The Whiskey Rebellion
1791

The Whiskey Rebellion was the reaction to a federal tax on liquor in 1791. Alexander Hamilton, Secretary of the Treasury, wanted to use the tax money to pay Revolutionary War debts. Many settlers and farmers thought the taxes of seven to eighteen cents per gallon of alcohol were too high and increased the cost of liquor. Farmers would have leftover grain from their harvest they would use the grain to make liquor. They wanted Congress to take away the law because the tax caused them to lose money.

Protestors, called “Whiskey Boys” attacked tax collectors. They attacked them in Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia. This continued for three years. The Whiskey Boys’ leader was Tom the Tinker. He wanted revenge on those who made the tax.

Bitter feelings reached a peak in the summer of 1794. The Whiskey Boys fired at tax collectors at the Oliver Miller homestead. Towns were robbed, and tax collectors were tarred and feathered. President George Washington sent federal troops to stop the Whiskey Boys. He wanted them to go to court for their crimes. He imposed martial law (complete military control) in Pennsylvania. He brought soldiers from many states to stop the rebellion.

Washington led a big army. It was as big as the one he led in the American Revolution. He had help from Hamilton and General Henry “Lighthorse Harry” Lee. The troops went to Pennsylvania but could not find the rebels. They thought all the men went into hiding. They continued to search, and later Washington helped to capture twenty men. Two of them were sent to jail. Two others were found guilty of treason and sentenced to be hanged.

The Whiskey Rebellion was important in many ways. It was the first time the government sent the military against its own citizens. This showed citizens violence was not the answer. It also showed the new government was strong enough to enforce its laws.
The Whiskey Rebellion
1791

Discussion Questions:

1. What was the Tax of 1791 supposed to do?

2. Who were the Whiskey Boys?

3. Where was the first violent protest?

4. Besides Washington, who led the state militias?

5. Why was the government’s reaction to the Whiskey Rebellion important?