

INSURRECTION !

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE WHISKEY REBELLION OF 1794

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The Whiskey Rebellion (or Western Insurrection as it was also called) was an event of national importance that occurred in this immediate area over two hundred years ago. It was the first real test of the Federal government - a "civil war" that has become misunderstood or even completely forgotten with time. Many books, articles and novels have been written on the subject over the years and the details may vary from book to book. At the Oliver Miller Homestead, a Whiskey Rebellion site located in Allegheny County's South Park, research continues to reveal the Oliver Miller family history and the true Whiskey Rebellion story.

To better understand the Whiskey Rebellion, one must first know something about Western Pennsylvania and the people who lived here at that time. In the early 1790's Western Pennsylvania was divided into four counties; Allegheny, Washington, Westmoreland, and Fayette, with a total population of about 75,000.¹ This was the frontier, cut off from the East by the formidable Allegheny Mountains. The roads were merely paths, crossed on foot or by horseback. Even the old Forbes' Road (much of present day Route 30) was difficult to cross by wagon. Native Americans still posed a major threat to the settlers who were expected to protect themselves by means of local forts and the militia. On the whole, frontier people were resourceful and fiercely independent. A large proportion of the settlers were of Scots-Irish heritage, a group that was often described as being an intelligent, religious, enterprising and sometimes war-like people with an instinctive hatred of excise taxes.

Whiskey played an important part in their lives. It was beverage and medicine as well as their primary means of acquiring cash. In Western Pennsylvania, where money was scarce, whiskey was as good as currency. In fact, there was no other product produced in Western Pennsylvania at the time that could bring cash to a farmer the way Monongahela rye whiskey could. Almost every farmer distilled whiskey either at his own or his neighbor's still. Rye was an important and very abundant crop but there was no profitable market for the grain until it was distilled into whiskey and taken by packhorse to the East where it was sold for about a dollar a gallon. Cash and other important items such as salt, lead, gun powder and iron could then be brought back in return.² Shipping the grain by boat down the Ohio and Mississippi was out of the question because the Indians were still a threat to the west and the Spanish had control over the mouth of the Mississippi. Taking the grain to the

East by wagon was equally difficult since the roads were so poor. This left the farmer with no other choice but to sell his whiskey in the East if he wanted to see a real profit.

In March of 1791, the United States government, with George Washington as President and Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury, enacted an excise tax as a way of raising money for the newly formed Federal government, which was still in debt following the Revolutionary War. The law required that all stills be registered and that a cash tax be paid per gallon of whiskey manufactured by the distiller.³ The people of the West were enraged. They saw their money going back East and were convinced that this tax was practically the same as the taxation without representation that they had fought against in the Revolutionary War.

When the government attempted to collect the tax, it was met with strong and often violent opposition. Tax collection offices were vandalized and the tax collectors themselves were threatened in various ways - tarring and feathering was a ritual torture. Those farmers who chose to comply with the law had their stills and property destroyed by men who were known as "Tom the Tinker's Boys". Shooting up a still was their way of "mending" it. Many farmers, including William Miller, were caught in the middle.⁴ They dared not say what they really felt out of fear of their more radical neighbors, so many, who would have paid the tax under other conditions, chose to ignore it. The people also felt that they had strength in numbers because the government could not possibly prosecute the entire area.

Federal authorities in the East were surprised by the degree of frontier defiance but until 1794 little was done to attempt to collect the tax or punish those who were delinquent. Then, at a time when the tension in the West was at a peak and there was serious talk of the frontier counties forming their own state or perhaps even their own country, the government decided to crack down on those who ignored the whiskey tax. The boiling point was reached on July 15, 1794, when United States Marshall David Lenox, accompanied by Excise Inspector General John Neville rode up to the home of William Miller (which was located near the present Oliver Miller Homestead). He was served a warrant that required him to pay a \$250 fine and to appear in Federal court in Philadelphia. Miller angrily refused the warrant, partly because he thought the cost of a trip to Philadelphia would ruin him, especially when he had already sold part of his farm and was planning to move to Kentucky.⁵ Miller ordered the men off his property. Farmers harvesting in the fields nearby took notice of the argument and they fired upon Lenox and Neville as they were leaving. Neither was hit and each went on his way, Lenox to Pittsburgh and Neville to his home on Bower Hill.

News of the incident spread to the Mingo Creek Militia who, by coincidence, were already scheduled to meet that day to fulfill President Washington's call for additional Indian fighters. (The militia met at the Mingo Creek Meeting House near present day Finleyville.) Early the next day a party of about thirty six men were led by John Holcroft (generally thought to be *the* Tom the Tinker) to General Neville's prestigious house, Bower Hill, to capture Marshall Lenox and demand the surrender of General Neville's commission. Neville was apparently prepared for such an attack. The group was fired upon first from the house and also from the slaves' quarters, wounding six. Of the six who were wounded, one named Oliver Miller later died of his wounds. He was the son of Alexander, (William Miller's older brother) and he was the first person to die as a result of the Whiskey Rebellion.⁶

Since Neville believed the Insurgents would return he requested protection from the Pittsburgh garrison (Fort Fayette). Eleven soldiers led by Major Abraham Kirkpatrick were at Bower Hill the next day. In the meantime the farmers had regrouped at the Mingo Meeting House, appointed Major James McFarlane as their leader and now numbered at close to five hundred. Though the plan was to ask General Neville to resign his position as Inspector of the Revenue, many went with the intention of avenging the "murder" of Oliver Miller. On the morning of July 17, 1794, the group made their way to the Neville home. At the rendezvous point of Couch's Fort, they were met by Reverend John Clark, the aged pastor of the Bethel Church. He begged them to realize their folly and turn back, but to no avail. They marched on to Bower Hill where, after several failed attempts at negotiations with Major Kirkpatrick, the firing commenced. Major McFarlane was killed when he stepped out from behind a tree in what he thought to be a cease fire.⁷ When his men concluded that he had been murdered, the house and outbuildings of General Neville were looted and burned. The General himself had escaped earlier but the soldiers from the Pittsburgh garrison were briefly taken prisoner. None were seriously mistreated.

David Bradford, an opportunistic lawyer from Washington County and the Whiskey Rebellion's most radical leader, stepped forward at the July 23 meeting at the Mingo Meeting House to urge the people to support the rebel farmers' cause. It was a violent speech that was somewhat countered by Hugh Henry Brackenridge, a Pittsburgh lawyer and politician. He advised the people to apply for mass amnesty for what had happened at Neville's house. He told them that, "what had been done might be morally right, but it was legally wrong" and that they had committed what amounted to treason.⁸

On July 26, David Bradford ordered the United States mail seized en route from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia.⁹ Pittsburgh's Federal sympathizers were identified and marked for punishment or expulsion from the city. A muster of all Western Pennsylvania militia was

ordered by Bradford to meet at Braddock's Field with the intention of overtaking Pittsburgh, which was considered by the farmers to be a hotbed for Federalists. On August 1, the militia numbered at about 5000. The intentions of the mass were varied. Some spoke of burning Sodom (Pittsburgh), others of seizing the Federal arsenal and many simply had looting in mind. Hugh Henry Brackenridge was aware of this gathering at Braddock's Field. He met with the Pittsburgh people and encouraged those whom the Insurgents found particularly odious to leave town. Then, in a show of support, he rode out to Braddock's Field with the Pittsburgh Militia and circulated among the people. He reminded them that the stores of ammunition at Fort Fayette were for General Anthony Wayne, who was at that time involved with fighting the Indians on the far frontier, and that neither the fort nor city could be taken without heavy loss of life.¹⁰ As the insurgents approached Pittsburgh they were met just outside of town (Brackenridge's idea) by citizens who had tables laden with food and drink. The farmers felt a spirit of comradeship and they finally passed through the town with the only incident of note being the burning of Major Kirkpatrick's barn on the South side of the Monongahela River.

Though the "taking of Pittsburgh" had been a disorganized failure, it was now impossible for Federal authorities to ignore the happenings in the West. In President Washington's proclamation of August 7, 1794, he referred to the Western outbreak as "acts which I am advised amount to treason, being acts of levying war against the United States."¹¹ Although Secretary of Treasury Hamilton was in favor of sending an armed force to quell the Rebellion, Washington first sent a team of five federal and state commissioners to Western Pennsylvania to negotiate a peaceful settlement. On August 20, the commissioners met with a group of appointed delegates at Brownsville. After several meetings it was decided that the citizens of Western Pennsylvania should take a yea or nay vote on submission to the laws of the United States. An earlier secret ballot had been taken of the delegates which showed thirty-four votes in favor of submission and twenty-three against.¹²

The ballot of the people was quite different. Though the majority of the people were now in favor of submission, the radical minority terrorized many of them to vote nay or to absent themselves from the polls altogether. The commissioners returned to Philadelphia to report failure in acquiring the submission of the people of the West. President Washington now felt that he had no choice but to order 13,000 troops, consisting of soldiers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Virginia and Maryland, to proceed into Western Pennsylvania to quell the Insurrection.¹³ This was a force larger than any that he had ever commanded in the Revolutionary War. The army, which was divided into two wings, marched to the West and met at the forks of the Youghiogheny and Monongahela Rivers on October 24, 1794.

When the soldiers reached the area they did not find any of the violence that had been expected. During the long march a change had come over Western Pennsylvania. The insurgents were now convinced that the government had no intention of repealing the whiskey tax and believed they would be seriously punished if they continued to rebel against the law. Hundreds of them fled the area, including David Bradford, who never returned. William Miller and his family, who had already made plans to move to Kentucky, were gone before the army arrived.¹⁴

Many of the soldiers had expected at least a short though bloody war and were disappointed that they had made the difficult journey across the mountains to find a country at peace. The frustrations of some of the soldiers were taken out on the night of November 13, still known to this day by some as "The Dreadful Night". In an attempt to bring in the those who were most wanted by the government, men were roused out of their beds in the middle of the night, marched on the run at bayonets' point, and tied in a cold, damp cellar for hours without food, drink or adequate clothing.¹⁵ They were detained for a few days then nearly all were set free because there was no evidence to be found against them. In fact, after about twenty men, including Thomas Miller, were marched back over the mountains under armed escort to stand trial, only two were convicted. They were sentenced to be hanged but were later pardoned by President Washington. The farmers who had refused to register their stills or pay the whiskey tax, including James Miller, (William's brother) were required to sign an oath of allegiance to the United States to retain their rights of citizenship.¹⁶

The main body of the army left the area in late November but 2500 troops remained to insure that order was maintained.¹⁷ The coming of the army had an inadvertent benefit for the inhabitants of the West. The cost of keeping the troops pumped cash into the area and the roads to the East were improved with the travel of the army. By coincidence, General Anthony Wayne had recently defeated the Indians in the Battle of Fallen Timbers.¹⁸ Following 1794, economic conditions in Western Pennsylvania improved as the Frontier advanced westward. The settler's major grievances (cash flow, roads, and the Indian threat) were resolved in a relatively short period of time. When Thomas Jefferson, an anti-Federalist was elected president, the Whiskey Tax was repealed.

Perhaps the most important result of the insurrection was that the citizens gained confidence in the newly formed Federal government. Its leaders were ready to make decisions and act with firmness and people realized they could be compelled to obey the laws. The United States of America had not only been preserved, but was now to flourish, with the Western Pennsylvania area as the key to the new western expansion.

NOTES

1. Russell J. Ferguson, *Early Western Pennsylvania Politics* (Pittsburgh, 1938) page 12. This information is from the United States Bureau of the Census - 1790.
2. Oliver Miller Homestead Associates, *Brochure* (revised, 1992). The frontier people still depended on the East for these necessary products which were not yet produced west of the mountains.
3. Leland Baldwin, *Whiskey Rebels* (Pittsburgh, 1939) pages 68-69. Originally a second class (country/farmer) distiller could pay the annual rate of sixty cents per gallon for the capacity of his still or nine cents for each gallon of production. The act was amended in May of 1792. Country distillers now had three choices. Those having stills with a capacity under four hundred gallons could pay fifty-four cents per gallon capacity per year, ten cents per gallon capacity each month they were in use, or seven cents for each gallon produced.
4. We know from two sources, genealogical research done by Oliver Miller Homestead Associate member, William Barton and from Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection in the Western Parts of Pennsylvania in the Year 1794* (Philadelphia, 1795, page 121) that William Miller had sold part of his farm (located in what is now Allegheny County's South Park) and had made plans to move to Kentucky. After some violence occurred in which Miller had been involved, Brackenridge asked him, "Well, what now, are you for war?" Miller told him, "No, I am for peace; but if I was to acknowledge that, I need never to go home. I will have to deny it; and I will have to do whatever my company will insist upon me doing now. But I expect to get away soon, and to be clear of it."
5. Oliver Miller Homestead Associates, *Brochure*. 1992.
6. Norma Hartman, "Which Oliver Miller?" *Pittsburgh History*. (Pittsburgh, 1992) Volume 75, Number 4, page 191. Many histories written on the Whiskey Rebellion mention that the Oliver Miller killed at Neville's house was the father of William and some say that he is William's brother. Oliver, senior died in 1782, Oliver, junior in 1785. William's oldest brother, Alexander Miller had a son, Oliver, who was probably in his teens at the time of the Whiskey Rebellion and most likely it is he who was killed at Neville's. Another interesting note is that Oliver Miller, senior, willed his still to Oliver, junior. After Oliver, junior's death, his brother William obtained the still. When William moved to Kentucky the still was left behind with his youngest brother James. This original whiskey still is now on display at the Oliver Miller Homestead in Allegheny County's South Park.
7. H. M. Brackenridge, *History of the Western Insurrection in Western Pennsylvania commonly called the Whiskey Insurrection*. (Pittsburgh, 1859) page 49.
8. Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*, page 87. Brackenridge sympathized with the frontier people but supported the United States Constitution and did not want to see the West secede.
9. *Ibid.*, page 91.

10. Ibid., pages 96-120. The exact number of militia gathered at Braddock's Field is not known. It is estimated in different books from between 5000 and 7000.
11. Dale Van Every, *Ark of Empire, The American Frontier 1784-1803*. (New York, 1963) page 311.
12. William Findley, *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania in the Year 1794*. (Philadelphia 1796, reprinted in Spartensburg, S.C. 1984) page 127. Findley notes that six men said afterwards that they had mistakenly given a nay vote instead of a yea. The vote was on this resolution: *That in the opinion of this committee, it is the interest of the people of this country to accede to the proposals made by the commissioners of the United States*.
13. Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion* (New York, 1986) page 212. Slaughter gives the actual number at 12,950. Washington himself accompanied one wing over the Forbes' Road as far as Bedford. Alexander Hamilton proceeded on with the army. At the time he was both the Secretary of the Treasury and the War Departments.
14. Oliver Miller Homestead Associates, *Brochure*.
15. Findley, *History of the Insurrection*. pages 206-210. H.H. Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*. pages 194-195. In referring to *The Dreadful Night*, Findley says "The greatest outrage, however, against humanity and decency was committed by General White in the Mingo-Creek settlement." For example, one of the prisoners was subject to convulsions and he "fell into a fit" during the march to Washington, PA. General White's response to the situation was "to tie the damned rascal to a horse's tail, and drag him along."
16. Oliver Miller Homestead Associates, *Brochure*.
17. Findley, *History of the Insurrection*. pages 321-322. H.H. Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*. pages 207-208. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*. page 220. Findley states that a separate corp of not more than 2,500 was raised partly of those employed in the expedition and partly of those who lived in the area. Brackenridge says that a corp of 800 remained, joined by a corp of cavalry raised from the country itself. Slaughter puts the number at 1500. Whatever the number, they were under the command of General Daniel Morgan and encamped on the Monongahela River about fourteen miles south of Pittsburgh (two miles above the present town of West Elizabeth near the mouth of Lobb's Run.) During the encampment some of the soldiers fell victim to small pox and were buried in nearby Lobb's Run Cemetery.
18. Van Every, *Ark of Empire*. pages 314-333. After Wayne's army defeated the Indians in the Battle of Fallen Timbers, the definitive Treaty of Greenville was signed on August 3, 1795. For the first time since the frontier was settled, the people of Western Pennsylvania could live without fear of Indian hostility.

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