestors in our area used nonviolent methods while simultaneously petitioning Congress to repeal the Direct Tax law and the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. They believed they were upholding the principle of popular sovereignty rather than attacking it.

Tax assessors were blocked from doing their work by various means, mostly threats and clubs, but also, at least in Macungie, by women pouring hot water out of second-story windows onto their heads. Some say the “hot water” was occasionally night soil and that chamber pots were dumped onto the assessors, but this is strictly anecdotal.

The resistance became potentially violent in March of 1799, when John Fries (pronounced “freeze”) of Milford Township led about 100 men, most of them Revolutionary War veterans, to Bethlehem to accost a federal marshal who had arrested a group of Macungie residents for interfering with federal assessors. Their intent was to free the prisoners and prevent Marshall Nichols from taking the prisoners to Philadelphia for trial. The attempted rescue was John Fries’s “rebellion.” The prisoners were released when both sides stepped back from armed conflict.

The entire incident was blown out of proportion by the highly partisan press of the time, and fears of a genuine insurrection grew. President Adams’s administration responded by ordering military force against the Macungie men. The tax resisters were arrested and charged with sedition and treason. Two, David Shaeffer and Michael Schmoyer, died in prison during a yellow fever epidemic. Fries was sentenced to death, but pardoned by Adams at the last minute. The pardon split the already fractured Federalists and was a factor in their losses in the election of 1800, which led to the rise of the Democratic Republican Party.

Sources: Macungie Historical Society, 2004; Paul Douglas Newman, *Fries’s Rebellion: The Enduring Struggle for the American Revolution*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.