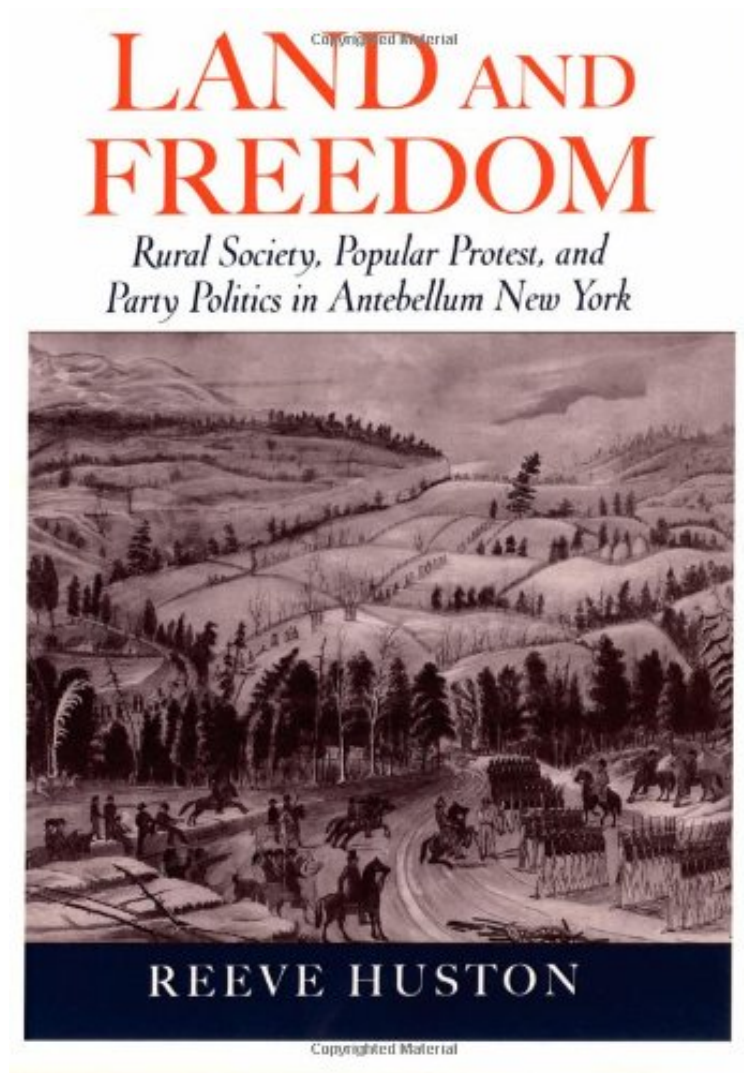


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Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York

Reeve Huston

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Reeve Huston : Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Land and Freedom: Rural Society, Popular Protest, and Party Politics in Antebellum New York:

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following review helpful. Fine blend of social and political history

By A Customer

This book deals with one of the most imposing and intrinsically important chapters in the social history of the antebellum North - the protracted struggle against tenancy by residents of the great manors of New York State's Hudson River Valley. This struggle remained one of the most visible and absorbing dramas of the early nineteenth century, commanding extensive attention from newspapers and politicians alike. The episode derived its significance from its obvious connection to one of the salient social and political issues of that predominantly rural world - the connection between land-holding and citizenship. Before it concluded, the anti-rent struggle became linked to a stunningly broad array of other reform efforts. In the course of relating this story, Huston tells us new things about the evolution of the concept of "free labor," the interaction between elite and popular values and between urban and rural life, voters and politicians, and among social conditions, ideology, and mass action. Not content with all this, Huston goes significantly further, tracing in detail (but with great economy of language) the complex ways in which that struggle influenced and was influenced by the evolution of party politics from the 1830s down through the 1850s. This study refuses to treat party politics either as tangential to the social concerns and actions of voters or as a mere reflection of them. Instead, the author shows us both how Whigs, Democrats, and eventually Republicans felt compelled to respond to the anti-renter challenge in different ways (in accordance with their own very different agendas) and how the particular nature of those responses then influenced the ideology and practice of the anti-renter struggle itself. The result is a fine case study in the way that partisan ideologies can be shaped by developments within society at large and how politics can, in turn, help alter the course of social movements. The book's introduction situates it effectively both in the history of its time and in the modern historiography of the early and antebellum American republic. It also lays out the author's specific argument with admirable clarity. The first few chapters then carefully, even meticulously, portray the changing nature of economy, society, and political culture in the Hudson Valley from the eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, dealing successfully along the way with pattern of property ownership, crop cultivation, market fluctuations, and gendered patterns of family work and rights. I was especially happy with the author's treatment of the knotty subject of small producers' attitude toward market production, a subject about which historians, sociologists, and economists have wrangled for many years. Perhaps more impressive is the book's depiction of the evolving relationship between landlord and tenant. Huston's treatment of the nature and meaning of deference in this connection is extraordinarily subtle. The manuscript avoids a tendency common among social historians to deduce from the existence of relative social peace in a given period the existence of general contentment and even multilateral ideological consensus. Huston shows us something quite different: the presence of contrasting values and assumptions that are masked in good times by social conventions and yield social explosion only when a changing context turns such latent differences into sharp and unavoidable conflicts of practical interest. The middle of the book gives us an equally deft, nuanced, and subtle mapping of the stages of growth and development through which tenant resistance to landlord exactions passed after about 1820, from incremental shifts in individual behavior to the initiation and differentiation of forms of mass action. Tenant outlooks are studied and evaluated with great sensitivity but without a hint of romanticism. They appear here as neither anti-capitalist stalwarts nor as Rockefellers-in-embryo. Instead, Prof. Huston presents them (accurately, in my view) as members of a "Janus-faced" group of small producers rooted in the market economy and necessarily accepting of its general contours but simultaneously driven by their particular situations and values to resist specific dictates of the marketplace. This understanding also helps Huston account for both the tenants' ability to connect to many other protest movements of the day while remaining deaf and blind to the claims of others -- thus "excluding" women, the propertyless, Indians, and African Americans from the circle to whom their sympathies extend. The last few chapters of the book bring the story to resolution, presenting an outcome in which the tenants' central aim (the overturning of the landlords' property titles) is unfulfilled even as most tenants did progress toward the sought-after status of independent yeomen by other means. The landlord class, meanwhile, gradually ceased to exist as a distinct social formation. These chapters also round out the author's argument about the relationship between the anti-rent movement and antebellum politics. Especially noteworthy here is the treatment of the interaction between the liberal wing of the Whig party (led in New York and nationally by William H. Seward) and the anti-rent movement. This is a subject of transcendent importance, not least because this was the political current that pioneered the shift from a semi-Hamiltonian form of capitalist politics that long dominated (and hobbled) the Whig party to the much more democratic form finally embodied in the Republican party by 1860. The author plausibly suggests that the Seward-ites' evolution was influenced by their protracted encounter with the anti-renters. This book is based on extensive primary research, particularly in manuscript collections, manuscript and published census data, and newspaper files (which historians of this period recognize to be one of the most important sources for the investigation of subjects such as this one). The manuscript itself is exceedingly well organized, tightly written, and clear and effective in its argumentation. Throughout, the author has successfully avoided the twin dangers that confront the writer of a first book - either to exaggerate the import of one's subject and oversell the larger meaning of one's thesis, or to seek refuge from criticism precisely by muting the thesis and leaving the subject's place in history and historiography under-attended.

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By Seth Kershners

ElkiRk NeW York is the sure-fireway of reasoning beyond the rural New York Robitussin-

induced hangovers which preside indefatigably in South Fallsburg New York the place-setting for an underrated little boy named Alouiciousaced all the Latin exams then moved on to French and never learned what it was to live by golly this is a great book!

During the early nineteenth-century, two million acres of New York's farmland were controlled by a handful of great families. Along the Hudson Valley and across the Catskills lay the great estates of the Van Rensselaers, the Livingstons, and a dozen lesser landlords. Some two hundred and sixty thousand men, women, and children—a twelfth of the population of New York, the nation's most populous state—worked this land as tenants. Beginning in 1839, these tenants created a movement dedicated to destroying the estates and distributing the land to those who farmed it. The "anti-rent" movement quickly became one of the most powerful and influential movements of the antebellum era. The anti-renters raised issues that lay at the heart of America's republican experiment: the distribution of land, the nature of democracy, and the meaning of freedom. In doing so, they left an indelible mark on politics and public ideals in both New York and the nation. They influenced and bitterly divided both major political parties, and helped create the Republican party. Moreover, they shaped the ideas, policies, and careers of such national leaders as Martin Van Buren, Silas Wright, Horace Greeley, and William Seward. Deftly interweaving an engaging narrative history with broad-ranging social and political analysis, *Land and Freedom* brings to life the voices of antebellum northern farmers as they debated the critical social and political issues of their day. It grounds those debates in a detailed analysis of social and political change on New York's estates, and demonstrates the impact of farmers' ideas and initiatives on the broader social and political order. In doing so, it offers new insights into the social and political thought of northeastern farmers, the extent and limits of popular political power under the Jacksonian political order, and the social origins of free-labor ideology and the Republican party.

"Reeve Huston's *Land and Freedom* is the most exciting and original book on the social history of Jacksonian-era politics that I have read in many years. Not only does the book retell the fascinating story of New York's Anti-Rent Wars; it connects the riots and revolts to the history of mainstream (and not-so-mainstream) politics in persuasive and provocative ways. It has all the markings of a classic piece of scholarship."--Sean Wilentz, Princeton University

"In a masterful achievement, Reeve Huston restores the Anti-Rent Wars to its vital place in the history of the antebellum north, describing a struggle that even in failure reshaped society and politics in New York, bridging the two worlds of proprietary manors and Free Soil Republicanism. Huston's balanced attention to practice, language, institutions, and the state make *Land and Freedom* a model of the newest American political history."--John L. Brooke, Tufts University

"This is an excellent book, which tells a good story well. Probably the best work for decades on the New York Anti-Renters, it makes a significant broader contribution to our understanding of antebellum society and politics, and deserves wide attention from scholars and students. Huston's account of the Hudson River Valley and the Anti-Rent movement brings together the history of rural society and the history of party politics in an especially forceful and effective way. Huston achieves something quite striking: he takes a movement that could, on its own terms, be said to have failed, but shows how it was central to the unfolding of American political ideology--in this case, the mid-nineteenth century conflict between slavery and 'free labor.'"--Christopher Clark, University of Warwick

"*Land and Freedom* shows the precise detail and the large significance of New York State's nineteenth-century struggles between great landlords and tenant farmers. Reeve Huston does not reduce any of his subjects to formulaic symbols. He demonstrates instead that achieving the tenants' goals was both a major change and a matter of profound historical irony."--Edward Countryman, Southern Methodist University

"Deeply researched and gracefully written, Reeve Huston's *Land and Freedom* is a subtle and penetrating exploration of one of the most important social movements in antebellum America. Deftly weaving previously unconnected strands of social, economic, intellectual, and political history, Huston's portrait of New York's anti-rent campaign reveals hidden complexities in rural Americans' notions of republican government, market capitalism, and even freedom itself. An outstanding contribution to nineteenth-century history."--Harry L. Watson, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

"[A] fine, scholarly stud[y]."-- s in *American History*

"Is an important contribution to the historiography of both the Market Revolution that occurred in Jacksonian America and the free labor ideology of the late antebellum period."--H-Net

"Exceptionally well-written, a good example of how works of history can blend analyses of political philosophy with attentiveness to the strategies of political wire-pullers. Students of this era can not afford to ignore it."--H-Net

"Taken together Reeve Huston's *Land and Freedom* and Charles McCurdy's *The Anti-Rent Era in New York Law and Politics* probably amount to as definitive statement on the Anti-Rent wars we are likely to want or need for at least a generation." - s in *American History*

"One cannot help but be impressed by the breadth of Huston's research and his engagement with the subject."--H-Net

About the Author
Reeve Huston is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Arizona, Tucson.