**Abstract**

This article documents the legal and social history of “distress for rent” (also known as rent distraint) in early Republic New York, a legal tool that allowed landlords whose tenants were in arrears to seize tenants’ belongings and sell them to offset the cost of the unpaid rent. Rent distraint was a practice and topic around which New Yorkers contested ideological and practical conceptions of class, the rights of property, the role of law, and welfare. In 1811, New York City officials began tracking tenants in arrears of rent, creating a deep archive of documents that reveal the nuances of landlord-tenant relations and subsistence in this period. This article follows that paper trail, exploring distraint in this context as a legal remedy, as an experience with major impacts on individuals’ lives, and of efforts to reform the law and the lived experience of law. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, poor, middling, and wealthy New Yorkers were engaged in knowledge exchange around distraint and the social categories and experiences associated with it. Their stories document a materialist sensibility that crossed class lines and was attuned to the practical dimensions of working people’s living conditions.

**Keywords**

Distraint, distress, landlords, tenants, poverty, reform, rent