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## ***Historical Article: "The Whiskey Rebellion"***

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Vocabulary words in this article:

excise:

repealed:

A tax on whiskey? To Alexander Hamilton and the Federalists in the east, it seemed like a good idea. Hamilton believed that an excise tax on whiskey was a proper way to collect money to help pay off the national debt. To the average American family, which drank six gallons of whiskey per year, such a tax would cost about \$1.50 annually. But to the farmers of western Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas, this was considered a tax on one of life's necessities. In the west, whiskey was used freely at weddings to toast the bride and at funerals to mourn the dead. Whiskey was believed to warm the body in winter and refresh the spirit in summer.

Whiskey had an even more important function in the western counties of Pennsylvania where whiskey was used in place of money. Real money was seldom seen by farmers living in these remote areas. Whiskey was their main source of cash. Twelve hundred pounds of wheat, oats, or rye could easily be distilled into 20 gallons of whiskey, weighing 160 pounds. The liquor could then be loaded in jugs, slung across the backs of mules, and hauled 300 miles from Pittsburg to Philadelphia. There, it would be sold for \$1 per gallon. Whiskey, therefore, became the main cash-producing product for these western farmers. Since it could be easily exchanged for money, it was often used in place of cash. For example, farmers paid for their goods with whiskey, and merchants exchanged it for supplies. Even ministers' small salaries were often paid with this liquor.

Alexander Hamilton knew the independent ways of the western farmers. He also knew that a tax on whiskey could raise about \$800,000 per year which could be used to pay national and state debts. While a tax of 25 cents per gallon would cost the average family on \$1.50 a year, it would take \$6 of the \$20 the average farm family in western Pennsylvania made each year. To these farmers, this seemed to be an unfairly high tax.

Hamilton's suggestion for a tax on whiskey in 1791 caused a heated debate in Congress. James Jackson of Georgia thought the whiskey tax unfair. When told that people should drink less whiskey, Jackson defended their right to get drunk! Hugh Williamson of North Carolina proposed that there should be a tax on beer and cider consumed in New England. Those who supported the tax said that alcohol was a luxury (and a sinful one at that) and not a necessity. Other pointed out that the rich were paying far more in taxes than \$6 per year.

James Madison and Thomas Jefferson remained silent on the issue of the whiskey tax because they had made a deal with Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton agreed to a plan to move the nation's capital from Philadelphia to a new city in the South called Federal City (now called Washington, D.C.) in exchange for the national government taking over the state debts left over from the American Revolution. The whiskey tax was one of Hamilton's methods of paying off the debts.

After the tax was passed, many of the farmers in the west remembered how the colonists had protested England's tax policies. Tax collectors were tarred and feathered by angry mobs. Liberty poles with slogans against unfair taxation were planted in the ground. Committees of correspondence were formed, and several towns and counties passed resolutions stating why they opposed the whiskey tax.