
THE HUMAN TRADITION IN

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION



EDITED BY

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*William Prendergast and
the Revolution in
the Hudson River Valley*

"Poor Men Were Always Oppressed by the Rich"

Thomas J. Humphrey

A leader in New York anti-rent riots of the 1760s, William Prendergast (1727–1811) aimed for freedom from onerous or unstable leases and liberty from chronic debt and unending tenancy. Instead of emphasizing intercolonial protests against British authority, Prendergast found the local situation more critical. He sought justice, as he saw it: the eviction of new tenants and their replacement with rebels. Prendergast and his followers did not advocate a social revolution; they did not aim to take landlords' property, but rather they defended the traditional system. Once captured by the British, Prendergast faced trial for treason against the king. He had burned out farmers, assaulted people in the presence of many witnesses, and ridiculed the court system and the head of state. Why then did a royal governor pardon him?

Prendergast's fascinating story, as told by Thomas Humphrey, demonstrates the importance of the rural population in the Revolution. How did rural rioters differ from the more famous Sons of Liberty, whose activities usually centered on the major seaports? For many tenants, the Revolution offered an opportunity to side with the British against their patriot landlords in the hopes of obtaining land rights. Prendergast's son joined the British army, but was William's wartime moderation consistent with his earlier goals? How had he come to possess in 1771 the lands that he had previously rented? After the war, the extended Prendergast family, including seventy-eight-year-old William and sixty-eight-year-old Mehetibal, moved west. While loyalist landlords of New York had lost their estates, the patriots had not. Government confiscation of property aimed to punish loyalism, not to offer economic equality to the landless. Would Prendergast or his children have been disappointed by that reality, or did the promise of expansion into the frontier offer sufficient hope for his brand of independence?

Thomas J. Humphrey, a historian at Cleveland State University, has completed a book-length study of eighteenth-century agrarian rioting in the Hudson Valley, New York.

William Prendergast was born in Ireland in 1727 and died in western New York State in 1811, and he provides a vital link between the colonial world in which he lived and the post-revolutionary world his children inherited. In colonial New York, rural people such as Prendergast rioted for land almost continually against New York landlords who owned most of the arable land in the Hudson Valley and who constituted the colonial social and political elite. Like hundreds of rural people who lived during the revolutionary period, Prendergast did not participate in Stamp Act protests, join boycotts of British goods in the early 1770s, support the patriot movement against the British during the Revolutionary War, or take part in the debate over the Constitution of 1787. Prendergast, however, resembled his neighbors who worried more about getting, or keeping, land and supporting their households than they did about the political struggles of the Revolution. In the face of advancing armies that jeopardized their welfare and stability on the land, these farmers refused to join either side in the war and sometimes joined both sides to protect their interests in the land. Prendergast also moved west in the early nineteenth century, again like thousands of rural people, preferring to farm new land on the frontier to staying in the increasingly crowded rural communities in the east. Through Prendergast and his family, we may glimpse their rural way of life, their choices during the American Revolution, and their struggles to own land and attain stability in eighteenth-century New York.

According to his gravestone, William Prendergast was born in the port of Waterford, in County Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1727. He worked as a shipwright while he lived in Waterford, but emigrated to the Hudson Valley sometime before 1754, settling in Dutchess County on the east side of the Hudson River. He could not have bought land in the region, because the Philipse family claimed the land on which he wanted to live and refused to sell any to settlers or to tenants already living on the land. Landlords such as the Cortlandts, Livingstons, Beekmans, Van Rensselaers, and the Philipses owned much of the arable land in the Hudson Valley, especially on the east side of the river, and they refused to sell. They all preferred prospective settlers to become tenants who paid rent, and they usually required tenants to pay rent with agricultural products, such as wheat, which they could sell in Albany, Poughkeepsie, and New York City. These men and their families derived great wealth from the rent and other fees their tenants

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paid. Frederick Philipse, who held the land Prendergast farmed, claimed two hundred thousand acres and owned two mansion houses, one of which was a full three stories high, and at least thirty slaves. New York landlords such as Frederick Philipse easily translated their economic power into political power and dominated New York colonial politics. Prendergast became a tenant farmer on Frederick Philipse's estate.

Although tenants in the Hudson Valley often signed written and sometimes printed leases with their landlords for land, tenants on Frederick Philipse's estate agreed to verbal leases. Prendergast became a tenant who lived on his leasehold at the will of the landlord. In the early 1750s, Prendergast agreed to a developmental lease for approximately 120 acres of unimproved land without rent for five years. The Philipses outlined the style of leases they used when they applied for compensation for the property they lost during the Revolutionary War. The lease stipulated that Prendergast begin paying his annual rent, £4 12s. New York currency, or the equivalent in winter wheat, five years after he first settled on the land. Developmental leases enabled new tenants to spend the first five years of the lease clearing land, building a house and barn, planting crops, and making the farm reasonably productive before they began paying rent. During the developmental period, tenants needed food and money, or at least credit, to buy necessities such as seed, candles, and perhaps clothes. Tenants usually bought these goods at stores operated by the landlords. When the developmental period ended, tenants ostensibly began paying rent. Most tenants paid rent yearly, but most also failed to pay rent at some point, because of poor crops, bad weather, or simply choosing not to pay. On the eve of the Revolution, all but two of the tenants who lived on Philipse's Highland Patent with Prendergast owed at least two years' back rent, and all of them owed the Philipses money. Such a system of credit made the tenants economically, socially, and politically beholden to their landlords, who used their economic power both to force tenants to vote in particular ways and to ostracize their political opponents. If a tenant fell too far in debt, the landlord could evict him, sell the improvements made to the leasehold, and keep that money to eradicate the debt.

In 1755, as Prendergast was clearing his land as a tenant, he met Mehetibal Wing and married her. Mehetibal was a Quaker who lived in Quaker Hill, New York, near Pawling. She and her sister, Abigail, were the daughters of Jediah and Elizabeth Wing, and both had been born in Rhode Island. Abigail Wing married Nathan Hiller, who lived on a farm neighboring William Prendergast's on Philipse's Highland Patent. Mehetibal began having

children when she was eighteen, in 1756, and bore a child approximately every two years after that until 1781, when she was forty-five. She and William Prendergast had thirteen children, at least eleven of whom survived into adulthood. Of that eleven, all but Elizabeth and Martha married, and all but two lived into the 1820s and 1830s.

Prendergast and his family probably followed the general agricultural production patterns of his neighbors. Most farmers in the region spent the developmental period of their leases clearing the land and preparing it for planting. Although Prendergast may have tried to clear the land by himself, his wife and neighbors, including Nathan Hiller, probably helped. In the early stages of his tenancy, Prendergast used the lumber harvested from the leasehold to build a house, a barn, fences, and pens for animals. When he cleared new land, Prendergast used the lumber to pay rent or to trade at local markets. After they had cleared enough land to build a shelter, Prendergast and his wife began clearing for crops, diversifying production as much as possible. If they relied too heavily on one crop and that crop failed, they would go hungry. As a result, farmers in the region grew wheat, oats, barley, corn, and potatoes. Both Prendergast and his wife worked hard to provide food for the household. Mehetibal, for instance, kept a small fruit and vegetable garden near the house, in which she grew lettuce, pumpkins, tomatoes, and peas, and nurtured a small orchard of apple and pear trees. She also sewed clothes, mended torn or worn clothes, spun yarn, churned butter, kept chickens, and cooked all the family's meals. She and the children also joined William Prendergast in the fields, particularly during periods of intense labor such as plantings and harvests. Mehetibal helped on a more regular basis with weeding crops and with other more mundane chores in the fields and on the farm. Prendergast, for his part, would have planted winter wheat, a valuable crop, oats, corn, pumpkins, and potatoes. He also probably acquired some chickens, milk cows, pigs, cattle, and sheep. Such a variety of crops ensured food for the household if one crop or another failed and enabled them to pay rent with those goods they produced in abundance. Furthermore, like his rural neighbors, Prendergast probably traded his surplus, such as extra wheat or butter, at local markets for those goods he and his family could not produce on their farm or that they could buy cheaply. They lived according to the agricultural cycles of the crops they planted and the rhythms of their farm animals.

Prendergast and his tenant neighbors could not always trade freely at local markets. The Philipases, like other New York landlords, restricted the market activities of their tenants. They re-

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quired their tenants to grind their grains, such as winter wheat and corn, at their gristmills, and tenants paid approximately 10 percent of what they had ground for the service. The Philipses also demanded that tenants saw their logs at the manor lord's sawmills, again for a fee. Although some tenants might have traveled beyond the manor for these services, the distances they would have had to travel prevented many from doing so, and the fees the Philipses charged were not exorbitant. In addition, the Philipses required tenants to give them first chance to buy surplus agricultural goods, and they tried to force tenants to buy and sell their goods at stores operated by the manor lord. For the tenants who needed their grain ground, logs cut, and available markets, manor services proved convenient. Landlords, for their part, provided their tenants with important services, and their mills and stores provided them with another source of revenue.

Prendergast and other dissatisfied rural people in the area disliked some aspects of their tenancy. They found landlords oppressive and their leases onerous. Prendergast, for instance, leased his land at the will of the landlord, Frederick Philipse. Under such an arrangement, the landlord could evict a tenant whenever he chose without cause. Although the Philipses rarely did so, the threat undermined tenants' stability on the land. When Beverly Robinson, who operated the Philipse Highland Patent, claimed nearby land concurrently claimed by the Wappinger Indians and demanded that tenant farmers in the region agree to new, shorter leases, disgruntled rural people fought to keep their land. Many of them had already signed 999-year leases with the Wappinger Indians, and tenants on Philipse's Highland Patent also thought they held long-term agreements with the Philipses. The one- to three-year leases Robinson wanted them to sign jeopardized their continuity on the land and thus threatened the stability of their households. The Wappingers responded by seeking legal counsel and taking the Philipses to court over legal ownership of the land. Not surprisingly, the Wappingers did not fare well in a court dominated by New York landlords who empathized with the Philipses. Anglo-European colonists, however, had other reasons for not giving the land to the Wappingers. John Morin Scott, one of the attorneys who represented the Philipses, argued that favoring Indian claims over colonists "will be a Dangerous Tendency," because "Twill open a door to the greatest Mischiefs inasmuch as a great part of the Lands in this Province are supposed to lie under much of the same Scitiation."¹ The court did not decide against the Indians until 1767, but Beverly Robinson began forcing tenants to sign shorter leases in the early 1760s. In the summer of 1765, Robinson and the Dutchess County sheriff, James Livingston,

started evicting tenants who refused to sign the new leases. They sometimes burned rebellious tenants out of their houses to make way for new tenants who would agree to the new leases. The tenants wanted to own the land on which some of them had been living and working for thirty years, and to have the Philippses and Beverly Robinson jeopardize their landholding was more than many of them could bear.

In the fall of 1765 disgruntled rural people met at Samuel Towner's tavern approximately three miles south of Pawling, to discuss their response to Robinson's new leases. During the meeting, Prendergast stepped forward to lead the rural rioters in raids to "turn out all the People who had taken the short leases" and to evict those new tenants placed on the farms of rebellious tenants. Prendergast vowed to lead the rural rioters in their fight to restore "Justice" and to "relieve the oppressed," and he announced that it "was high Time the great Men such as the Atty Gen: & the Lawyers, should be pulled down."² The rioters wanted to own the land on which they lived and worked, and the leases they desired amounted to fee-simple landholding, in which they possessed the land without restrictions. On November 21, 1765, Samuel Munro Jr., whose father sat in jail for helping the Wappinger Indians against the Philippses, followed Prendergast's orders and led about forty men to James Covey Jr.'s house. When Munro banged on the door, Covey refused to answer, but the rioters broke the door down and threw Covey and his wife onto the ground in front of the house. They told them to leave and never return to their farm. For the rest of that day, hundreds of rioters marched throughout the countryside and similarly evicted other tenants and their families who had signed new leases with the Philippses. After they evicted these tenants, the rioters usually selected rebels to take over the farms, and mediators chosen from among the rebels adjudicated conflicting claims to individual leaseholds.

In March 1766 colonial authorities mounted an effort to stop the rioting, and they managed to capture a few rioters and take them to jail in New York City. When William Prendergast learned of these arrests, he proposed to go to New York City to gain the prisoners' release "by Force" if necessary.³ Prendergast led approximately two hundred men to the edge of New York City and threatened to burn down parts or all of the city unless the rioters were released. His threat to burn the city could scarcely be dismissed as an idle one, given that the incidence of arson among slaves and other disgruntled people in the city was high and that a fire could completely destroy an eighteenth-century town. Prendergast also used the opportunity to voice the rioters' demands more publicly. He insisted that the landlords give the rioters perpetual leases for

the land on which they were living. According to Prendergast, the rioters were more content than the quiet tenants. The landlords in New York City were proprietary users of the land. The Philippses paid for the land in the city to derive income from the tenants, particularly from the wealthy. Prendergast learned that the rioters had their 200,000-acre leasehold on a 120-acre leasehold. The other tenants' income was in New York currency and the low rural rioters of the Hudson Valley inhibited the small fires around the countryside. He had signed short

In late May Prendergast went to Robert Hughson to join the rioters. He was. Although Hughson was open and told Hughson and farm immediately with them inside the house. He could not move his baby. The rioters demanded a shorter lease, and local officials to gather evidence for peace. When Robert Hughson's treatment his wife complained to the court. He obtained writs for delivering the writs to a crowd of rioters. Hughson and Peter Towner's house, Prendergast securing evidence to coerce Hughson and the rioters in giving any testimony. Prendergast decided

the land on which they already lived and worked. Moreover, according to Prendergast, the rioters did not want to pay more in rent than the quitrent due the king for the land. Some of the landlords in New York paid the king a fixed fee, or quitrent, for the proprietary use of the land instead of providing services. The Philipses paid the quitrent, because the king ultimately owned the land in the colony and had granted them permission to use it, to derive income from it, and to will it to their heirs. Many tenants, particularly Prendergast, became especially angry when they learned that the Philipses paid only £4 12s. in quitrent yearly for their 200,000-acre estate, the same annual rent he paid for his 120-acre leasehold. Nor did Prendergast's rent differ much from other tenants' in the region, who paid, on average, £3 15s. New York currency per 100 acres. Simply put, Prendergast and his fellow rural rioters, like contemporaneous rural rioters in other parts of the Hudson Valley, hated and rebelled against tenancy because it inhibited their permanence on the land. The rioters set a few small fires around the city, but pulled away and moved back into the countryside. Once there, again they harassed the tenants who had signed shorter leases.

In late May 1766, Prendergast led a group of about sixty rioters to Robert Hughson's house either to evict Hughson or compel him to join the rioters. Hughson was not at home, but his wife was. Although she refused to open the door, Prendergast pushed it open and told Hughson's wife that if they did not leave the house and farm immediately, the rioters would burn down their house with them inside. Robert Hughson had rightly feared the mob, but he could not move because his wife was close to delivering their baby. The rioters attacked Hughson's home because he had accepted a shorter lease, and because his father George had also helped local officials to deliver eviction notices to dissident tenants and to gather evidence against the rioters for the local justice of the peace. When Robert Hughson complained to his father of the ill-treatment his wife had received from the rioters, George Hughson complained to the local justice of the peace, Samuel Peters. Peters obtained writs for the arrest and eviction of the rioters. While delivering the writs, he and the elder Hughson ran into a formidable crowd of rioters who chased and caught them. After binding Hughson and Peters, the rioters carried their prisoners to Samuel Towner's house, held them prisoner overnight, and beat them for securing evidence against the rioters. Prendergast also tried to coerce Hughson and Peters into swearing to give evidence in favor of the rioters in any future court proceedings, or at least not to give any testimony against them. Both men refused, and Prendergast decided to compel the men to swear the oaths.

The next day the rioters constructed a country courtroom in a nearby field where they took their enemies to stand trial for their crimes against the rioters and against the rural people who lived in the region. In this "courtroom" the rioters, and not New York landlords, held power, and the agents of the landlords bowed their heads and spoke softly to their riotous superiors. The courtroom was twelve feet by twelve feet, marked off by a wooden-railed fence. Inside that square, the rioters had constructed a smaller, similar square that served as the dock in which the prisoners stood. Approximately two hundred rural rebels gathered around the "courtroom" as Prendergast marched around, brandishing a large sword and warning Peters and Hughson of their punishment if they refused to destroy any evidence they might have collected against the rioters or to give evidence in support of the rioters in future court proceedings. Prendergast declared that the rioters would ride Peters and Hughson on a rail "to the first convenient Place of mud and water, and there duck them as long as we think proper, and from thence we would take them to a White Oak Tree, and there whip them as long as we think proper, and thence take them out of the country and there kick their Asses as long as we think fit."⁴ In refusing to take the oath, Peters remarked that Prendergast had an "Odd way of treating Men." Then Prendergast exploded, yelling out "*that if the King was there he would serve him so for Kings had been bro't to by Mobs before now.*"⁵ Suitably cowed, Peters and Hughson destroyed the writs of eviction they carried and the written evidence they held against the rioters. Regardless of their compliance, the crowd of rioters refused to be denied the chance to inflict their brand of justice on men who had so openly threatened their welfare. They first grabbed Peters, dragged him through the mud, and beat him, stopping only when Peters promised not to "take advantage of them for keeping him in Custody."⁶ After the crowd similarly beat Hughson and extracted the same promise from him, they released their prisoners.

The country courtroom set up by Prendergast and the rioters, and their activities in it, offer some insights into the members of this crowd. Primarily, they held their own court because they knew that they could not receive equitable treatment inside an official court, with New York landlords so completely dominating these institutions. That Beverly Robinson could evict tenants from the land before a court decision on the dispute between his father-in-law and the Wappinger Indians, and that he could do so with the apparent backing of the law, suggests that landlords controlled the courts and legal system in colonial New York. Prendergast and his fellow rioters were aware of these inequities. By constructing their own court, these rural rebels tried to gain power in a world

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Once inside the courtroom, with the power to mete out his brand of justice, Prendergast offered various clues to the cultural heritage he carried with him from Ireland to New York, and to those traditions of his fellow rioters. Prendergast parceled out traditional forms of discipline publicly so everyone in the community could join in the activities, and he condemned his enemies with historically loaded language that the crowd understood. When he threatened to have Peters and Hughson tied to a "White Oak" tree and whipped, for instance, Prendergast may have been alluding only to a stout tree against which the rioters might whip their antagonists, but references to a "White Oak" tree offer other potentially rebellious meanings. In the 1760s, Philadelphia ship carpenters called themselves White Oaks and marched in parades under the insignia of the White Oak, often affixing green sprigs of the tree to their coats. During the Stamp Act riots in that city, these White Oaks protected Benjamin Franklin's house from the rioters because he had organized mechanics, including ship carpenters, into military organizations in the 1740s and 1750s. The link between Prendergast and Philadelphia ship carpenters is tenuous, but the White Oaks in Philadelphia were loosely arranged as an ethnic organization and were related to the Whiteboys in Ireland and the Hearts of Oak in Ulster. In 1793, Arthur Young, an English agricultural writer who toured and wrote about France in the late 1780s, described the Whiteboys as rural rioters from Kilkenny who reached their height of popularity and power in the late 1750s through the 1770s. The Whiteboys were Irish tenants who rioted against absentee English landlords. In the 1790s, Young noted that these Irish rebels were apparently first "known by the name of *levellers*."⁷ The ethnic connection between the Irish Whiteboys, Irish ship carpenters, and Prendergast's references to a "White Oak" tree is more plausible because Prendergast grew up in County Kilkenny, where the Whiteboys enjoyed particular popularity, and was a ship carpenter before he immigrated to the Hudson Valley.

Prendergast also invoked menacing references to the English Civil War, suggesting that knowledge of that event remained in the cultural heritage of colonial New Yorkers and that colonists of distinct social groups perceived the references differently. Figures from the English Civil War, such as Oliver Cromwell, resurfaced as important characters for eighteenth-century American colonists. Prompted by a revival of religious evangelicalism in the 1740s, the poorer and less-educated people rekindled in their folklore a favorable image of Oliver Cromwell as the leader of the New Model

Army and as the defeater of tyranny. On the other hand, wealthy and politically powerful colonists detested Cromwell as the man responsible for the perils of standing armies. Similarly, other American colonists remembered favorably the men responsible for the Civil War and, especially, for the execution of the king; the inhabitants of Saybrook, Connecticut, had reserved house lots for these regicides. When, in 1766, William Prendergast declared that mobs had overcome kings before, he called up images of these various attacks on people in authority, and by doing so he emphasized the rioters' collective contempt for men who abused their social and political power.

Beverly Robinson and Frederick Philipse did not long endure the rioters' insurgency. In July 1766, they called on the British army for help in defeating the rioters. The British troops encountered and skirmished with a small band of rural rioters that Prendergast commanded near a bridge in Patterson, New York. Two British soldiers were wounded, and one died later, but the regulars routed the crudely armed rioters. Mehetibal and the wives of many of the rioters feared that their husbands would be killed by the British troops, and they persuaded them to surrender to the British and plead for the governor's mercy. So many rioters surrendered that the British housed them in a nearby log church. Prendergast would not surrender, but he was captured a short time later. Under heavy guard, Prendergast was taken from Patterson to Poughkeepsie, where he stood trial for capital treason against the king, because he had led an armed rebellion and because he had waged war against the king's troops. If convicted, he faced a gruesome death. Prendergast's arrest and removal to Poughkeepsie apparently excited rural people throughout the eastern part of the southern Hudson Valley, and they threatened a more general insurrection against New York landlords. A large number of rural rioters positioned themselves near Quaker Hill, New York, vowing to fight for their land to the last man. Again, New York landlords called on the British army to defeat the rioters, and approximately two hundred troops marched out and put down the rebellion.

Once in irons, Prendergast never stood a chance. New York landlords ruled colonial politics, and their power extended to the courts. Furthermore, they wanted desperately to make an example of Prendergast, the known leader of the rioters. Rioters and obedient tenants alike knew Prendergast's fate was sealed: tenants could not be "defended in a Course of law because they were poor." They knew "there was no Law for poor Men."⁸ Prendergast was tried in a specially convened Court of Oyer and Terminer, which was a commissioned court consisting of several judges that presided over

cases of treason. Prendergast met a severe New York sentence or was watched in horror in the Hudson. He was a cousin of Philipse and he operated with William Smith Jr. for justice, John M. Prendergast in their original land of 1765. In addition to City Sons of Liberty ask for help from Other Sons of Liberty by Prendergast's death was deemed titled to set up

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The court gave a severe sentence for Prendergast should be taken to be drawn on a gallows hanged by the King's Entrails and Priests be burned in his further ordered that of at the "King's

cases of treason and felonies. Once in front of that court, Prendergast met few allies. All the justices were powerful and prosperous New Yorkers. Most owned land and rented some of it to tenants or were related to those New York landlords who had watched in horror as hundreds of rural people rioted for their land in the Hudson Valley in the 1760s. Judge Robert R. Livingston was a cousin of Robert Livingston Jr., the lord of Livingston Manor, and he operated the lower part of his family's estate. Justice William Smith Jr. had married into the Livingston family. Another justice, John Morin Scott, was also acting as the Philippses' attorney in their ongoing struggle against the Wappinger Indians over the very land on which the rioters began their protests in the fall of 1765. In addition, Scott was a leading member of the New York City Sons of Liberty who, when Prendergast traveled to the city to ask for help from that group, refused to assist the rural rioters. Other Sons of Liberty also sat on the court, too, a point not missed by Prendergast, who ruefully noted that if "opposition to Government was deemed Rebellion, no member of that Court were entitled to set upon his Tryal."⁹

Prendergast did not have a lawyer at the trial. Instead, he defended himself with the help of his wife. While Prendergast tried to refute the arguments presented by Attorney-General John Tabor Kempe, Mehetibal's behavior during the trial "attracted the Notice of the Audience," because she "never failed to make every Remark that might tend to extenuate the Offence, and put [her husband's] Conduct in the most favourable Point of View." Her attention to the details of the prosecution's case, her ability to stall their opponent's arguments with convincing rebuttals, and her "affectionate Assiduity fill'd every Observer with a tender Concern." Her skill at contradicting the prosecution's case prompted one of the king's attorneys to "make a Motion to move her out of Court, lest she might too much influence the Jury," but the justices denied the request.¹⁰ Despite Mehetibal's powerful presence in court, Kempe's case proved too strong. The testimony lasted three days, the jury returned a guilty verdict one day later, and the justices rendered their sentence twenty-four hours later.

The court gave Prendergast what it described as the "usual severe sentence for Treason." The justices determined that Prendergast should be taken back "whence he came and from thence shall be drawn on a Hurdle to the Place of Execution, and then shall be hanged by the Neck, and then shall be cut down alive, and his Entrails and Privy members shall be cut from his Body, and shall be burned in his sight, and his Head shall be cut off." The court further ordered that Prendergast's body be quartered and disposed of at the "King's Pleasure."¹¹ Although the members of the Court

of Oyer and Terminer had fulfilled their roles as administrators of justice, they meant only to show rural rebels what might happen if they rioted again. When they delivered their sentence, they also recommended that the king mercifully review the prisoner's fate. Nonetheless, after the court read how it wanted Prendergast to pay for his crimes, he "fell like a slaughtered ox," uttering a cry that melted to tears "even those lease susceptible [*sic*] of Compassion."¹²

When Mehetibal heard the sentence, she ran out of the courtroom, borrowed her sister's prettiest dress, and dashed the seventy miles on horseback to New York City to appeal for the life of her condemned husband. Governor Henry Moore knew that the court had recommended that the king review Prendergast's sentence, and thus agreed to Mehetibal's plea for a temporary stay of execution so the king could examine the case. Although the governor generally was not an ally of New York landlords, neither he nor the landlords wished to provoke an all-out rural rebellion by executing a man who had become such a popular leader. By leading the riots, Prendergast had become so well liked that Sheriff James Livingston, who was charged with carrying out the sentence, could not find anyone willing to help execute the leader of the riots. Those rebels who rioted after Prendergast was arrested did so in his name. Others attempted to break Prendergast out of the jail in Poughkeepsie, but he convinced his liberators that more harm would fall on them if he ran, and so he remained in jail. His popularity extended so far into the community that the sheriff had to offer double and then triple the usual pay for executioners, and he had to promise them anonymity so they could avoid harassment by Prendergast's supporters. Still, no one stepped forward. Men who had not participated in the riots, and who might otherwise have volunteered to help the sheriff, probably were afraid of reprisals from their neighbors if they helped put to death such a popular leader. Thus, the sentence and the recommendation for the king's mercy restored order in the region and reestablished the landlords' power in the community. In December 1766, King George III granted Prendergast an official pardon, and he returned to his farm in the Philipse Highland Patent, gaining ownership of his land in 1771, when the Philipses decided to sell off land in the Highland Patent to raise money for other business ventures.

Prendergast stood out among rural people in the region, and among rural rioters, because he led the riots against Robinson and the Philipses. Otherwise, he and other rural rioters in the second half of the eighteenth century shared similar goals. They wanted to own the land on which they lived and worked and to provide

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some kind of landed inheritance to their children. Land ownership provided them with the kind of stability tenants could not achieve. Most people who had become tenants, like Prendergast, either could not afford to buy land or they could find no land to buy because New York landlords owned most of the available arable land. Once these people began farming their lands, many of them fared well and some prospered. Nevertheless, they were still tenants, and tenancy meant long-term and short-term instability on the land, which proved debilitating. Thus, rural rioters rejected short leases and wanted to eliminate the Philippses' claims to the land and pay the quitrent to the king themselves. The Philippses, like other New York landlords who faced rural rebellions on their estates during the period, battled just as hard to keep their land because land ownership provided the basis for political and economic power. Prendergast, for his part, achieved his goal of land ownership before the Revolution.

Between 1771, when he took ownership, and 1777, Prendergast apparently sold his farm in Dutchess County to his first son Matthew and moved north into Rensselaer County. Although he had moved, he could not escape his past, and he remained a potentially dangerous enemy in the eyes of those New York landlords who became patriots. Patriot landlords in the region feared that their tenants might join the British army during the war in the hopes that the king might give them their leaseholds. The landlords' fears were well founded. Just as Ethan Allen in Vermont threatened to join the British to assure Vermont's independence from New York, in May 1777 hundreds of tenants on Livingston Manor rioted for land against their patriot landlords. They timed their riot to coincide with a rumored British invasion of the northern Hudson Valley and were more concerned with surviving the war and owning their land than fighting in the war. Leading patriots knew many rural people cared more about their material condition than the political battles of the Revolution. Robert R. Livingston noted that many rural people vowed to fight for the king primarily because if the king "succeeded they should have their Lands."¹³ Still others became bandits who attacked patriots and loyalists alike who threatened to take their land. Patriot landlords such as the Livingstons and Van Rensselaers did not offer land to tenants to fight for the patriot cause. Tenants would have taken the offer. To landlords, Prendergast represented a likely candidate to lead rural insurgents against New York patriot landlords in future rebellions that might jeopardize the patriot cause.

Patriots primarily suspected Prendergast of loyalism because he refused to side with them against the British. Prendergast,

however, did not join the British against the patriots either. In that respect, he resembled hundreds of rural people throughout the Hudson River Valley who refused to join either patriots or loyalists during the Revolutionary War, because British and patriot armies marched near and through the region. These armies attacked people who openly supported the other side and regularly stole their goods and property. To avoid such confrontations, many rural people did not join either side. Likewise, men feared for the welfare of their families. Rural men knew that "their families must want when they are killed."¹⁴ For these rural people, familial bonds, material conditions, and permanent possession of the land proved stronger and more important than the political debates of the Revolution.

Patriots tried to dissuade people from joining the British. They often forced suspected Tories and people who would not openly join the patriot movement to sign bonds to ensure their proper behavior during the war. While these people did not necessarily have to put up the money when they signed the bond, patriots used the bonds to take the property of people who later acted for the British, or at least against the patriots. When persons refused to sign bonds, patriot leaders assumed those persons would act against them and sometimes forced them to leave the area. Prendergast had signed at least three of these bonds. On one occasion in the fall of 1777 and twice more a year later, the New York Committee for Detecting and Defeating Conspiracies and the New York Committee of Safety demanded that Prendergast sign bonds for £150 to £250 New York currency to ensure his good behavior during the course of the war. Sometimes patriots simply took goods from disaffected people to support their war effort and reimbursed them. In late 1778 the Albany Committee of Correspondence paid Prendergast an unknown amount for agricultural goods, probably cattle and crops, taken from his farm by a local patriot militia unit and by the Continental Army.

Patriots also persecuted William Prendergast because he had more direct links to loyalists and the British army. Prendergast's oldest son, Matthew (1756–1838), had joined the loyalists in the early years of the war. We may never know whether Matthew Prendergast stood in the courtroom, or just outside, during his father's trial and heard the subsequent sentence announced, but he certainly knew of the rural riots his father led. He also understood the inequities between his family and the families of the politically and economically powerful landlords, and he probably watched his mother ride away to New York to plead for his father's life. To Matthew Prendergast, the king deserved respect and loy-

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ally because he had saved his father when New York landlords wanted him executed. At the beginning of the war, Matthew Prendergast, then in his early twenties, joined Abraham Cuyler's group of New York loyalists. In 1780 he led a group of loyalists who fought and captured some Connecticut patriots on Long Island. He moved to Nova Scotia after the war, but had moved back to his family's farm in Pawling, New York, by 1790. He moved to western New York with his family in 1805, where he served as a justice of the peace and as a supervisor for the town. Matthew Prendergast dutifully kept his British military uniform and wore his long hair tied in a queue in British military fashion for the rest of his life.

William Prendergast and his family remained on their farm in eastern New York from the end of the war until 1805, when he and his family migrated west. He appears in the first federal census of 1790 with eleven people living in the household—one white male under sixteen years, five white men over sixteen years, and five white women. Matthew evidently still lived on the farm in Pawling with his wife Anna. James had become a doctor and moved with his family to Steuben County, New York, by the end of the century. By 1800, Jedediah Prendergast and his wife Penelope Chase headed a household in Rensselaer County, as did Martin and his wife Martha Hunt. Presumably, they lived near their father. Thomas apparently lived with one of his relatives because he does not appear in the census records. Between 1800 and 1805, however, the Prendergasts decided to sell their lands in eastern New York, pool their resources, and move. The group of twenty-nine crowded into four covered wagons, crossed part of New York, headed east into Pennsylvania, floated on a flatboat to Louisville, Kentucky, drove the wagons to Nashville, and then headed slowly overland back through Pennsylvania and into New York. When the group ventured into Ripley, New York (now Quincy), William Prendergast's tired son Thomas exclaimed, "I have traveled far enough."¹⁵ Matthew Prendergast, now acting as the head of the family, bought the land and hut of Josiah Farnsworth and stayed.

During the winter, most of the Prendergast party moved toward more settled regions of the state to find food. Two men stayed behind to find suitable land to settle. In early 1806, Matthew and James Prendergast bought approximately thirty-three hundred acres from the Holland Land Company on the western shore of Lake Chautauqua, built a log hut to live in, and began clearing land for planting. The rest of the family returned in the spring. William and Mehetibal Prendergast built a small farmhouse of their own on a slight hill overlooking a nearby creek, later named

Prendergast Creek, where they both died a few years later. He was eighty-four and she was seventy-four. They were buried in the family cemetery a few hundred yards up the hill from their house.

Why the Prendergasts decided to sell their land, migrate west, and start farming all over again remains unclear. Prendergast and his family probably moved for many of the same reasons other farmers left the relative safety and solid infrastructure of the east for the relative danger and unknown of the frontier. Migrants were often lured by cheap land in newly opened western territories, or felt constrained by the increasing size of New York's rural population. Prendergast probably knew that he could not provide a landed inheritance for all of his children in eastern New York, because so many people were moving into the northern Hudson Valley and settling on previously uninhabited land. By the early 1800s available land was becoming scarce. In western New York, still very much the frontier in 1805, Prendergast and his family could buy enough land to provide for themselves and for their children. His desire to own land, and enough land to be able to distribute it among his children, remained relatively consistent throughout his life. That Prendergast could give his children land meant that he could offer them some assurances of economic independence and political autonomy, because as landowners they would be socially and politically beholden to no one.

William Prendergast lived long enough to see his fellow colonists in North America rebel successfully against the British and establish their own country. Prendergast remains an important historical figure not because he participated in the Revolution on either side, but because he tried not to join either side. He and many other rural people in the Hudson Valley cared more about keeping their farms and providing for their families than they did about the political battles of the Revolution. To that end, he did not pledge his support for patriots or loyalists. Prendergast also represented those thousands of rural people in New York's Hudson Valley who increasingly believed that their labor on the land made that land valuable and entitled them to own it. Land ownership offered them economic and political independence. Such a perception of independence and liberty countered, and sometimes conflicted with, the notions of freedom espoused by many New York patriots. Although both groups of people lived in the new nation formed after the Revolution, their distinct notions of independence suggest that Americans thought differently about the Revolution they had waged so recently. Prendergast, like others who lived during the revolutionary period, spent his life searching for a place where he could provide security for his family and where he could furnish his children with the foundation for a stable life.

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