In 1793 Democratic societies emerged and spread quickly throughout the new nation. These clubs numbered as many as forty-two and ranged in location from Massachusetts to Georgia. The societies saw themselves as watchdogs of republican virtue, ready to inform the public of any indiscretions that might threaten liberty by either state or federal government. The Pennsylvania Democratic-Republican societies—despite differences in levels of activity, organizational structure, and community interests—used issues such as the Proclamation of Neutrality, the Jay Mission, and most especially the excise tax, to define and to draw distinctions between themselves and the Washington administration. Rather than producing uniform and rigid ideological organizations, the unity that was forged around principles and ideals both allowed, and sometimes required, club leaders to respond pragmatically to local and regional needs and interests. The Whiskey Rebellion of 1794 was a case in point.

Historians have previously underestimated and misunderstood the role of the western Democratic Societies in the rebellion. The records of local society meetings demonstrate that the membership of the societies in the west stressed both ideological and pragmatic reasons for repeal of the excise tax. Both eastern and western societies advocated changing the law through peaceful constitutional means. Members of the societies in the west were certainly concerned with local autonomy. However, their methods—such as resolutions, remonstrances and electioneering—as well as the language they spoke went well beyond the local. They promoted the emerging "republican interest", which opposed Alexander Hamilton’s economic program and his Anglocentric trade proposals, and which expressed continued support for revolutionary France. Moreover, these groups were very fluid and not represented by any particular political elites. Nor did they organize into a political party. Yet they recognized the need to voice their concerns over the issues of the day. In a sense, then, one consequence of nationhood—the new-found role of republican citizen—sparked many individuals to take active roles in politics and to express their views through grass roots societies. The Western Pennsylvania societies did not stand by passively when it came to the excise tax, nor did they react only as contemptuous hotheads concerned only about their own local autonomy as some historians have portrayed them. Rather the societies in the west (like those throughout the country) used the liberal-democratic language to guard against a concentration of corruption and unchecked power in the national government.
This study will also analyze five contemporary accounts of the Whiskey Rebellion: those of Alexander Hamilton, Alexander Addison, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, William Findley, and a little-known account by David Bradford. Contemporary written accounts of the rebellion present not only information about the individuals involved in the uprising, they also confirm the role the societies played in the insurrection. Additionally, an examination of the local militia membership and that of the societies indicates that several key leaders of the western clubs were also active in the uprising.

The most critical account, penned by Alexander Hamilton to President Washington, in early August 1794, chronicled the events of the revolt and placed blame for the rebellion solely upon the anti-excise leaders in western Pennsylvania. Later reprinted in the *American Daily Advertiser* on August 21, 1794, it has long served as the accepted historical version of the Whiskey Rebellion.³

Judge Alexander Addison wrote another account of the rebellion in late November 1794. Addison, who served as judge of the fifth judicial district of Pennsylvania, presided over the four western counties involved in the rebellion. His version of the events, written in response to a request from Virginia Governor Henry Lee, did not condemn western leaders as harshly as Hamilton’s. Addison, a Federalist who nevertheless opposed the excise tax, declared his opposition to violence as a means of circumventing the law.⁴

Two additional accounts of the rebellion—published in 1795 by Hugh Henry Brackenridge and in 1796 by William Findley—also recounted the insurrection, from, in both cases, the point of view of moderates who opposed the excise law yet tried to stay neutral when violence occurred. Brackenridge’s *Incidents of the Insurrection* offered a defense of his actions during the rebellion in an attempt to silence critics, who accused him of being an instigator of the insurrection as well as a member of the Society of Allegheny County. Findley’s *History of the Insurrection*, meanwhile, attacked Alexander Hamilton and the actions of the federal government, defended the westerners in Pennsylvania, and accused Hamilton, and his enforcement of the excise tax, of inciting the local populace to rebellion.

A fifth, little-known account, of the Whiskey Rebellion was dictated by David Bradford in January 1795, after he fled to Spanish-controlled Louisiana Territory.⁵ Unlike any of the others, Bradford’s recollection of the insurrection was sympathetic to the insurgents. Even though contemporaries considered Bradford to be one of the most radical leaders of the rebellion, his narrative of the uprising is valuable in that it provided readers with a view of events from the perspective of an insurrectionist Democratic society officer.

Ranging from a pro-administration perspective to a radical vindication of the events surrounding the violence in western Pennsylvania, these accounts and the local society’s minutes and remonstrances offer sharply contrasting
portrayals of the roots of both this armed protest and the motives of the insur- 
gents. When examined closely, they also afford an opportunity to assess the 
role of the western societies in the Whiskey Rebellion.

I. Western and Eastern Pennsylvania Democratic Societies and the Nation

In eastern Pennsylvania and throughout the country, the societies pub- 
lished resolutions protesting the levy. The clubs not only attacked its provi- 
sions, but they also criticized the administration for framing and enforcing 
such a law. As seen through the language of the resolutions, both eastern and 
western Pennsylvania societies as well as others in the United States, stressed 
both ideological and pragmatic reasons for repeal, and all of the clubs adva- 
cated changing the law through peaceful constitutional means.

Not satisfied with the response of the federal government, eastern soci- 
eties also prepared strong statements denouncing the excise tax. On May 12, 
1794, the Democratic Society of Pennsylvania had a number of its resolves 
published in *The General Advertiser*. The first argued that “the infant manu-
factories of this country, require the fostering care of government” and that 
the proposed tax in the report to the House of Representatives would only be 
detrimental to the manufacturing community. It further asserted that, due to 
the tax, the citizens “cannot bear the burden [sic]; and that such a tax tends to 
the ruin of many individuals and the impoverishing of the country.”

A second resolve explained the horrors of an excise system of taxation, 
arguing that history had shown that excise taxes had been always “abhorred by 
free men.” Even more importantly, the excise was “a system attendant with 
numerous vexations, [and] opens the door to manifold frauds, and is most 
expensive in its collection.” In fact, the number of officers required to collect 
the tax only contributed to the outlandish cost of such a levy, and these offic-
ers were “ever ready to join in a firm phalanx to support government even in 
unwarrantable measures.” The tone of the resolve emphasized that excise col-
lectors had been overly zealous—and insensitive in dealing with citizens—in 
collecting taxes. In both east and west, societies blamed the tax on the admin-
istration, mainly Hamilton; and in the west the societies, and militia units, 
often focused their anger on individual excise collectors, whom they perceived 
as direct threats from the government. The third and final resolve concluded 
with the statement that its members would “join in any constitutional mea-
sures, to prevent the final adoption of the system of excise now contemplated 
by Congress.”

In a letter dated May 30, 1794, to the Democratic Society of Pennsylva-
nia, the German Republican Society agreed completely with the aforemen-
tioned critique. The president of the German society, Henry Kammerer, or-
dered a set of resolves be sent and that “you [the Democratic Society of Penn-
sylvania] will, also see in them an approbation of your opposition to an un-
constitutional and dangerous measure; and an intention to fraternize with you in every proceeding that shall have public good for its object." The German Republican Society resolved that it would "at all times, unite with that society, in legal opposition to every measure, which shall affect rights or invade the Constitution of our country."9

It is important to note the language in both of these sets of resolves. Their emphasis on legal and constitutional means to solve the problem of the excise tax is important. Neither of the societies advocated violent change. Rather, they both pursued legal means of redress through the election process. The eastern societies participated in electioneering and promoted the idea that "Associations of citizens for political purposes, keep attention alive; and in case of governmental misconduct they may act with effect." They further called citizens to "fraternize with us in a common cause; and give you aid, that the principles of a free Government may be handed down incorrupt to posterity."10 They not only believed they had an obligation to root out bad government, but they also had to promote issues they saw as important, especially opposition to the excise law. Thus, throughout the spring and early summer, they continued to protest the excise tax, while pointing their efforts at so doing toward the fall elections.

Other Democratic Societies around the country echo the same criticisms of the excise law. For example, on June 18, 1794, the Republican Society of Newark, New Jersey, had several of its resolves published in Wood's Newark Gazette. The particular resolve in regard to the excise stated that "the opinion of this society that the raising a revenue by means of excise, except in cases of eminent necessity, it incompatible with the spirit of a free people."11 The Franklin or Republican Society of Pendleton County (South Carolina) argued in a resolve "that the collecting of taxes, or other duties to be paid in money, in these remote counties, is oppressive and unjust." It further stated that "Under these circumstances the seizure of property, and the sale thereof by the sheriff, is highly injurious and destructive to the laborious and honest farmer and his family."12

Lastly, the Democratic Society of New York, in a circular letter to the Democratic Society of Pennsylvania, expressed its concern over the excise law. It stated that "we also submit to you the expediency of petitioning Congress, at their present session, for the repeal of the excise laws." The New York Society went on to argue that even though their brethren in the west had resorted to violence, "we still remain convinced, that the present system of excise, by its own arbitrary principles, and the undue power and influence it bestows upon the executive officers of the government, it inimical and dangerous to what we conceive and trust to be the principles of our constitution." Even with this strong statement the society cautioned that in whatever actions they take "they do not violate the principles and the spirit of its established constitution."13
Opposition to the excise clearly helped to unify the Democratic societies. As with the Proclamation of Neutrality and neutral trade, eastern concerns centered around the potential economic burdens on manufacturers resulting from the extension of the tax to urban industries. As evidenced by the fact that objections to the tax started long before such an extension in 1794, the societies in the east realized, from the start, that the levy on distilled spirits offered a major issue against the federalists. Opposition to Hamilton's excise tax was central to their efforts to unseat Federalist officeholders and to repeal the tax.

II. The Whiskey Rebellion

Armed rebellion broke out on July 15, 1794, when David Lennox and John Neville, the Supervisor of Collection, tried to serve a court summons to farmer/distiller William Miller of Allegheny County. Lennox, who had previously served summonses in Fayette, Cumberland, and Bedford counties a few days earlier without incident, found the going much different in Allegheny. When he tried serving his summonses there, on the home turf of the Mingo Creek Democratic Society, he met strong resistance. As Lennox attempted to serve William Miller with a writ, Miller refused to receive it; similar results had occurred earlier in the day, when Lennox had served David Phillips, militia leader and local preacher, with a writ while he had been harvesting in his field.

Phillips, as it turned out, had alerted his neighbors, believing that the marshal was arresting individuals and taking them to Philadelphia for trial. Although Phillips and his neighbors now followed Lennox and Neville, inciting a crowd against the two tax collectors, armed conflict did not occur until the next day. Much of the hostility felt by residents, of course, stemmed from the fact that they resented having to travel to distant courts in Philadelphia to plead their cases. Neville's appearance with the marshal simply intensified the local citizens' ire.

On the same day Lennox and Neville delivered their writs, Dr. Absalom Baird, the brigade inspector general for Washington County, heard appeals by some members of the Mingo Creek regiment seeking exemption from service in the militia, whose numbers had been augmented by Governor Mifflin to help with frontier duty against the Indians. As the exemption hearings took place, a man burst into the courtroom and declared that the marshal was taking people away to Philadelphia to answer the summonses on delinquent payments of the excise tax. In response to this news, some fifty armed men assembled at the Mingo Creek church. Word spread quickly, and soon an even larger group gathered to confront the marshal and Neville. John Holcroft, the alleged "Tom the Tinker" and Mingo Creek Society officer, led this body of men, who on the following morning, July 16, surrounded John Neville's
house on Bower Hill. These individuals believed they also would find David Lennox there, and they planned to demand the surrender of both the writs and Neville’s commission as tax collector. However, only Neville, his wife, and granddaughter were in the house. In a brief skirmish, in which Neville repulsed the men, he wounded several and killed one.  

During the exchange at Bower Hill, men died on both sides. Among the insurgents killed was James McFarland, a Revolutionary War hero and militia captain, who became a martyr to the insurrectionists and a regional symbol of the anti-excise cause. His death triggered the next phase of the rebellion, which brought well-known leaders, such as Hugh Henry Brackenridge, William Findley, Albert Gallatin, and David Bradford, to the forefront.

Events moved faster after the violence at Bower Hill. On July 23, the insurgents met at the Mingo Creek church to plan their next actions. At this meeting, David Bradford first stood and defended the operations of the insurrectionists. In so doing he emerged as one of the central leaders of the more radical insurgents. Bradford was not only Vice-President of the Democratic Society of Washington County, he also was the county’s deputy attorney general. To better determine public sentiment toward the insurgents, Bradford and his cousin, William Bradford, masterminded a plan to intercept the mail from Pittsburgh to Philadelphia on July 26. It was then delivered to Bradford by Benjamin Parkinson, president of the Mingo Creek Society. Bradford opened and read various letters, which he used to root out regional administration sympathizers. Angered by what he had seen in the confiscated mail, he then put out a circular letter to the western insurgents, dated July 28, and called for a militia muster of the four western counties at Braddock’s Field. It was here that Bradford and the militia, in a show of force, declared their intention to march on Pittsburgh. Between the call for the meeting at Braddock’s Field and the actual muster held on August 1, excise collectors in several of the western counties suffered the indignity of being tarred and feathered. The climax of the rebellion occurred, however, when the militia gathered at Braddock’s Field.

Following the militia muster at Braddock’s Field and the march on Pittsburgh, tempers cooled. Albert Gallatin and other moderates managed to persuade citizens against following David Bradford’s call for raising an army to meet any federal force sent over the mountains. At the Parkinson’s Ferry meeting on August 14, for example, Gallatin managed to persuade the majority of the representatives in attendance that it was better to avoid open rebellion and to guarantee the protection of life and property. On this point, the moderates won out and Bradford and his followers no longer dictated the course of events among the insurgents.

Following Bradford’s abortive march on Pittsburgh, the federal government made the next move in the crisis. On August 7, President Washington issued a proclamation that outlined his opinion of the events on the western
frontier from 1791 to the violence in July 1794. The president related the facts (as he understood them) that had led to the outbreak of disorder in the western counties. He believed that the state as well as the federal government had been more than fair in trying to avoid conflict and that the actions of the insurgents were nothing short of treason. "In my judgement, [it is] necessary, under the circumstances of the case," Washington said, "to take measures for calling forth the militia, in order to suppress the combinations aforesaid, and to cause the laws to be duly executed." The president also called for the insurgents to disband and to stop their actions against the federal government.

But first, the president opted to appoint a commission to negotiate a peaceful solution to the insurrection, sending United States Attorney General William Bradford, Supreme Court Justice Jasper Yeates (A Pennsylvania resident), and United States Senator James Ross (a resident of Washington County, Pennsylvania) to resolve the issues at hand. In addition to these federal representatives, Governor Mifflin sent Chief Justice Thomas McKean and General William Irvine to represent Pennsylvania in the peace process. After meeting with representatives from the four western counties on August 20, the peace commissioners concluded that the inhabitants would never peacefully submit to the federal government, noting that there still existed a reluctance by many western inhabitants to submit to that authority. Even though representatives who met with the commissioners voted for submission to federal law the vote was not unanimous.

Yeates and Bradford believed the government could not trust the insurgents to cease their activities. This sentiment was relayed to the Washington Administration in a letter to Secretary of State Edmund Randolph, in which the commissioners urged the president to use force to settle the conflict in western Pennsylvania. Specifically, they advised that federal troops be dispatched to western Pennsylvania. The die had now been cast and the insurrectionists' fate sealed.

Approximately 12,000 troops were then mustered, from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and New Jersey by order of the Washington Administration to quell the rebellion. After rendezvousing at Carlisle on October 11, the army swung south into Maryland (ostensibly to acquire more troops) and then split into two columns, with orders to converge on Parkinson's Ferry. At Fort Cumberland, Maryland, Washington left command of the army with General Henry Lee and returned to Philadelphia. Before leaving, he expressed his resolve that the authority of the federal government be carried out in western Pennsylvania.

Three officers of the Mingo Creek Society—John Baldwin, John Holcroft, and Benjamin Parkinson—were among those arrested in Washington County. Federal authorities seized their stills and excluded them from the general am-
nnesty. A fourth officer, David Bradford, of the Democratic Society of Washington County, faced a warrant for his arrest but managed to flee the region. All but Bradford were soon pardoned; he had to wait until 1799 for such action on his behalf.

Once the army left in late November, all that remained was the debate over responsibility. Who was to blame for the revolt? Alexander Hamilton accused the western leaders of inciting the populace against the federal government. Radicals, such as David Bradford and Benjamin Parkinson, saw no alternative but violence and felt that they were forced into action. Moderates, like Albert Gallatin and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, had to straddle the fine line between loyalty to their local community and upholding the laws of the federal government. All of them, then, tried to find an interpretation that placed the fault for the uprising on others.

III. Democratic Societies, the Rebellion, and its Contemporary Chroniclers

For many years, historians generally accepted Alexander Hamilton's version of the events leading up to the violent encounter at Neville's house as the most accurate historical account of the Whiskey Rebellion. Hamilton wrote about the circumstances of the uprising in a report prepared for President Washington in August 1794. That document not only related the events up to that time, but justified the federal government's proposed use of force in dealing with events in western Pennsylvania. Shortly after submitting his document to the president, Hamilton asked permission for it to be printed in the national press. Washington agreed and Hamilton's account appeared in the American Daily Advertiser on August 21, 1794. By having this version of events printed in the newspaper first, the administration gained the initiative in influencing public opinion regarding the decision to use force against the rebels.

Hamilton's report not only outlined the various reasons for using the military to put down the western uprising, it also placed blame for violence squarely on the anti-excise leaders in western Pennsylvania. The secretary started his account by reviewing the official and extra-legal meetings held shortly after the excise law passed in 1791. He denounced Albert Gallatin, David Bradford, James Marshall, and John Canon by name for accepting leadership roles in the drafting of anti-excise tax resolutions.

From Hamilton's perspective, the incidents of protest and violence had commenced as early as 1791 and continued through August 1794. Moreover, he contended, the extra-legal gatherings stirred the people to violent acts.

These meetings composed of very influential individuals and conducted without moderation or prudence are justly chargeable with the excesses, which have been from time to time committed; serving to give consis-
tency to an opposition which has at length matured to a point, that threatens the foundations of the Government and of the union; unless speedily and effectually subdued.32

The names of many local and prominent members of both the Washington County and Mingo Creek Democratic societies dotted the pages of Hamilton's report, which mentioned David Bradford, Edward Cook, Benjamin Parkinson, John Holcroft, and Richard Holcroft as representatives from the various counties in these extra-legal meetings. All of the above were members, and in some cases officers, of one of the western Pennsylvania Democratic societies. Not surprisingly, many of those singled out in Hamilton's account were, later in 1794, excluded from the government's general amnesty offer. Furthermore, Hamilton pointed to these designated leaders of the Democratic societies as the fomenters of rebellion; he also attempted to have those bodies censured in Congress.33

While Hamilton placed blame for the revolt on the western leaders, a more moderate view of the rebellion's causes appeared in a letter from Alexander Addison to Governor Henry Lee. Addison, a Federalist district court judge for western Pennsylvania, wrote his account of the uprising at the request of the governor, and it is considered by historians to be well balanced. In it, he supported the rebels' right to oppose the law but did not endorse the violent methods of the insurgents.34 Addison's four-page letter therefore provides a pro-administration viewpoint other than Hamilton's.35

Unlike Hamilton, Addison did not believe the uprising could be traced to a well-planned conspiracy. He pointed out instead that many of the alleged leaders of the rebellion proposed moderation rather than violence.36 Reviewing the history of excise laws in Pennsylvania, Addison argued that westerners merely followed the pattern of protest they had employed in defeating earlier excise tax proposals at the state level. Pennsylvania, which had enacted a tax on distilled spirits in 1781 and supplemented that measure in 1783, had consequently repealed it in 1791.37 Prior to that repeal, many frontiersmen had assaulted and tarred and feathered state tax collectors. Thus, when the federal government levied a similar tax, the response of the frontiersmen did not differ significantly from their earlier actions against the state government. If all went well, they believed, the federal excise tax would "become a dead letter."38

While it may seem he remained sympathetic to the rebellion, Addison actually supported fully the government's decision to send troops to the west. He saw their arrival in western Pennsylvania as necessary to restore law and order to the region.39 It should be noted, however, that Addison was not a pro-administration hard-liner; he took a more moderate view of the rebellion, and he paid particular attention to the problems (including protection from Indians, underrepresentation, and inequitable taxation) faced by westerners.
While Addison's letter is balanced and somewhat sympathetic to westerners, the writings of William Findley and Hugh Henry Brackenridge convey even more moderate accounts of the Whiskey Rebellion. Both were written after the insurrection and each, in its own way, represented an effort by its author to vindicate his actions before and during the rebellion.

William Findley took his opportunity to explain his own role, before and during the insurrection, in a book-length account. More importantly, however, he, focused on the plight of the western inhabitants, noting the region's economic burdens, frontier dangers, and underrepresentation in the state assembly. Findley thus blamed Alexander Hamilton directly for the Whiskey Rebellion, noting that he chose to issue writs under the old unamended law and thereby to deny the accused the right to appear before local courts instead of those in Philadelphia. While it was true that a few incidents occurred in the first years of the tax, the reaction of the distillers, he argued, had become more violent only within the last year. "During this period the treasury department either wholly neglected it [the tax law] or tampered with it in such a manner as was only calculated to encourage the opposition and discourage every exertion of well disposed citizens to support the law." Like Brackenridge, Findley blamed the excise tax for the rebellion, but at the same time, he presented himself as a voice of moderation, condemning those who proposed violence. Although Findley did not specifically refer to the societies, one can assume by his moderate stance that he did not condone their actions in regard to the rebellion.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge, even more than William Findley, tried to place himself in the best light with regard to his participation in the tumultuous events of the summer and fall of 1794. Brackenridge, who helped found the Pittsburgh Gazette, served as a moderator between the town of Pittsburgh and the insurgents during their march from Braddock's Field in August 1794. His Incidents of the Insurrection is a lengthy three-volume work, focused primarily on the author's plight, when caught between the locals and the federal government. Modern historians, including Leland Baldwin, Thomas Slaughter, and Jerry Clouse, find Brackenridge's version of this dilemma to be valuable, noting that he, like Findley, identified the excise tax and its burden upon the people of the west as the main cause of the uprising.

In so doing, Brackenridge dealt more directly with the activities and involvement of the Democratic societies than did Findley. He noted that there were as many as three societies in the region, and that of the three, the one at Mingo Creek was by far the most radical. "They did not, as a society, project the first outrages, but they naturally sprung [sic] from that licentiousness of ideas with regard to law and liberty which the articles of their institution held out or were calculated to produce." Brackenridge also acknowledged that the purpose of the societies was to keep the people focused on how to combat
the excise tax. In other words, the Mingo Creek Society did not directly start the rebellion, but it served as a forum in which those who proposed violent action could be heard. While Brackenridge did not directly blame the societies for the eruption of violence, he implied that they only exacerbated the situation, leading thereby to riots and armed rebellion.

As the Vice-President of the Democratic Society of Washington County, David Bradford, related yet another version of the Whiskey Rebellion early in 1795. While his involvement in the rebellion has been well documented by historians (including Baldwin and Slaughter), his written account of the events remains unpublished. In October 1794, as federal troops moved across the mountains toward Pittsburgh, Bradford fled western Pennsylvania for Natchez in Spanish-controlled Louisiana Territory. On January 8, 1795, a Spanish official recorded—in Spanish—his dictated account of the Whiskey Rebellion. While this narrative was relatively short (about eight pages hand written), it is still valuable as that of a Democratic society leader who was also an insurgent.

Bradford was very supportive of the citizens of western Pennsylvania. Like Findley and Brackenridge, he blamed the enforcement of the excise tax for the violence, but he went even farther in vindicating the actions of the rebels and, in fact, argued that they had no other recourse than to take up arms.

As soon as the excise law on strong liquors and stills was promulgated, it greatly disgusted those living west of the Allegheny Mountains, declaring their disgust by means of representations that the said law be annulled. They formed various councils of their neighbors and their members published in the Gazette recommending to the public that they abstain from respecting as members of society the officials for collecting the excise tax, considering them as [sic] contemptible men, thinking by that method that no one would receive a similar official.

Bradford's statement perhaps best defended the activities of the Democratic societies in their efforts to protest the excise, which he viewed as a problem not only for western Pennsylvania, but for the United States as a whole. The law, he claimed, was badly administered and put an unnecessary burden on citizens. He also claimed that the majority of all the people, as well as those in the Democratic societies, strongly opposed the law, stating that a direct tax, based on one's ability to pay, was more equitable than one on distilled spirits.

Where Bradford's account differs most dramatically from others is on the mood of the local inhabitants. He recalled that the death of James McFarland "caused much consternation, inflaming the passions in a way that it is not possible to explain." At the Mingo Creek meeting house shortly after the burial of McFarland, citizens decided that "the general opinion was that they should support those who attacked the Neville house and not let them be persecuted.
by the law.” Bradford noted that, because the council was not legally elected, it had no authority to act. So it was decided to elect an assembly and meet on August 14.46

Bradford then portrayed a populace unified around the idea of opposing the federal government by the time of the August 14 meeting at Parkinson’s Ferry. “The deliberations were of delicate nature, resulting in the general opinion that they should declare themselves independent and put their luck to the consequences; it is incredible the union that existed in this Popular Assembly, whose members numbered 400.” Throughout his account, he thus described a contentious populace unwilling to submit to federal law. In fact, when a council of representatives from the western counties met with the commissioners and agreed in principle to accept submission, Bradford argued that “they [the council] could not speak for the people” and the issue would have to be brought before the entire assembly. When that body voted on the issue of whether to submit to the law, the vote was thirty-four in favor and twenty-three opposed. Bradford thus argued that a large number of the people in western Pennsylvania did not want to submit to the federal law and that it was only under threat of military action that they finally gave in to the government.

Bradford contended that the commission “spread inflammatory rumors against the peoples of the west” to influence the administration to send an army against them. He further argued that “the measures taken by government officials produced the desired results and, instead of repugnance in the Militia, they were ready to follow the President and his General, and when they arrived in the territory of the insurgents it resulted in major disturbances and insults.”47

Although careful not to incriminate either himself or the societies, Bradford depicted his role in the best light possible. His claim to innocence undoubtedly stemmed from the fact that he related the story to Spanish officials while hoping to be allowed to remain in their territory. In confirming the role societies played in the Whiskey Rebellion, he, like the other contemporary reporters of events, did not claim that they officially organized the violence. Bradford, however, showed the importance of the societies in influencing the opinions of the populace.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge, in his recollections of the insurrection, recounted that the Mingo Creek Society formed over grievances against eastern courts, for electioneering, and due to a general discontent with the situation in the west.48 He went on to say that no one man, or one particular society, was responsible for “the first outrages” against the excise collectors; rather, it was the general feeling of unrest caused by the societies. On the other hand, he stated that the Mingo Creek Society was “the cradle of the insurrection.”49 Inconsistent statements, such as these, make it difficult to ascertain the societ-
Western Pennsylvania Democratic Societies and the Excise Tax

The Western Pennsylvania Democratic Societies and the Excise Tax 55

ies' actual involvement in the rebellion. It is hardly surprising, then, that modern accounts do not end the debate among historians.

In later tracing their activities, Eugene Perry Link found that some leaders of the Washington County and Mingo Creek societies took part in the insurrection. Yet, he could not document that the societies themselves officially participated in the Whiskey Rebellion.50

William Miller acknowledged that David Bradford and James Marshel, members of the Washington County Society, participated in the rebellion, but he contended that no members of the Mingo Creek Society did so.51

In more recent scholarship, Marco Sioli also points to the fact that the societies had no direct ties to the insurrection in the summer of 1794. Even so, he notes their importance as organizing tools for protest against the excise tax.52 Thomas Slaughter, likewise, admits that the societies may have unintentionally contributed to the rebellion by "providing a forum for reinforcement of local concerns." People in the region had expressed a tendency toward independent action, and the societies simply fueled the fire of opposition rhetoric.53

Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick contend that, because leaders of the western societies participated in the rebellion, those bodies certainly must have influenced the insurgents. They also point to the fact that the societies had close ties with local militia units, both in membership and in leadership. A majority of militia troops called out at Bower Hill were both members of the Mingo Creek militia and the Mingo Creek Society.54 A closer look at the sources, thus, indicates that the societies in the west took on a larger role in the rebellion than was once believed.

An examination of the Mingo Creek Society minutes, indeed, reveals the names of some of the more prominent participants in the rebellion. For example, those of John Holcroft (the alleged "Tom the Tinker," writer of many of the most inflammatory essays against the federal government), Benjamin Parkinson, and John Baldwin appear in the records of several meetings.55 Thus, the assertion, by Miller, that no names could be linked to the Mingo Creek Society is not accurate.

Additionally, upon examining the minutes and other records of the Mingo Creek and Washington County societies, it is apparent that several of their members (Parkinson, Baldwin, Holcroft, and Bradford) also later appeared on the lists of those to be excluded from the general amnesty.56 Yet, while it is known that some of the leaders of the western societies took part in the insurrection, it is fairly clear that they did not take action officially in the name of the societies. It is certain, however, that the societies did address many of the problems that the excise brought forth. Consequently, their role and influence cannot be dismissed as a factor in the actions of the frontiersmen in the summer of 1794.
While all of the above contemporary accounts (and those of later historians) differ little as to the chronology of the Whiskey Rebellion, they vary regarding the sources of the uprising in western Pennsylvania and its intensity. Hamilton saw the root of the problem resting with western leaders and their predisposition toward violence. Both he and Washington later accused the societies of being the fomenters of the uprising. Addison, on the other hand, took a more moderate view, defending the actions of the local leaders in the west. Brackenridge and Findley, in turn, went to great lengths to vindicate themselves and to blame the federal excise tax and Hamilton for the violence. Brackenridge further confirmed the role of the societies in the insurrection. Lastly, Bradford’s account portrayed locals as emotional and united in their resolve to stand against the excise law.

IV. Western Democratic Societies and the Excise Tax

The Societies in the west were founded in the late winter of 1793 and early spring of 1794. While they agreed with the eastern societies on the issues of the French Revolution, the Proclamation of Neutrality, neutral trade, and John Jay as envoy to England, they, like the eastern societies, focused their unifying efforts especially on the excise law. Their response to that tax was not, however, as pronounced or as organized in the public arena as in the east, possibly because westerners felt more immediately threatened by the federal government and chose to operate in a less public forum. There were, nonetheless, some public remonstrances by the societies in the west related to taxation.

In a remonstrance sent to the president and Congress on the opening of the Mississippi River for navigation, for example, the Democratic Society of Washington County addressed that matter. While stating that members respected the laws of the country, it argued that the excise tax strayed out of the bounds of reasonable government and that “to be subjected to all the burthens, and enjoy none of the benefits arising from government, is what we will never submit to.” The Washington County society also considered the excise tax an eastern law, contrived by easterners to take advantage of the hard-working populace of the western frontier. In the same remonstrance, this sentiment became very apparent when the society declared: “If the interest of Eastern America requires that we should be kept in poverty, it is unreasonable from such poverty to exact contributions. The first, if we cannot emerge from, we must learn to bear, but the latter, we never can be taught to submit to.”

The language of this remonstrance voiced the frustrations that many westerners experienced with the collecting of taxes on whiskey, with navigation of the Mississippi River, and with the selfishness of the east. The fact that whiskey was the foremost commodity in the region’s exchange economy made a tax on it particularly burdensome. Open navigation of the Mississippi would
make it much easier for farmers in the west to ship their goods to market. Lastly, westerners viewed the excise tax as a means for the rich to get richer and for the benefits of the tax to be siphoned from the west. Eastern monied interests were bleeding the poor farmers in the west dry. The tone of the remonstrance was harsh and somewhat threatening; the Washington County society was not, however, advocating unconstitutional action, such as the use of force or violence against the federal government, to resolve the excise issue.

The societies in the west, like those in the east, proposed checking their congressional and state representatives through close examination of the records of the state Assembly and the federal Congress. Part of the constitution of the Republican Society at the Mouth of the Yough, which was written in April 1794 (Article I Section 7), stated:

\[\text{The society shall have, from time to time, the laws of the United States, with the minutes of the house of representatives of Congress; the laws of Pennsylvania, with the minutes of the house of representatives of the commonwealth; together with any other book or books that may be thought necessary for the instruction of the society.}\]

This clause shows the concern of the societies with the issues of the day and the actions of their legislators. By having the records of the state Assembly and federal Congress read aloud, members could keep close tabs on their elected representatives. The Mingo Creek Society constitution, written in the spring of 1794, also declared that the "society shall have power, with the concurrence of the district and county, to nominate and recommend such persons as in their opinion will be capable to represent us in the government in this state and the United States." The above statement also points to the fact that the societies were involved in choosing individuals to be put forth for public office. Electioneering was advanced by clubs in both the east and the west. The election process could be used to promote candidates who then change laws such as the excise tax.

The Mingo Creek Society, from its inception, planned to united the four counties of Allegheny, Washington, Fayette, and Westmoreland around various Democratic societies to work on repealing that levy. As early as February 1794, it discussed the possible organization of other societies in the four western counties. Many who attended Mingo Creek Society meetings came from counties other than Washington. Mingo Creek's location, on the border between Washington and Allegheny counties, allowed individuals from both to become members. Oftentimes, in the minutes of its meetings, councilmen from the different districts, in signing their names to the minutes, indicated in which county they resided.
In regard to the excise tax, the Mingo Creek Society tried to work with the different militia districts in the four counties in order to send a petition to Congress requesting a repeal of the tax. In late April and early May, it “resolved that a remonstrance be drawn . . . similar to that of the People west of the Allegheny Mountains.” Copies of that document were to be distributed to the different councilmen in order to obtain as many signatures from their districts as possible. A copy of this remonstrance is not among the records of the Mingo Creek society; however, it is likely that it echoed the sentiments of the Democratic Society of Washington County in its objections to the tax.

The Mingo Creek Society also addressed the many problems that the excise brought forth. For example, it went as far as to propose, in a meeting on February 11, 1794, that a collection be taken up for “one of the members (James McCall) for the expense he was put to by a fellow citizen the name of exciseman.” On February 19, 1794, it also passed unanimously a motion that a remonstrance be sent to Congress declaring that any of the inhabitants of Washington County who had their whiskey confiscated should have recourse to take legal action against the said exciseman.

The efforts of the Mingo Creek Society to unify against the excise tax were very similar to those of the eastern societies. Both tried to organize at the local level to consolidate efforts against the tax. The Mingo Creek Society, like those in the east, also worked within legal constitutional means, promoting the idea of petitions and electioneering to ensure that candidates would listen to local people.

For the western societies, the issue of the excise centered around its economic burdens, in addition to its threat to personal liberty. The excise tax coupled with other issues which concerned frontiersmen—the lack of protection against Indians, free navigation of the Mississippi, and a concern that the west was neglected by the legislature, and therefore received few of the benefits of government enjoyed by citizens in the east—gave rise to a concerted effort to end that burden. For both groups, east and west, their stand on the excise and related issues allowed them to define themselves in regard to the administration. Not only did they draw attention to the pronounced differences between them and the federal government, it also afforded the leaders in the societies an opportunity to voice both local and national concerns.

In the most recent study of the Democratic Societies, Matthew Schoenbachler argues persuasively that “the remonstrances and declarations of the Democratic-Republican Societies strongly suggest that a ‘Country-republican’ ideology spurred the formation of these clubs and profoundly guided their critique of the policies of the federal government.” He further argues that the Societies exhibited “the compatibility of democratic hopes and republican fears,” and that “Americans of the early republic created a radically new, yet oddly familiar, language of politics.” This language, as Schoenbachler
The Western Pennsylvania Democratic Societies and the Excise Tax

properly notes, was embodied in the Democratic Societies and played out in their efforts to guard against concentrations of power and corruption in government and nowhere was this more evident than in western Pennsylvania.

Both eastern and western societies believed that the administration had gone too far in its efforts to raise and collect an excise tax. On the ideological level, they argued that an internal tax was nothing more than an aristocratic-English policy, that Americans had gone to war over such policies twenty years earlier, and that collection of the tax threatened personal liberties. The more practical reasons for opposition, in both the east and the west, centered around economics and politics. Economically, the tax would be a burden, both to the urban-based manufacturers and to the rural farmer/distiller. Opposing it thus gave the societies a forum by which they could publicly criticize the administration, holding up to the public thereby the dangers of a government that neglected the needs or interests of the people, while promoting their own candidates for political office. Clearly, then, the societies attacked the administration for both ideological and practical reasons.

That the protests in the west turned violent does not diminish the fact that western societies did indeed promote the new "republican interest" throughout the United States. No longer should the inhabitants of Western Pennsylvania in the 1790s be viewed as apolitical backwoodsmen only interested in their own local autonomy. Rather, these western Pennsylvanians now take on the attributes of citizens capable and willing to act upon a larger national political ideology.

From contemporary accounts, and from those of recent historians as well, it is clear that the Democratic societies did play a role in the Whiskey Rebellion. Local militia membership and that of the societies overlapped, and several key leaders of the western societies were active in the rebellion; both of these facts point to such involvement. Moreover, the societies in the west, as demonstrated through various methods and language, served as organizational tools to voice concerns and to communicate and guard the "republican interest." Without question, then, the western societies played a much larger role in the rebellion than some have thought.
Notes
5. See David Bradford papers, Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
14. Thomas McKean and General William Irvine to Governor Thomas Mifflin, August 22, 1794, Miscellaneous Manuscript Collection, Darlington Library, Pittsburgh. This letter was in response to a request by the governor for a report on the insurgents in western Pennsylvania.
16. On June 5 the excise tax had been amended so that westerners who had disputes with the federal tax collectors could have their day in a local court rather than having to travel across the mountains to a distant court. However, Hamilton had the writs that had been issued in May under the old law served in July rather than seeking new ones. Even more than the excise tax itself, locals resented that the federal court system required them to travel to Philadelphia. In fact, the Mingo Creek Society constitution harangued the court system and proposed a local system of courts to take care of regional disputes. See constitution and minutes of February 11 and 19, 1794, in the Rawle Family Papers, 1: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
18. Isaac Craig to Major General Knox, Secretary of War, July 18, 1794, Craig Letterbook, Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh. Isaac Craig, the son-in-law of John Neville, was a strong Federalist.
27. Elkins and McKitrick point out that, over the years, the historiography of the Whiskey Rebellion has changed from a pro-Hamilton emphasis to an anti-Hamilton one, and back again. For a detailed summary of this historiography see Elkins and McKitrick, *The Age of Federalism*, 464-474.
29. The combination of Hamilton's report, and the letter from the commissioners (sent by Washington to the west), convinced the president that force was the only answer to the uprising in western Pennsylvania.
30. The extra-legal meetings that Hamilton
reflected are noted in chapter 4.
33. *Ibid.*, 28-29. Among the men excluded from the government's general amnesty offer were seven members of the Washington County and Mingo Creek societies: John Baldwin, David Bradford, Edward Cook, Daniel Hamilton, John Holcroft, Richard Holcroft, and Benjamin Parkinson.
35. A copy of Addison's letter is housed in the Craig Papers at the Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh. According to editorial notes by Kohn, ed., "Addison on the Origin and History of the Whiskey Rebellion," there is some question as to the authenticity of the letter, but its tone and interpretation fit with the style and the viewpoint of Addison. The oldest son of Isaac Craig, who read law with Addison in 1807, also refers to the letter in his later writings on the rebellion.
40. William Findley, *History of the Insurrection in the Four Western Counties of Pennsylvania in the Year MDCCXCIV With a Recital of the Circumstances Specially Connected Therewith and an Historical Review of the Previous Situation of the Country by William Findley, Member of the House of Representatives of the United States* (Philadelphia, 1796), 76.
41. See Baldwin, *Whiskey Rebels*, 80-81; Thomas Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 5; Clouse, *The Whiskey Rebellion*, 2. All of these works draw heavily from both Brackenridge's and Findley's accounts of the rebellion.
43. *Ibid.*, 3: 28-29. The society that Brackenridge was referring to had its constitution and sentiments printed in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* on April 26, 1794. There are no other records of this body, and it appears that it was not as active as the Mingo Creek Society or the Washington County Society.
44. Bradford's account of the Whiskey Rebellion is in the Bradford papers.
48. Brackenridge, *Incidents of the Insurrection*, 3: 26. Brackenridge was a moderate during the insurrection however, he was linked with the Democratic societies as one of the instigators of the rebellion. Most of Brackenridge's account is a justification of his actions and an answer to charges leveled against him by both federal authorities and his fellow citizens of Pittsburgh.
55. See Rawle Family Papers, I.
56. See Pennsylvania Whiskey Rebellion Collection.
57. A copy of the remonstrance was reprinted in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, April 5, 1794.
59. Constitution of the Republican Society at the Mouth of the Yough, in the *Pittsburgh Gazette*, June 28, 1794.
61. Rawle Family Papers, I, Minutes Mingo Creek Society, February 28, 1794.
63. Rawle Family Papers, I. The societies in the west hoped to organize the four counties of Washington, Allegheny, Fayette, and Westmoreland into one Republican society. The documents in the Rawle Family Papers
show that the groundwork had been started for such a comprehensive organization. In this regard, it is perhaps significant that the Republican Society at the Mouth of the Yough, and the Mingo Creek Society in Hamilton's District, had the same constitution and resolutions.

64. Ibid.