

Whiskey Rebellion

From the early colonial days, American colonists made money from the sale of alcohol. This started during the triangle trade when sugar cane was used to make molasses in the West Indies and then sent to the American colonies where it was used to manufacture rum. Because of the time required to transport goods long distances, it was cheaper to reduce sugar cane to molasses for shipping. A shipment of sugar cane would spoil on a long journey.

With a tradition of distilling alcohol firmly entrenched in America, many people began to travel to the colonies with the hopes of making their fortune in spirits, another name for alcohol. Among the first group of immigrants was the Scotch-Irish, well-known for the whiskey they produced in Europe. As these people arrived in America, they found much of the best farmland already taken, and they traveled farther west to find suitable farmland. As these early settlers ventured westward, they found few roads or means of transportation back to the East, which would be critical in shipping their crops to markets before they spoiled. In addition, these early settlers often clashed with American Indians who believed them to be trespassers on Indian land. Frontier life was much different than life today. Early settlers on the frontier had to build or grow whatever they needed to survive. They also had to rely on one another during tough times. Money was rare on the frontier. People traded goods in exchange for items they needed. In addition, based on their experiences back home, the Scotch-Irish distrusted the government, particularly the British government. Because of this distrust, the early Scotch-Irish settlers were happy to live far away from governing powers.

As the rum traders had earlier, frontier settlers were faced with a big problem. How could they ship their crops east to markets without the crops spoiling in transit? They answered this question the same way the earlier triangle trade had solved the problem. Instead of transporting all crops to the East, they would reduce the cargo into a product that would not spoil; liquor was the easily transportable product.

After the United States gained its independence from England in 1781, the new country was deeply in debt. By 1790, the United States government had assumed the debts of the thirteen colonies and needed revenue to pay down the war debt. Taxes were the only way the government could raise money. Congress levied the Distilled Spirits Excise Tax in 1791. This tax placed a nine cent per gallon charge on all spirits produced in the country. As soon as the farmers learned of the

tax, they protested. They claimed the tax was unfair because it placed a higher tax on small distilleries than on large distilleries. They also complained they received no benefit from the taxes. The tax revenue did not provide better roads and canals for transportation of their crops and did not provide protection from Indians. Farmers protested the tax in different ways. Most people simply refused to pay the tax, while others threatened excise officers who collected the taxes. Some of the most violent protests occurred in western Pennsylvania, where excise offices were burned and tax officials were beaten.

While the farmers did not want to pay the tax in the first place, it also was true they were incapable of paying it. Most of the people required to pay this tax had no money because they very rarely used it. These people bartered or traded for what they needed and had no real use for money.

Realizing this tax revolt was a major threat to the young United States government, in 1794 President George Washington led 12,000 militia to western Pennsylvania to squelch the Whiskey Rebellion. Shortly before the militia arrived, settlers involved with the rebellion fled into the countryside, and the rebellion ended quickly. The rule of government was established, and a strong message was sent to Americans. The national government would guide our nation.

Name: _____

Date: _____

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Discussion Questions:

1. What trading system involved harvesting sugar cane in the West Indies, converting it to molasses, and shipping it to the American colonies where it was made into rum before it was shipped to its final market?
2. What immigrant group was well-known for making spirits in Europe?
3. Why was it easier to transport spirits east rather than crops?
4. Why did farmers believe the tax was unfair?

