

Volume 2

Number 160

The Whiskey Rebellion - Part IV

Lead: In the winter of 1794 President George Washington sent an army into western Pennsylvania to put down a rebellion among farmers opposed to a federal tax on whiskey.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Passed to pay the lingering debts run up by the former colonies in the American Revolution, the excise tax on whiskey was deeply resented by farmers in the west who distilled spirits and used them for medicine as well as a form of money,

trading whiskey for farm supplies, clothing and most other needed goods. When a citizen militia led by back country lawyer David Bradford threatened to sever western Pennsylvania from the rest of the state or perhaps even secede from the Union, President George Washington declared them traitors and sent a delegation to investigate and an Army to put down the rebellion.

While the President was conscripting 13,000 troops from four states, moderate voices in the counties around Pittsburgh were working to avoid a showdown. At a meeting during the fall at Parkinson's Ferry, Bradford's radical plans were voted down, but when Washington's

proclamation of treason was read it took all the persuasive power of the moderates to prevent open warfare. Tension was high in the hill counties around Pittsburgh as the Army under Revolutionary War hero General "Light-Horse Harry" Lee moved slowly westward.

When Lee arrived he encountered no opposition to his demand that all citizens in the area sign an new oath of allegiance to the United States. David Bradford and his colleagues had escaped down the Ohio to Spanish territory.

During the investigation, the Army probably got out control and began arresting people at random. In one

incident, which was later referred to as "the Dreadful Night," the soldiers dragged 16 men from their beds and forced them to run for several miles, sleep all through the rainy night in an open pigpen, endure a five-day lockup, sit through a makeshift trial, only to find themselves acquitted. All but two had already signed the oath.

The government of the United States would face many challenges in the decades after the Whiskey rebellion but it had proven one thing: it had the power to tax.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Baldwin, Leland Dewitt. *Whiskey Rebels: The Story of a Frontier Uprising.* Pittsburgh. PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968.

Parker, Iola B., "Whiskey Creek Keeps Running, but Only With Water," *Smithsonian* 5 (3, June 1974), 82-89.

Slaughter, Thomas Paul. *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Copyright by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.