

Whiskey Tax

Edwin Eugene Ott

20150723

In order to help pay off debt leftover from the Revolution, in 1791 a federal excise tax on whiskey and other distilled products was imposed. Along the American frontier including South Carolina, small farmers raised corn, rye, and other grains as a meager cash crop. Transportation of grains to markets was difficult and costly. Distilling spirits was a means of converting grains into a more stable and less bulky product.



In the Pennsylvania backcountry, small farmers refused to pay the tax and mounted protests. They felt the tax was unfairly penalizing them. In July 1794, a force of about 400 “whiskey rebels” attacked the home of the regional tax collection supervisor. President George Washington organized a militia force of nearly 13,000 men and marched into western Pennsylvania. This show of force ended the rebellion.

In 1802, under President Thomas Jefferson this hated tax was repealed. By this time, the king of cash crops, Cotton, was growing in the backcountry of South Carolina. The Piedmont was transformed from the backcountry into the “Upcountry.”

The excise tax on whiskey was brought back in 1812 to support losses in federal income from the War of 1812. With the national debt having been paid off in 1834, President Andrew Jackson abolished the excise taxes.

The distillation of spirits was a very popular business in Laurens District (Laurens County, SC). In the 1820 Census, Laurens District had a population of 17,682 and 81 whiskey distilleries. In the 1840 Census, the district had a population of 21,584 and 64 whiskey distilleries.