

Historical Highlights

Sand Lake Historical Society

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Dr. Smith Boughton and his house

Editor's Note: In Bernd Foerster's *Architecture Worth Saving in Rensselaer County, New York*, there is a picture of Dr. Smith Boughton's House. It is on Route 43 in the Alps, located in the Town of Nassau a short distance from the Sand Lake town line. The house had been in very poor condition and surrounded by trash. When improvements were noticed, it was discovered that the house had new owners. Mark Lewis and his wife, both interested in historic preservation, had purchased the house. Who was this Doctor? We local people should know.

THE CALICO HOUSE

By Joanna & Mark Lewis

A historical marker in the front yard reads *Home of Big Thunder, Dr. Smith Boughton, leader of the Anti Rent War of 1838-1844*. On page 189 of *Architecture Worth Saving, Rensselaer County NY.*, there appears a picture of the house, located on State Route 43 in Alps, with the following narrative: "Some buildings are worth saving for reasons other than their architectural distinction. This modest house, for example, should be preserved because it was the home of Dr. Smith Boughton, who played an important role in history as leader of the Anti Rent Wars, the rebellion against Feudalism in the United States."

According to Don Carpentier, an expert on historical buildings, the house was probably built between 1799 and 1810. This would have made the house between 29 and 38 years old when Dr. Boughton and his 16-year-old bride Mary Bailey moved in. The house was built on the land of Amasa Bailey, Mary's father, and was probably given to the newlyweds as a wedding gift.

We believe the original house had four rooms downstairs and two rooms and an attic upstairs. An addition in the 1950s add-

ed a kitchen and one large dining room. In our renovation process we subdivided the 1950s dining room to add another downstairs bedroom. The "Sitting Room" (our designation) has a wonderful, well-used stone fireplace and semi-cathedral ceiling. Although far from elegant, the house has a charm and beauty all its own. In our renovation, which by the way is far from complete, we have tried to keep to colors and furnishings that would complement the era of the house.

Naturally, we are eager to learn more of the history of the house. We are told it was used as a way station in the "Underground Railroad"; there are many features in the house that would seem to bear this out. If anyone having information on the house would please pass it to us, we would be most appreciative.

By the way, in honor of Dr. Boughton and his Calico Indians, we have chosen to name the house "Calico House." Those who have a true interest in this important part of history are welcome to stop, have a cup of coffee and see where Dr. Boughton lived. But please call (674-3995) before you come!



Smith Boughton house as it appeared in the 1960s; from Foerster's *Architecture Worth Saving in Rensselaer County, New York*.

Dr. Smith Boughton, a.k.a. Big Thunder

By Mary French

Dr. Smith A. Boughton was born on his father's and uncle's leaseholder farm in Stephentown on September 1, 1810. Soon his father moved across the river to Rensselaerville in the West Manor where Smith grew up and helped his father farm to pay the rents to the patroon, Stephen Van Rensselaer III. At the age of 17, Smith entered Middlebury College in Vermont and graduated in 1831 with a medical degree.

He was always a sort of radical. In college he led a student protest against compulsory church attendance, and, during a political protest in Canada, he joined the American Volunteers. In 1839 he settled in Alps, town of Nassau. In 1840 he married Mary, the 16-year-old daughter of Amasa Bailey, a leading farmer of the Alps, and continued his medical practice.

As a boy, Boughton was aware of the farm lease or rents paid by the farmers to the Patroons. This was in reality a feudal-type system carried out long after the original seven years the renters had agreed to. "The tenants realized too late they should have received leases before they spent seven rent-free years of toil clearing and improving their leased acres. They were dissatisfied with their leases, but, after having suffered through seven years of hardship, few of them were courageous enough to refuse the leases and again pioneer into the wilderness to clear and to plant." (Thero, 1966) This feudal-type system had many of the farmers in revolt and refusing to pay their rent. They became known as Anti-Renters.

Seeing this as a need to be set right, Boughton joined forces with Burton Thomas of West Sand Lake. Boughton was considered a master of "rustic rhetoric" and, as a public speaker, condemned the patroons — William P. Van Rensselaer and his brother Stephen IV — and preached resistance. He was an organizer, traveling from the East Manor to the West Manor and back in his effort to unite the farmers as anti-renters in formal local associations with officers

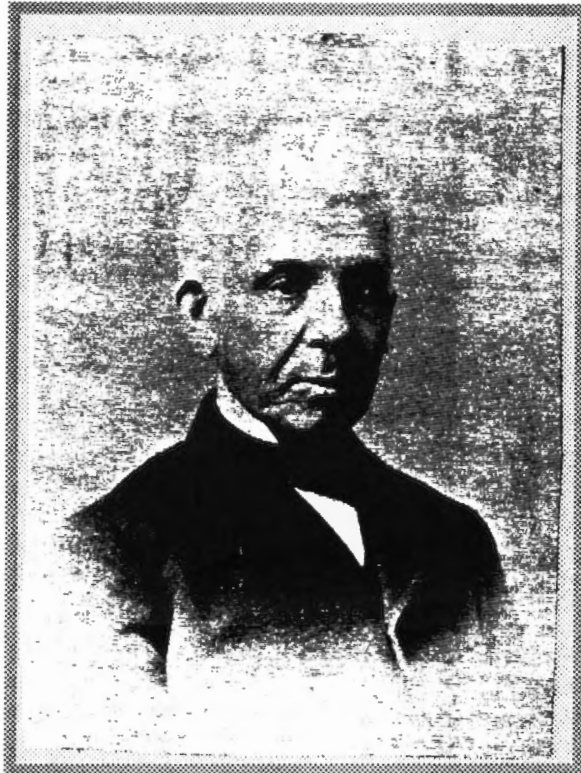
and treasuries. He apparently was fitted for the task for he was described by his best friends as a "zealous doctor, a handsome young man of genteel deportment and great personal charm, cultured and highly educated," though his enemies looked at him "with jaundiced eye [and] insisted he was only a loose-lipped, knocked-kneed, ignorant, uncouth adventurer." (Thero, p.50)

Throughout 1843, Doctor Boughton, Burton Thomas and lesser-known leaders had ridden over the two manors securing signatures for a petition to the State Legislature for relief of the leasehold system. Little was accomplished legally, but skillful organization was occurring within the anti-rent forces.

The report of the Judiciary Committee in April 1844 made it clear that there was no hope of achieving victory over the Van Rensselaers via purely political or legal avenues. (Thero, p. 66) Long before May 1844, the anti-rent leaders, foreseeing the legal avenue blocked, decided on straightforward use of force to gain their ends. The past two years of Dr. Boughton's planning and organization had resulted in a pledged membership of more than four thousand anti-renters in the East Manor Association. The West Manor claimed even more, and Schoharie County membership was in the thousands.

Tenants established local chapters of the associations, set initiation fees and dues, and agreed on meeting places and warning signals. Tar barrels burning along the East Manor roadsides became a common sight as anti-renters built up their courage and issued a warning to the sheriff or Van Rensselaer agents. To arm the farmers *en masse* would bring the State militia into the manors and bring bloodshed or surrender.

Doctor Boughton wrote: "Our all was at stake. The law was on their side and we were at their mercy. We resolved to adopt the same kind of protection resorted to by the people of Boston when the tea was



Dr Smith A. Boughton, circa 1885; photo by Shroder, Troy, N.Y. From *Tin Horns and Calico*.



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thrown into the water of the bay. We raised in the counties a large force of men to prevent the landlords from executing their threats. This force was to be on hand to protect the tenants from legal hounds. They were to appear only on certain occasions. They were not to disturb the community in any other form. Socially or legally, no one knew who they were, except the individuals. This force was to be used only until we could get judicial or legislative redress." (Thero, p. 68)

So that a sheriff, who might be harassed to turn back by the anti-renters, could not recognize any of the farmers and arrest them at a later date, the Indian costume of calico and mask, first used in March 1841, was adopted on a manor-wide scale. They agreed to announce the advance of the sheriff of the manor by blowing a dinner horn as a signal to the Indian Boys militia. Chiefs of the "Indians" took on names such as "Yellow Cloud" or "Red Jacket." Dr. Boughton became the famous "Big Thunder." Thomas Thompson of Hoags Corners became "Tuscarora"; Frank Abbot, leader of the Nassau-Alps Anti-Rent Association, which met at Martin's Tavern in Hoags Corners, was known as "Little Thunder." The goal of the "Indians" was to prevent any of the landlord agents from continuing the eviction of tenant farmers until the Anti-Rent political process, already at work in Albany, could develop an alternative to the rent system. (Big Thunder Day Flyer)

"Soon a well-trained and disciplined army of about ten thousand men were ready for whatever might come. No two costumes were alike in color, style, or decoration and their arms were makeshift

and varied — muskets, pistols, spears, hatchets, and axes, cheese knives, bits of scythes, and clubs. Some of the chiefs of tribes were distinguishable by long dresses like women's nightgowns. Otherwise the disguise was so complete that anecdotes were told about parents talking for hours with their own sons and struggling sisters being overwhelmed with unwelcome caresses of their own brothers, without the slightest suspicion of their identity." (Thero, p. 69)

On July 4, 1844, a publicized Independence Day "Indian" parade and rally, and speech by "Big Thunder," was to be held at Hoags Corners. Smith Boughton's wife, Mary, wanted to go but was left behind when her husband took off to make house calls with his medical bag. She packed up her baby and went to the rally. Big Thunder got up to speak. Mary was flabbergasted to recognize her husband's voice. Back home she went to await his return. "He explained the stranglehold of the manor lords on the courts and the legislature, the tenants' need for leadership and their determination to fight the battle through, whatever the cost. The doctor and his sweet-faced young wife did not end their talk until dawn speared the darkness of the room, but when at last they lay down to rest, Big Thunder had won his hardest recruit. Mary Boughton never faltered in loyalty to her husband's cause." (Christman, p. 84)

Tarring and feathering of sheriffs and landlord agents occurred whenever attempts were made to collect rent. And there were altercations such as the killing of William Rifenburg who had condemned an anti-rent rally and would not obey an "Indian" who demanded he cry "down with the rent."



On the other side, Smith Boughton was arrested in December of 1844 because he allegedly had taken certain official papers from a sheriff by force and destroyed them before him. He was a "hot political football." His arrest was to demoralize the anti-rent organization. They would not allow bail to be posted. One jury decided he was innocent except for one juror. He had to have retrial. This resulted in him being sentenced to life in prison. Boughton was imprisoned at Dannemora but was allowed to be the prison doctor.

It was not until the struggle turned to the election process that there was a change of events. In 1846 John Young received anti-rent endorsement for governor. Young promised that, if elected, he would release the tenant prisoners from Dannemora, and the tenants meant to have Young for governor and the release of their comrades. The election was a Young triumph by eleven thousand votes, and it was seen by all as an anti-rent victory.

In February 1846, Governor Young ordered the anti-rent prisoners released and the freed "Indians" came home amid celebration. June found elected judges free of landlordism and the tenants brought suits to test the legality of the Van Rensselaer deeds. (Thero p.100)

In Boughton's words: "I saw the feudal landlords stripped of their feudal privileges, the leases stripped of onerous extractions. Each tenant by paying a small sum obtained such title as made him owner of his land in fee absolute and he could sit under his own vine and fig tree of his own planting with no one to make him afraid of being disturbed or driven from his land. No rent is collected annually. Landlordism in its old original is done." (Boughton letter c. 1885)

Dr. Smith Boughton is buried in Sand Lake Union Cemetery. Four of the local Big Thunder Days began with a ceremony at his graveside. Mr. William Boughton Bates, great, great grandson of Smith Boughton, was present on July 4, 1984, to give a short speech and to place a wreath on Boughton's grave on the 140th anniversary of Big Thunder's call to arms at Hoags Corners. His gravestone says "Dr. S. A. Boughton, born September 1, 1810, died November 14, 1888, Aged 78." A reminder of the long warfare is close by: In the next plot an already well-settled monument marks the grave of Willard Griggs, the turncoat Anti-Renter who died trying to evict William Witbeck. His stone reads "Erected by a friend, to the memory of Willard Griggs who was shot in fearless discharge of his duty as deputy sheriff in executing process. and died August 2, 1869, Aged 58." (Christman, p. 319)

Dr. Smith Boughton, a.k.a. Big Thunder, needed no epitaph. His memory lives on in the hearts of all who seek justice and freedom.

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Author's Note: Researching this article was a visit with friends. John Thero, a former teacher, principal and superintendent of Averill Park Central Schools, had written a paper on the Anti-Rent Wars for his graduate work. Madolyn Carpenter, former town historian, had filed all the publicity from the "Big Thunder Days" which Phil Lord, then-president of the Historic Hoags Corners Association, and his fellow historians had culled. Thank you to these persons for their help. — Mary French



Odds 'N' Ends

A Correction: in our Winter 1998/99 issue, in the article entitled *LANDMARK HIGHWAY*, By Hughes Gemmill, (Page 3, Column 2, Line 4) it should read "by the 1740s and 1750s" not 1840s and 1850s as printed. We regret the error.

Annual Dinner Meeting

Get your reservations in early for this year's dinner meeting to be held at the Lakeview in Averill Park village on Tuesday, May 11. A Dutch treat cocktail hour will begin at 6:00 p.m. — a social get-together followed by a hot and cold buffet. So come one, come all for a for an enjoyable evening. Bring a friend with you. Please make your reservation by filling in the form on the last page or calling Bea Danks (674-5030) or Linda Ormsby (674-3624). Price of the buffet is \$15 per person. ANNUAL DUES for June 1999 to May 2000. (\$5.00) can be paid at the same time.





Sand Lake Historical Society

Use the form below to sign up for the Annual Meeting, May 11 at the Lakeview Inn on Crystal Lake, Averill Park village. Cost for the buffet is only \$15.00.

You can also use this form to pay 1999-2000 membership dues, still only \$5.00 for one year. Don't miss any issues of our interesting newsletters and details about upcoming events of the organization.

We look forward to your continuing support!

Linda Ormsby (674-3624) &
Bea Danks (674-5030)
Co-Presidents

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Annual Meeting
and/or 1999-2000 Membership Renewal — June 1, 1999-May 31, 2000**

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