
Who Got Stuck with the Bill?

By Leigh-Anne Yacovelli

Introduction

The Federalists' plan to reduce the new nation's debt resulted in several crises, one of which was the Whiskey Rebellion. The events that unfolded in western Pennsylvania could have happened along any of the frontier areas. Virginia and Tennessee both felt the effects of the whiskey tax, but Pennsylvania, with its system of government that was the closest to true democracy, seemed to draw the most attention from government leaders. The residents of western Pennsylvania fought for the acknowledgement of their needs by the leaders in the eastern part of the state. Specifically, the "Whiskey Boys," some of the men from Pennsylvania's western half, fought for the repeal of a law that mostly affected the people along the frontier border. These same men became the focus of the federal government's attention as it implemented its plan to unburden the new nation from its national debt. This move by the government caused the division between Republicans and Federalists to widen, and established the executive branch's right to use the military to quell domestic upheaval.

A Challenged Nation

After gaining their independence from England, and since neither English law nor their charters, if applicable, applied to them any longer, many of the former colonies created constitutions to reflect their new status. Rhode Island was an exception; it did not retire its charter and adopt a new constitution until 1843. Pennsylvania's constitution provided for government by a Quaker oligarchy. Revolutionary War leaders sided with democratic leaders rather than Quaker leaders because of their loyalist leanings. Thus, the new constitution created a more true democratic government. No longer did only a few religious leaders have the power to decide the laws governing Pennsylvania. Neither was this right held only to landowners as seen in other states with Federalist leanings. Instead, everyone had a voice, even the westerners, to the dismay of those in the East. Voters in the West

usually did not make the polls because of distance and terrain, but if they did, the new person in the Assembly was one who lived in the West, not just owned land there. Examples of this were Robert Whitehall, a farmer, and William Findley, a weaver,¹ men known and trusted by their neighbors whose politics was similar to theirs. This new legislature passed laws that favored small farmers rather than large companies that held a monopoly on goods.

The “bad blood” between the wealthy landowners in the East and the poorer people who lived along the western frontier dates back before the Revolutionary War. The early 1770s saw the occurrence of the War of Regulation. Farmers and artisans in North Carolina, tired of the corrupt political dealings of their leaders, managed to shut down their local governments in an attempt to elicit change. They viewed their leaders as concerned with only the eastern merchants and lawyers holding office, who passed laws against the farmers in West. The Regulators attacked the courts to draw attention to their plight. However, the governor used the garrisoned troops to quell the insurrections. Not only was the War of Regulation significant in highlighting governmental rivalry between East and West, but a leader of the Whiskey Rebellion, Herman Husband, took part in the North Carolina attacks before he fled to Pennsylvania.²

As time wore on, it became obvious that the Articles of Confederation were not adequate to address the growing debt to foreign countries and its veterans. Arising out of the distress caused by the Articles was an insurrection tied closely to the Whiskey Rebellion: Shays’ Rebellion. From 1786 to 1787, Massachusetts farmers pled with their government officials for debt relief. Many of the small farmers were not able to pay the mortgages on their land, or only had worthless paper money while their creditors required payment in gold or silver. They issued petitions and held protests, but their government officials only passed more laws that seemed to make things worse. Daniel Shays gathered over a hundred armed men and marched on Boston when the courts charged eleven former Revolutionary War veterans with rioting after they and some of their neighbors tried to shut down the government. Boston’s elite saw Daniel Shays and his followers as disputing their control, and called in the militia to bring them to justice.

After the approval of the Constitution, the debt of the individual states to foreign countries became the nation’s debt, and Alexander Hamilton pushed through excises on luxury items such as whiskey to pay for it, which affected the citizens living in the frontier sections of the states more than the people who lived

along the East coast. Revenue from the excise was lower in some states than the cost of collection, as was the case in Georgia, because only the coastal areas saw enforcement. In Kentucky, the law was a “dead letter.”³ Places like Northwest Virginia, and the western sections of North and South Carolina were the same as Kentucky.

Petitions asking for the repeal of the whiskey tax came from Pennsylvania, Virginia, North Carolina, and Maryland’s legislatures. The government’s answer to their protests was the removal of the right of local courts to indict citizens with tax evasion. This added to the problems for the farmers in western Pennsylvania because they now had to attend trial in Philadelphia, over three hundred miles from home, and often during their busiest farming season, which kept them from making money to pay for necessities and their land, and which led to foreclosure. Thus, the people in the West viewed it as deliberate confiscation of land by Easterners.⁴ Speculators from the eastern cities purchased the foreclosed land in the West.

The History and Purpose of Whiskey Taxes

The excise on whiskey in 1791 was not the first time a government taxed this item. Whiskey taxes existed from 1684-1791, sometimes to provide money for fighting the French, other times to pay bills of credit. There was no regular collection of taxes due to the irregular passage of laws, and the unpopularity of the tax. Whiskey was a constant target for taxes because of its wide array of uses from people of all lifestyles. Those who lived the frontier’s hard lifestyle found whiskey an easy and accessible luxury. It also held great importance in medicine because of its use for fevers, snakebites, and pain. The army even gave it to its soldiers with their rations. For a while, rum from the Caribbean was cheaper than distilling wheat and rye, but this only lasted until the non-importation laws went into effect. The surge in demand for locally distilled alcohol created a shortage of bread. In order to regulate the stills, Congress instituted a law in 1778 that forbade distilling for part of the year, but the government eventually saw no further use for it, and repealed it.⁵

There was always the view that taxes like the whiskey tax were the reason why the Americans went to war against England. A more specific argument used by the Republicans was that taxes on whiskey made it too expensive to make

because it was a tax on production, not sales. The Federalists said it was a tax on the wealthy, who bought distilled liquor. A game of semantics ensued between party leaders when the Republicans countered this argument, and pointed out that the wealthy did not pay the tax because their whiskey was stored in large casks.

The whiskey tax also affected the small farmer in the West more than those in the East because they did not have the access to coin money the way the Easterners did. Small western farmers and immigrants bartered with whiskey and produce to purchase what they needed from area merchants, as well as the army for the cash needed to pay for their land. The whiskey tax left no money for any items other than necessities, which further highlighted the Westerners' lack of access to markets, and that the eastern elitists owned their land.

Farmers brought whiskey over the Alleghenies by horse in large casks called kegs. A horse could hold two kegs, each holding six to eight gallons; whereas a horse could only carry four bushels of rye grain. The demand for this grain was not high enough for the grower to see a profit. However, the people wanted whiskey, so the farmer made rye whiskey from the unwanted grain. In 1794, the army paid almost fifty cents per gallon whiskey, but only forty cents per bushel rye.⁶ For transportation purposes, this meant a horse could carry more earning capacity if it carried whiskey. To keep the trip cost effective, distillers usually sent twenty to thirty horses at one time to eastern markets. By 1793, the Ohio River to the Mississippi saw nearly one-third of these caravans, but because Spain closed the Mississippi to travel, overland essentially became the only way to market.⁷

Another benefit the wealthy Easterners had at their disposal was the availability of large stills. Western neighbors went in together on a distillery because a good one, a one hundred gallon still, cost as much as a two hundred acre farm. These farmers used the shared still similar to a shared mill. They paid for their share of the still out of their whiskey supply since the one whose property it sat on usually paid up front for the still. Hamilton said it was the distiller's fault for not making the customer pay the production tax. Stills in the East had customers at the site of production, and could pay their tax immediately. The stills in the West could be as large as those stills in the East, but the whiskey had to make it to market. The Westerners had to wait for the sale, and since the whiskey tax was on the size of the still, there was the ongoing problem of transportation, and customers in the East still demanded the same low price for whiskey, there was no room for profit anymore. No profit meant the West became the greatest consumer of its whiskey. No matter

what, they still had to pay the tax.

The tax schedules for a city, town, or village were nine to twenty-five cents per gallon by proof, and if a distiller could pay quarterly, they received discounts. The tax code charged country distillers sixty cents per gallon for still capacity, or nine cents per gallon for production. A later act in 1792 reduced the rates. If a still was less than four hundred gallons, it cost fifty-four cents per gallon annually, ten cents per gallon per month in use, or seven cents per gallon produced. Further amending the act was the Act of 1794, which allowed stills of one hundred gallons or less to pay the monthly fee annually.⁸

Opinions and Feelings

Pennsylvania's people were no different from other states, and Pennsylvania's population saw a distinct division into two sections created by wealth. The first group contained the old money landowners, merchants, and manufacturer owners, who were proud of their heritage and birth. As the United States expanded, the second set of people continued to increase, small farmers, artisans, and new immigrants, all of whom were proud of being equal. This growing sector of the population settled in the West because the existing people already owned and operated everything for their own profit in the East, leaving no room for newcomers. The Westerners said the reasons for their rebellion were simply from a hatred of taxes, riding the tide of the popular anti-tax movement from the Revolutionary War, and from the abundance of Scotch-Irish people who now lived in the area. These Scotch-Irish immigrants came to America harboring a tremendous hatred of the tax collector, and were the biggest instigators of the Whiskey Rebellion.⁹

The Whiskey Rebellion was essentially a regional rebellion. Because the United States still had a decentralized federal government, as the Constitution was relatively new, the local governments continued to take charge of situations that arose. These people were also the ones responsible for the collection of taxes. However, they did not support or enforce taxes because they benefitted from positions of power. That is, until the federal government forced them to abide by their positions under the threat of removal of their authority.¹⁰ These leaders used the Scotch-Irish's natural hatred of the tax collector, and the popular sentiment regarding taxes in general, and incited the public. They later claimed they were part

of the rioting to calm down the distillers who terrorized tax collectors.¹¹

There were three groups involved in the events that led to the Whiskey Rebellion. The first group contained the elite economic and political leaders of the West, the distillers. Since the whiskey tax affected them directly, they swayed the protests. The area's elected and appointed leaders were the ones who gathered in Pittsburgh for the meetings in September 1791 and August 1792, which led to the resolution that so incited President Washington. The militiamen formed the second group. These military-minded men could reprimand the tax collector, and through their actions, they supported protesters.¹² Ultimately, the reason for the rebellion was the third and largest group, the general public. The leaders took their cue from the public, who felt they still had a right to demand a choice and have a say in the governing.

West Versus East

The commoners in the West knew about important events before their mail arrived. Politics moved with the wagon trains that crossed the state carrying whiskey and furs. These people were not stupid, as is so often believed. Even graduates of Princeton found themselves in western Pennsylvania for a chance to make it big. People like Hugh Brackenridge, a western lawyer and a leader of the rebellion, did not have the opportunity to become rich and famous in the East. The West offered this chance. The major religions for those who lived in the western frontier, the Presbyterians and Episcopalians, required their religious leaders to hold an education. The common people also demanded and built academies for their children to attend. The literacy rate in western Pennsylvania was sixty-five percent. This was impressive given that England's was sixty percent, and France's was only fifty percent.¹³

Easterners called the people who lived in western Pennsylvania stupid because many only had the minimal creature comforts, such as homespun clothes, and wooden dishes, not china. Instead of multicourse meals with a variety of ingredients brought in through coastal trade similar to what the Easterners had, the people in the western counties ate corn meal, pork, game, some vegetables, and wild berries. The townsfolk and gentlemen farmers had as much as their cohorts in the East, but the East saw the Westerners as all the same.

The East had a definite hierarchy of landlords and tenants, and wanted to keep its power. After all, they postured, the federal government was there, and they

were the oldest settlements. This feeling of entitlement was the cover speculators used. The West disliked the idea of the assumption of war debts by the government, because it was mostly speculator money. Moreover, the West believed that the people who held the bonds had done nothing to deserve payment.¹⁴ Many farmers faced foreclosure on land, and prison for taxes, because the wealthy speculators in the East bought the foreclosed land in West. This supported the Westerners' view that Easterners were greedy. The small farmers could not get loans from the state's bank, only speculators with access to gold and silver coin could, which resulted in more foreclosures. Pennsylvania's legislature had Westerners in the Assembly, who forced the revocation of the bank's charter, and refused to charter it again the next session. However, the purchase of bonds to pay state debt was popular even among the lesser rich, so speculation continued.

Westerners viewed themselves as part of a perfect democracy, and demanded the government leave the farmers, artisans, and laborers alone, and regulate the lawyers, bankers, and large landowners. Westerners wanted a land tax because of eastern speculators who owed mortgages on most of the western lands, which is where the extra cash of farmers went. The whiskey tax, said the Westerners, was simply eastern money ruling the government.¹⁵ The Easterners accused those in the West of not pulling their weight in sharing the expense of paying the government's debt. What many Easterners failed to realize was that the Westerners were usually among the first to pay their taxes.¹⁶ That is, except the whiskey tax.

The Insurrection

Post-Revolutionary War, the people who lived in western Pennsylvania avoided foreclosures and tax collectors by crowd activities, which threatened local agents into not doing anything. They blocked roads with items such as fences and logs to keep judges and jurors from attending courts. Witnesses who testified against tax evaders saw their barns burned, and distillers who paid their tax found themselves tarred and feathered, and their stills destroyed. Men dressed as Indians, women, and black-faced vigilantes tarred and feathered tax collectors, another common occurrence. Likewise, landlords, who rented office space to the tax collectors, saw their buildings destroyed. It was unfortunate, but the law required the posting of the Offices of Inspection so people knew where to go to pay their tax.

This gave Tom the Tinker enough time to cause problems for the owners of the building.

Tom the Tinker became a people's favorite for advertising the latest offenders so the public could act against them. During one riot, James Kiddoe had his still shot full of holes. John Holcroft, the leader of the rioters, laughed and said Tom was tinkering with the still. This gave rise to the infamous name. It became Tom's job to shut down the Offices of Inspection so that there was no compliance with law. Anyone could play the role of Tom the Tinker, and everyone took part in protesting the tax. Even prominent, wealthy landowners in the West shared in the protest when they published tax records in the papers, and petitions of aggrieved parties.

People knew there were other troubled spots in the United States, but the Federalists were too good with publicity, and made it seem as if ending the resistance in Pennsylvania would end all the problems. Hamilton wrote in the *Gazette of the United States*, the official paper for the government, what many believed was the government's point of view regarding the Whiskey Rebellion. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison used other newspapers, such as the *Pennsylvanian Gazette* and *General Advertiser*, both from Philadelphia. While Jefferson and Madison agreed that Hamilton's policies, supported by the Federalists, were aristocratic by their very nature, they disagreed on the use of force against the people in western Pennsylvania. The raising of troops was unpopular, but when the Federalists labeled the Whiskey Boys as "Shaysites," and not vigilante farmers to drum up support for troops, patriot fever took hold. In a December 28, 1794 letter to Madison, Jefferson not only wrote against this, but also the way in which the Federalists attempted to quiet the media and the Democratic societies.

The Democratic societies formed in support of the people's causes. Their main purposes were promoting citizen awareness, public education, and public political discussions.¹⁷ Along the western frontier, they petitioned the government to open the Mississippi River, and supported the people in their rights no matter how they chose to exercise them. In the East, they criticized the excise tax, but denounced the Whiskey Boys for their armed resistance. The Federalists tried at every opportunity to quiet the societies, and to limit or do away with their influence on the public, which did not always work. The Democratic societies involved in the western counties of Pennsylvania were the Mingo Creek and the Democratic Society of the County of Washington in Pennsylvania. The stronger of the two was

the Mingo Creek Society. Established February 28, 1794, they spoke in exaggerated terms of liberty. Members elected each other to public office or influenced elections, and sometimes, were able to keep things out of the courts. The other society, located in Washington County, and formed in approximately March 1794, included prominent citizens as officers, such as James Marshal and David Bradford. Members of the Mingo Creek Society and the Washington Society were part of the vigilantes who burned John Neville's house in July 1794.

George Washington supported Hamilton regarding quelling the rebellion. He said the "insurrection" was the "first ripe fruit of the Democratic Societies," and wrote to John Jay that the Whiskey Boys "precipitated a crisis for which they were not prepared."¹⁸ Jefferson showed his displeasure regarding the side Washington took when, in his December letter to Madison, he wrote, "It is wonderful indeed that the President should have permitted himself to be the organ of such an attack on the freedom of discussion." Washington thought that the Whiskey Boys would destroy the union created by the Revolutionary War if allowed to continue with their violent uprising. His position regarding the use of the military to handle a civil event was the first real stretch of the executive branch's right to order and lead troops.

Elected representatives from western Pennsylvania and other counties met

at Parkinson's Ferry on August 14, 1794. Albert Gallatin, a representative in the Pennsylvania Assembly, opposed David Bradford's proposal to raise arms against the government leaders in eastern Pennsylvania.¹⁹ The peace process began with Mr. Gallatin's speech, and they drew up a resolution²⁰ that



Figure 1 *Washington Reviewing the Western Army, at Fort Cumberland, Maryland.* Oil on canvas attributed to Frederick Kemmelmeyer. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

promised protection to the people and property involved with the tax collection.

However, leaders in the East believed the gathering was an insurrection, and in October 1794, Washington ordered troops sent to the area.

Conclusion

The people of western Pennsylvania did not think troops would come, or if they did, they could intimidate them the way they did the tax collectors and all those that opposed them. For this reason, Generals Henry Lee and Hamilton met no resistance when they arrived with their fourteen thousand troops. In the end, the government required participants of the Whiskey Rebellion to sign an “Oath of Submission to the Laws of the United States” if they wished amnesty for their part in what transpired.²¹ David Bradford and some of the other rebellion leaders fled to Ohio. The troops arrested thirty-two men, and marched them to Philadelphia for trial. The court only convicted two, John Mitchell, charged with mail robbery, and Philip Wagle, a known participant of a Fayette County riot, because they viewed the farmers as poor country bumpkins. George Washington eventually pardoned all of the Whiskey Rebellion participants except David Bradford.

Feelings ran deep regarding the Whiskey Rebellion. Generations fought over the truth of what happened and why. Brackenridge wrote about his activities during the rebellion for the side of the people, and about Neville’s connection with the side of the government. Neville’s grandson, Neville B. Craig, dismissed Brackenridge’s story when he wrote his history of Pittsburgh. In response, Brackenridge’s son wrote his own history to counter Craig’s version.

The Whiskey Rebellion was two forms of rebellion that the Federalists would not tolerate. They considered meetings, such as the ones in Pittsburgh, as extra legal, even though they were peaceful, and produced only resolutions and written protests against the government. While the Federalists leaders overlooked the community censure and rebuke of taxpayers and collectors, the violence to people and property was too much to ignore. Hamilton wrote a narrative regarding the government’s use of force, and stated that it was justified and moderated, and that it helped to end the rebellion. His spin on the authority of the president to use the military on internal issues helped establish the right to do so.

Notes

1. William Hogeland, *The Whiskey Rebels: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty* (New York: A Lisa Drew Book/Scribner, 2006), 54.
2. Jerry A. Clouse, *The Whisky Rebellion: Southwestern Pennsylvania's Frontier People Test the American Constitution* (Harrisburg: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Bureau for Historic Preservation Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1994), 7.
3. Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850's* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 49.
4. Leland D. Baldwin, *Whiskey Rebels: The Story of a Frontier Uprising* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1939), 72.
5. *Ibid.*, 57.
6. *Ibid.*, 25.
7. Clouse, *Southwestern Pennsylvania's Frontier People*, 11.
8. Leland D. Baldwin, *Whiskey Rebels*, 68-69.
9. Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People*, 41-48.
10. Michael P. Hanagan, Leslie P. Moch, and Wayne P. Brake, *Challenging Authority: The Historical Study of Contentious Politics* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1998), "Introduction," xxi.
11. Hanagan, Moch, and Brake, *Challenging Authority*, 38.
12. Clouse, *Southwestern Pennsylvania's Frontier People*, 17-18.
13. *Ibid.*, 8.
14. Leland D. Baldwin, *Whiskey Rebels*, 62.
15. *Ibid.*, 71.
16. *Ibid.*, 12.
17. Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People*, 53.
18. *Ibid.*, 51.
19. Clouse, *Southwestern Pennsylvania's Frontier People*, 31-33.
20. Parkinson's Ferry Meeting, Resolutions, *Document No. 1*.
21. Hanagan, Moch, and Brake, *Challenging Authority*, 40.

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