



NORTH GREENBUSH NOTES

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Two Jims in North Greenbush Politics

Once upon a time there were two gentlemen named Jim who were contemporaneously involved in local politics. Jim Gratton, a Republican and Jim Herbert, a Democrat, had interesting careers in public service and their stories tell some of the history of our town over a forty year period.

Jim Gratton came to North Greenbush in 1939 and immediately became involved in local politics. He ran for Receiver of Taxes against Democrat incumbent Marty Herbert and defeated him by 156 votes. Gratton held this position for 18 years. In those days, the tax payments were often received at his home. Gratton and his wife gradually got used to residents bringing large bags of money to the house. He also served as Republican committeeman for 40 years. As town GOP chairman, Gratton presided over a lengthy period of Republican dominance in local elections.

Although a partisan politician, Gratton was friendly with his neighbor, Democrat Councilman Richard Fennelly and once told him that while he wouldn't support him, "I wouldn't do anything to hurt you". This was high praise from a man whose political nickname was "Mr. Republican".

Looking back on his career, Gratton would probably be most proud of being a founding member of the Defreestville Fire Department and his longtime work on the Town Planning Board, when he helped shepherd the establishment of the RPI Technology Park.

The other Jim- Jim Herbert was an equally partisan Democrat. He was the proprietor of Herbert's Pharmacy in Defreestville. Like Jim Gratton, Jim Herbert also served as Receiver of Taxes. He ran unsuccessfully for town Supervisor in 1961, but came back and won the position in 1965, becoming the first Democrat Supervisor since the 1930's.

I've read the Town Minutes and various newspaper reports from his term in office and it seemed to be a tumultuous time: Town Board meetings were usually rancorous; votes were often 3-2 along party lines against the Supervisor and some voters seemed to think nothing was getting done. Can you imagine that?

Mr. Herbert was successful in pushing programs for youths in the town. He set up skating ponds on Route 43 and at Milhizer's Pond in Wynantskill. He fought against the county tax levy which he said was responsible for the spiraling tax increases in the town. High taxes and the Republican enrollment edge probably contributed to Herbert's defeat in 1967. It would be ten years before the Democrats would again elect a Supervisor.

Jim Herbert's name appeared in town headlines once more in the early 1990's when he successfully won a court battle to have property he owned in North Greenbush annexed to the City of Rensselaer. Herbert contended the city could provide water and sewers for development but the town could not. Ironically, town water was an issue in the 1960's when Herbert was Supervisor – but the water issue is a story for another time.

Suggestions for future articles? Call me at 283-6384.