

## THE FRIES REBELLION OF 1798–1799

You will hear of America250 and America250PA more and more frequently as we approach the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The Lower Macungie Township Historical Society historical society has made a major contribution to the national and state commemorations with a short film about the Fries Rebellion, which took place in the counties of southeastern Pennsylvania in 1798 and 1799. Much of its activity was among the “church people” of present-day Lower Macungie.

John Fries, from Bucks County, was a charismatic, highly energetic man, an auctioneer or “vendue crier” who traveled frequently for work. Fries gathered supporters throughout southeastern Pennsylvania wherever he spoke out in opposition to actions by the Federalist government. The activities of Fries and his followers and the heavy-handed suppression by the national government are depicted in this movie.

Many of our members have ancestors who participated in this revolt against the 1798 house tax, a new federal tax proposed by the Federalists and President John Adams to help pay for a standing army and to build up the new navy so the country could be prepared for military action against France. This would be the first national tax on property and would support the first peacetime standing army. Pennsylvania Germans in our area valued the contributions of France, an ally in the recent War for Independence, and still considered the French to be friends of the United States.

Our forebears were angered by the tax proposal, and infuriated when the Alien and Sedition Acts were adopted in 1798:

These laws raised the residency requirements for citizenship from 5 to 14 years, authorized the president to deport “aliens,” and permitted their arrest, imprisonment, and deportation during wartime. The Sedition Act made it a crime for American citizens to “print, utter, or publish ... any false, scandalous, and malicious writing” about the government.

The laws were directed against Democratic-Republicans, the party typically favored by new citizens. The only journalists prosecuted under the Sedition Act were editors of Democratic-Republican newspapers.

*(Source: Archives.gov)*

The political issues of the 1790s were complex, and took place during a period of protest and revolution in many places around the world. In the United States the war for independence was over but democracy was still evolving. In its simplest terms, the Lutheran and Reformed Pennsylvania-German farmers in our area (called collectively “Kirchenleute” or “church people” to differentiate them from the various sects that had settled in the state) believed that the war for independence they had just fought was not producing the results they wanted or expected. Many felt they were being treated unfairly, while land speculators and major landowners were being given advantages. Similar issues underpinned the earlier Shays’ Rebellion (Massachusetts, 1786–1787) and the Whiskey Rebellion (western Pennsylvania, 1791–1794).

A contributing factor to the outrage expressed by the families in our area was that the assessors were primarily English-speaking, often Quakers who were not local men. More often than not, local men refused to be assessors.

Most of the protestors in the Fries Rebellion supported the new Republican party, and believed in a continuing form of democracy in which the people could have a voice in governmental decision-making. However, their peaceful attempts to influence the discussion were unsuccessful. On the other hand, the Federalists, who controlled the Presidency and Congress, believed that after representatives were elected, they alone were to make the decisions.

The rebellion led by John Fries was the last tax revolt in the new United States, after Shays’ Rebellion

and the Whiskey Rebellion. Fries himself was prosecuted and convicted twice for treason; the first conviction was thrown out on a technicality, but he was sentenced to hang after the second conviction. Only President Adams's last-minute pardon saved him. The judge in the second trial, Samuel Chase of Maryland, was impeached in 1804 for bias in two sedition trials, one of them being that of John Fries. He was subsequently acquitted by the Senate.

The government was intent on crushing opposition, not in discussing the issues that had made citizens so angry. It is generally accepted that these insurrections were one of several factors that influenced the decline of the Federalist party. The Fries Rebellion in particular was significant as it occurred the year before the all-important election of 1800, when the Republicans emerged victorious and a peaceful transfer of power took place—despite the fears of many partisans.

Today, we think of the house tax as an invaluable tool for learning about the past: its data have been used by genealogists and historians for years. But it was so much more important. This movie, conceived of and written by Sarajane Williams, is designed for all ages to come to a better understanding of our sometimes tumultuous early democracy. The issues of the late 1790s are presented in our movie in a way that makes them understandable.

A story guide for teachers, with a lot of background information and a list of references, has been prepared so further discussion can take place in schools.