

The Fries Rebellion

a short-film sponsorship proposal

Introduction

In anticipation of *America250* celebrations to be held nationwide in 2026, the Lower Macungie Township Historical Society has prepared a script to produce a 30-minute film about *The Fries Rebellion*. In this docudrama, places and events of the Fries Rebellion are seen through the eyes of a modern schoolgirl. Audiences of all ages will be entertained and informed about an insurrection that occurred in 1798-1799, primarily in the German-speaking populations in and surrounding the “Lehigh Hills” region of then Northampton, eastern Berks, upper Bucks, and upper Montgomery counties of Pennsylvania.

Macungie Township in the late 1790s was a hotbed of patriotic protest. Local farmers and others joined together to voice strident opposition to the way they perceived the new nation was going under President John Adams’s administration, and rebelled against a new federal tax. Named after its leader, John Fries (pronounced “freeze”), the Fries Rebellion made waves at the highest levels of the new government.

To date, the Quakertown, Upper Milford, and Alburty-Lockridge historical societies, the Sun Inn Preservation Association in Bethlehem, the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center in Kutztown, the Mercer Museum in Doylestown, and Lehigh University’s Professor Scott Paul Gordon, Ph.D., are planning to collaborate on this historic project. Several of the scenes will be filmed at original sites that still exist. In addition to being distributed via various media outlets, this film is expected to become an essential tool for schoolteachers. It will provide insights into the ongoing, unfolding American experiment, highlight many aspects of our local heritage, and be a legacy for generations to come.

The Lower Macungie Township Historical Society is seeking your sponsorship to help bring this film to fruition. Please let us know if you are interested in receiving further information about the various levels of support and provide the name of the best person in your organization to contact.

Film Synopsis

Kayla, a teenager who recently moved with her parents to the Macungie area, has a history report due for a school project. Her mother, who grew up in Macungie, suggests the Fries Rebellion as a topic, even though she knows very little about it. Kayla finds reading books challenging and instead relies on other ways to access information. At the Lower Macungie Township Historical Society’s museum, Kayla is introduced to her uncle Steve, a history professor at a local college. After he realizes that she is extremely sensitive and that a literature search will not work for her, he takes her on a driving tour so she can see and experience some of the places where the Rebellion took place.

While on the tour through our beautiful countryside, Steve shares many details and answers Kayla’s questions about the Pennsylvania Germans who lived in the area, late 18th-century ideologies and politics, and the Rebellion. Relevant black-and-white graphic images and sepia-tone photos are used to highlight Steve’s narrative.

Their first stop is at the Red Lion Inn (formerly Enoch Robert’s Tavern) in Quakertown. A charming waiter named Dan, who is a former student of Steve’s, serves their lunch. After Dan’s hand accidentally touches Kayla’s, the restaurant/bar reverts to a 1798 setting. In her “vision,” Dan is wearing colonial garb and chatting with other patrons at the bar, including John Fries. Outside, a drunken militia tries to attack two tax assessors. Fries intervenes and orders the angry mob to halt just as attempts are being made to pull the assessors off their horses. The vision fades, she is perplexed, and Steve begins to appreciate her intuitive gifts. He interprets and answers questions about what she might have seen in her technicolor vision.

Steve's narrative continues as they drive to the next historic location – the Jamison Publick House in Geryville (formerly Conrad Marks's Tavern). After exiting the car, Kayla touches a historic marker outside the tavern and has a vision of an assessor being harassed by late 18th-century protestors, shouting, "No window tax!" A bit dazed, she returns to the car, and they resume their tour. Kayla asks, "What's a window tax? Did they tax computers, too?" Steve provides more information.

They proceed to Hendrixson's furniture store (formerly John Shymer's Tavern) in Shimersville. There, Kayla touches an exterior stone wall and envisions a large crowd gathered inside the tavern, signing a petition for Congress to repeal the new tax law. After a speech by John Shymer, about 60 men follow him outside and swing their hats, exclaiming "Huzzah for Liberty." As they drive away, Steve continues to explain other developments, including threats of violence to assessors, that occurred at that time.

Next stop is the Buckeye Tavern (formerly Henry Shankweiler's Tavern) in Macungie. Kayla touches an exterior stone wall there and suddenly is a witness to being in the midst of approximately 50 men gathered outside the tavern. Federal Marshall William Nichols and two tax assessors move toward the crowd to arrest Henry Shankweiler. Henry runs into his barn as other rebels block further entry. Henry rants from inside the barn and refuses to go with Nichols to Philadelphia, but eventually agrees to meet him later and post bail. The crowd cheers as Nichols and the assessors leave. After Kayla's vision ends, Steve interprets what she "witnessed" and describes the events that had occurred there on March 4, 1799, as well as the aftermath. The next day, Nichols and the assessors returned to Bethlehem with 18 prisoners.

From there, Steve drives by Lower Macungie Township properties previously owned by rebels Philip Wescoe, Captain Henry "Light Horse" Jarrett, Harmon Hartman, and Michael Schmeyer, while telling their eye-opening stories.

They stop at the parking lot of the 1760 House (formerly Peter Trexler's Tavern) in Trexlertown. As Kayla touches the stone exterior wall of the tavern, she envisions Captain Henry Jarrett's company of light horse riding into town. They meet a crowd of loud protestors who are attempting to threaten and intimidate would-be deponents for cooperating with Judge William Henry and assessor Jacob Eyerle. Captain Jarrett keeps the crowd under control. Steve explains that a few weeks later, Judge Henry would relabel tax opponents as insurrectionists and traitors to the country.

After a lunch break, Steve and Kayla drive to the site (now behind Embassy Bank along Route 100 in Macungie) where tax resister Jacob Schaeffer lived. There, Kayla picks up an old pottery shard amongst the remains of a recently demolished building. In a very emotional scene, Kayla visualizes Schaeffer frantically gathering supplies prior to his escape from approaching federal troops. Just after he leaves, his pregnant wife (who looks like Kayla) goes into labor. When federal troops arrive, her mother dissuades them from entering the birthing room, but they vigorously search the house and barn for Jacob. They thrust their sabers into haylofts and threaten a young boy with hanging unless he reveals the location of his employer. Again, Steve interprets the vision, and they continue to downtown Macungie (then Millerstown).

While driving, Steve points out the location where David Schaeffer and his wife lived in the village. He tells the story about when David's wife, later known as "Grandy Miller," purportedly poured hot water, or perhaps the contents of chamber pots, on the head of a tax assessor. Other women in the area also apparently doused federal officials with hot water, so the insurrection also became known as "the hot water rebellion."

Steve stops for a brief walk around town, and Kayla picks up a stone to throw in the Mountain Creek and has another vision. She sees old Reverend Jacob Van Buskirk sitting with his family, a Bible on his lap, in his home next to the creek. A bullet shatters his window. He's not hurt, but he and his family are shaken. Steve explains that the minister was an ardent supporter of President John Adams, so a rebel apparently made an attempt on his life.

Next, they head for the Sun Inn in Bethlehem, which served as the former headquarters of Federal Marshall Nichols. On the way, Steve talks about the attempt by Captain Henry Jarrett and other leaders of the Rebellion to rescue the 18 insurrectionists who were being held there. As they drive past the Commix Hotel on Emaus Avenue (formerly Martin Ritter's Tavern), Steve tells Kayla that several companies of light horse met there to begin their march to Bethlehem, while John Fries and his armed rebels marched from Conrad Marks's Tavern in Milford. The groups met at the wooden bridge over the Lehigh River in Bethlehem. A few men and the commanders rode from there to the Sun Inn to negotiate with Col. Nichols.

Steve and Kayla arrive in Bethlehem, park near the Sun Inn, and walk to the building. When Kayla touches a stone wall of the tavern, she has a terrifying vision. Judge Henry, assessor Eyerle and a few other government officials are hiding in an upstairs room. The prisoners are being held in another upstairs room and did not want to be rescued. John Fries, Henry Jarrett and Col. Nichols are in another room negotiating while the armed insurrectionists are downstairs screaming and fighting with the posse, guns are pointed. Kayla quickly pulls her hand off the wall, grabs Steve's arm, and says "We've gotta get out of here! Now!"

It takes a while for Kayla to compose herself during their return trip to the LMTHS museum. Steve explains the outcome of the attempted rescue. After a stand-off, a long day of failed negotiations, and more threats of bodily harm to the government agents, Nichols finally released the prisoners to John Fries. The insurgents left quickly and quietly and thought they had won. Kayla asks, "Did they really win?"

Steve explains the consequences of the rebels' siege. After they returned home and cooled down, many started to think about the legal implications of their actions and quietly stopped their objections to the House Tax Law. On March 12, President Adams called out a force of federal troops and began making wholesale arrests of the insurgents for overt acts of treason and overt acts of levying war against the United States. John Fries was arrested on April 5. Federal troops encamped in "Schaeffer's Woods" in Macungie from April 10 to 16 and terrorized residents while making arrests. General MacPherson ordered a general parade and review of more than 1,000 troops through the tiny town of Macungie to make an impression on the residents.

Thirty men were placed on trial in federal court. John Fries, Frederick Heaney, and John Gettman were convicted and sentenced to be hung. Macungie residents David Schaeffer, Michael Schmeyster, and Phillip Desch, all of whom were sentenced for treason, died from yellow fever while in prison in Norristown. Steve shares more information about others who received sentences and were fined. After Adams was defeated by Thomas Jefferson in the 1800 presidential election, he granted amnesty to all participants in the Fries Rebellion.

Back at the museum, Kayla thanks Uncle Steve Schaeffer for the amazing tour. She asks him to spell his name, so it's correct for her report. She suddenly looks dumfounded and asks, "Do you think you might be related to the Schaeffers that were in the rebellion?" He replies, "Yes, I am related...and so are you!"

Project Description

The Fries Rebellion film is a story about how a sensitive young girl's simple search for information transforms her understanding through profound retrocognitive experiences and informed interpretation.

Through the narrative, she learns about the culture of the Germans who settled in the "Lehigh Hills" region of the Northampton, eastern Berks, upper Bucks, and upper Montgomery counties of Pennsylvania in the early 18th century, and how that ethnic group felt marginalized under English rule. The self-sufficient Pennsylvania Germans established crossroad villages, churches, businesses, and prosperous farmsteads. German men of the Lutheran and Reformed faiths (the "Kirchenleute") served in the military alongside French soldiers during the Revolutionary War, in contrast to pacifist German sects like the Moravians, Mennonites, Anabaptists, and Schwenkfelders who did not bear arms. Still infused with the spirit of the Revolution, including that of the recent French Revolution, the Kirchenleute tried to define what "freedom" and "liberty" within the Constitution meant to them.

The U.S. Constitution was barely 10 years old when the government, controlled by the Federalists, created the first Direct Tax Act, which was a levy on land, houses, and slaves. President John Adams needed to raise money for the creation of a standing army because the country was involved in an undeclared trade war with France. The Federalists, who pushed for a strong and efficient central government, were also concerned about Napoleon's intentions for world domination. For a variety of reasons presented in the film's narrative, the tax especially infuriated the Kirchenleute, who already had a deep-seated fear of any type of taxation.

Kayla not only learns about local history and the ideological and political underpinnings of the Rebellion, but also asks about other late 18th-century cultural issues including slavery, disease, and transportation. Recognition and appreciation of her ancestry and inheritance of her unique sensitivity is perhaps her most important realization.

However, Kayla also experiences and sees that misguided charismatic leadership, fueled by anger, misinformation, fearmongering, bravado, and inflamed rhetoric can quickly turn a well-established, tight-knit community of peaceful neighbors into violent foes. Along the way, manipulated and innocent victims suffer until a new order arises out of chaos.

Through the juxtaposition of past and present and personal versus national interests, the film subtly addresses the ongoing search for what liberty, freedom, patriotism, loyalty, and duty mean in the United States of America.

The style of the film mixes a serious tone through narrative and imagery, fantasy through dramatic re-enactments of an earlier time, and establishes a genial relationship between the lead characters. Black-and-white or sepia-toned images reflect Steve's intellectually informed narrative in contrast to the full-color re-enactments of historical scenes "experienced" by Kayla.

Audience

This film will be relatable to a wide demographic. All generations will be able to understand, interpret, and emotionally respond to the meaning of the story. This film is expected to become an essential tool for schoolteachers. Viewers will likely reflect about the unique heritage of this region and the sensibilities of its late 18th-century residents, the region's important role in the early foundation of this country, and the ongoing unfolding of the American experiment.

Audience Reach

The film is intended to be distributed through various media outlets. These include TV networks, cable channels, and streaming services, in addition to being viewed in theaters, museums, at presentations for local historical society and tourism groups, and in classrooms, especially those located throughout southeastern Pennsylvania. To date, we have received letters of support from the East Penn and Bethlehem Area school districts.

Production Team and Budget

Our goal is to raise \$216,878 to produce this film and its supporting materials. Please see the attached proposal from creative production company *in the Wee hours* in association with *ubiFire*.

Timeline

The goal is to have funds in place by year's end and begin film production in early 2024. With this timing, the film's premiere and initial film festival run would commence mid-2024 to commemorate the 225th anniversary of the Fries Rebellion. Afterward, the film is expected to become widely available in 2025 in order to participate in *America250* celebrations nationwide.

Promotion

The film will be promoted through various social media sites, newspaper articles, regional historical society newsletters and membership lists, direct mailings, outreach to community organizations, and an opening night gala.

Sponsorship

The Lower Macungie Township Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) organization, so contributions are tax-deductible. We are awaiting approval from the PA Department of Community and Economic Development for Educational Improvement Organization designation; please refer to your tax accountant for specifics regarding Educational Improvement Tax Credits (EITC). Sponsorship is available for various levels of contribution. Direct donations can be made by

Personal Check (via our address): **LMTHS, P.O. Box 3722, Wescosville, PA 18106**

PayPal (via our website): <https://www.lmthistory.org/fries-rebellion.html>

Sponsors who would like to be recognized for their generous contributions in the categories below will receive the following benefits for their support:

CATEGORIES

	Donation	Benefits (optional)
B.-Gen. McPherson's Patron	\$ 25,000+	Executive Producer screen credit; gala address; deluxe signage; appearance in film; website & FB ads; gala program ad; 12 tickets to opening night gala; advance film download
Col. Nichol's Endowment	\$ 20,000	Co-Executive Producer screen credit; signage; appearance in film; website & FB ads; gala program ad; 10 tickets to opening night gala; advance film download
Judge Henry's Hedge	\$ 15,000	Producer screen credit; appearance in film; website ad; gala program ad, 8 tickets to night opening gala; advance film download
Henry Jarrett's Trustee	\$ 10,000	Associate Producer screen credit; website ad; gala program ad; 6 tickets to opening night gala; advance film download
John Fries's Fund	\$ 5,000	Sponsor screen credit; gala program ad; 4 tickets to opening night gala; advance film download
Grandy Miller's Pot	\$ 2,500	Special Thanks screen credit; 2 tickets to opening night gala; advance film download

About the Lower Macungie Township Historical Society

The Lower Macungie Township Historical Society was formed in 1989, initially to save a log house in Wescosville from demolition. Since that time, this very active, all-volunteer society has expanded its mission to include educational outreach, programs, videos and social media; seasonal events at the log house; publication of newsletters, research articles, and books; archives of veterans' biographies; documentation of historic structures; operation of the Bartholomew Center for the Preservation of Lower Macungie Township History museum at Camp Olympic; and collaboration with schools, other local historical societies, and related groups.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. Please let me know if you would like any additional information.

Sincerely,

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