

# WHISKEY REBELLION - BACKGROUND

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Running a new form of government meant the decisions that Washington and his cabinet discussed and enacted defined the federal system and created precedents for future administrations. The Whiskey Rebellion was the first test of executive power for the young government.

Early in George Washington's first term, the administration wanted to pay off the Revolutionary War debt. Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, suggested an excise tax, a tax paid on a specific good, on domestic and imported spirits. Washington agreed. While the tax met some resistance in Congress, the bill became law on March 3, 1791.<sup>1</sup> Some critics of the tax worried it would disproportionately affect smaller distillers; others worried it expanded presidential powers too much. Resistance primarily came from the southern states and Pennsylvania.

In western Pennsylvania, farmers distilled grain into whiskey to create a product that would survive the long journey to port cities along the east coast. The excise tax was collected at the distillery creating a dwindling cash supply that not only decreased the profits of the distiller, but also limited the cash available to pay farmers for their harvest.

While discontent increased in parts of the country, political opposition continued in Philadelphia. Democratic-Republicans urged for more state control and became increasingly critical of the perceived strength of the central government. While Washington did not label himself as a member of either party, he aligned more with the Federalists ideologically.

Tensions continued to rise in Pennsylvania, and violence broke out against tax collectors in Washington and Allegheny Counties in September of 1791. Congress revised the excise tax in May 1792. The revision allowed for monthly payments of the tax<sup>2</sup> and reduced the amount distillers had to pay.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the change was not enough. In August of 1792, protestors threatened mob-violence against Captain William Faulkner who offered to lend his home to John Neville, a tax collector. At the same time, a committee met to discuss strategies to get the tax repealed. The committee's demands were printed and distributed throughout Pennsylvania, including Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Pittsburgh Gazette*. In response, Washington issued a proclamation on

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<sup>1</sup> Edward G. Lengel, ed. *A Companion to George Washington*, First Edition. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 449 – 450.

<sup>2</sup> Clouse, Jerry A. *The Whiskey Rebellion: Southwestern Pennsylvania's Frontier People Test the American Constitution*. (Harrisburg: The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2002) 20.

<sup>3</sup> Hogeland, William. *The Whiskey Rebellion: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and the Frontier Rebels Who Challenged America's Newfound Sovereignty*. (New York: A Lisa Drew Book / Scribner, 2006.) 115.

September 15 written by Hamilton, with the assistance of Attorney General Edmund Randolph, denouncing opponents.<sup>4</sup>

*“I George Washington, President of the United States, do by these presents most earnestly admonish and exhort all persons whom it may concern, to refrain and desist from all unlawful combinations and proceedings whatsoever, having for object or tending to obstruct the operation of the laws...”*<sup>5</sup>

Washington’s second term in office began in March of 1793; unfortunately, there was no sign of trouble diminishing in Pennsylvania. Organization of political and violent resistance increased. Another presidential proclamation was sent in February of 1794, but it was also unsuccessful.<sup>6</sup>

Another modification to the tax was made in June of 1794, allowing the state to conduct trials for violators, rather than forcing the accused to travel to federal courts in large cities like Philadelphia. Even before Congress passed this change, federal officials began to formally charge violators.

John Neville, a tax collector, served as Marshall David Lenox’s guide as he served the charges to citizens of Cumberland, Bedford, and Fayette counties. Before entering Allegheny County, a rumor circulated that Lenox would send those accused to Philadelphia for trial in federal court.

On July 16, the Mingo Creek Militia attacked John Neville’s home, Bower Hill, and suffered five casualties. Tensions came to a head the next night when Neville, Lenox, and members of the U.S. Army, led by Neville’s brother-in-law Major Kirkpatrick, met the Mingo Creek Militia again at Neville’s home.

*If you were George Washington, how would you respond to the situation?*

- *Suspend the tax.*
- *Let local officials handle the enforcement of the tax.*
- *Use military force.*

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<sup>4</sup> “To Thomas Jefferson from George Washington, 15 September 1792,” Founders Online, National Archives, last modified February 1, 2018,

<sup>5</sup> A Proclamation, 15 September 1792, The Papers of George Washington, Christine Sternberg Patrick, ed, et. al (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1987-) Presidential Series, 11, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Lengel, 457.