

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Col. Joshua Gist and the Whiskey Boys"

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by Jay A. Graybeal

200 hundred years ago President George Washington faced a crisis, citizens who lived along the western frontier were in open revolt over a Federal excise tax on whiskey passed in March 1791. Known today as the Whiskey Rebellion, the conflict became the first test of the fledgling nation's Constitution.

During the eighteenth century, liquors, including locally produced whiskey, were a mainstay in most households. Alcoholic beverages were consumed for a variety of reasons including prevailing social customs, suspected health benefits, and because of the real concerns about the dangers of contaminated water. In the frontier areas, distilled spirits were the only practical cash products for farmers who grew grain crops. These farmers were morally outraged by the tax and they led the open revolt in the summer of 1794.

Although the revolt stretched along the entire western frontier, southwestern Pennsylvania was the heart of the rebellion. Three years of secret meetings, public orations and heated discussions led to open warfare on July 16, 1794. Rebels attacked the homes of tax collectors and destroyed the stills of farmers who had obeyed the tax law.

Local residents became caught up in the fervor over the whiskey tax. Miss Mary B. Shellman described an event which occurred in Westminster during the Whiskey Rebellion:

"A mob of men, known as the "Whiskey Boys", marched into Westminster, and set up what they called a "Liberty Pole". Becoming alarmed, and knowing the personal bravery of Col. [Joshua] Gist, who at that time commanded a company of militia, he was sent for, and responded immediately. Riding into town with a drawn sword in his hand, he ordered the pole to be cut down, and dismounting, he placed one foot upon it, and stood there until the pole was cut in pieces, the whiskey boys leaving quietly while it was being done."

Col. Gist (1747-1839) was a strong supporter of the federal government and a Patriot during the American Revolution. He had been a colonel in the Soldier's Delight Battalion of Baltimore County, a military unit that remained in the state to guard against a Tory uprising during that conflict. He was in command of the 20th Regiment of Maryland Militia at the time of the Whiskey Rebellion. His distinguished brother, Gen. Mordecai Gist, commanded Maryland troops during the Revolution. Col. Gist and his family lived in an impressive brick residence called "Long Farm" built in 1795 located on Gist Road near Westminster. Col. Gist lies buried next to his wife Sarah in the Gist Family Cemetery across from Long Farm.

The Whiskey Rebellion continued throughout the summer and fall of 1794 but in the end the Rebels were no match for Federal troops. Gen. Washington summoned more than 12,000 men and charged Gen. Henry "Lighthorse Harry" Lee with ending the revolt in Pennsylvania. Federal troops arrested 150 rebels on November 13, 1794 and effectively put an end to organized resistance. Sporadic skirmishes, however, continued until President Thomas Jefferson repealed all excise taxes.

Photo Caption: Col. Joshua Gist, 20th Regiment of Maryland Militia, painted by an unknown artist, oil on paper, c. 1800. Historical Society of Carroll County collection, gift of Mrs. Betty Smith Yingling, 1992. Copy photograph courtesy of the U. S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.