

### **John Neville: Tax Collector**

John Neville was born into a prosperous family. He joined the revolutionary war effort and rose to the position of Commandant of Fort Pitt. He was taken captive by the British and was held until the war's end in 1781. After the war he resided with his wife, Winifred Oldham Pitt, and children in Western Pennsylvania.

#### **1. How might Neville's experiences have made him feel about the government and its powers?**

As a resident of the area, Neville understood the hardships that Hamilton's excise tax would place on local farmers, but he disagreed with their attempt to defy the decisions made by informed men such as Secretary Hamilton. Neville first became aware of Hamilton's intelligence and character during the Revolution. Neville knew Hamilton was concerned for the common good. This nation needed to get rid of its debts in order to focus on the future as a prosperous, well-respected country. Laws that worked for the good of everyone sometimes called for some citizens to give more than others. In any civilized society, people had to follow laws passed by elected representatives. If citizens refused, the authorities were justified in using force to gain compliance. Neville was selected as the state excise officer for his district and took on the difficult task of collecting taxes from local farmers who distilled whiskey. Neville knew this would make him extremely unpopular and might endanger his life. He knew that meetings were already being held in order to organize resistance to the whiskey tax.

#### **1. What would Neville argue that the farmers should support a plan that they thought singled them out for unfavorable treatment?**

#### **2. Would Hamilton's plan help or hurt Neville financially? Why?**

It did not take Neville long to realize that the citizens were going to make his job as difficult as possible. It was nearly impossible for him to find space to establish an office. When he finally did, the consequences were terrifying. A man name John Lynn agreed to sublease office space to Neville. Instead of attacking Neville and facing the risk of federal prosecution, the rebels used his landlord to express their anger over Neville's presence. In the middle of the night, a dozen disguised men attacked the landlord. Lynn was taken into the forest, tarred and feathered, and forced to swear that he would never rent to an excise officer again. He agreed and was left tied to a tree until the next day. Such disrespect for authority infuriated Neville. He attempted to prosecute his landlord's attackers, but Lynn was so terrified for his safety that he refused to cooperate.

Such actions did not stop Neville in his efforts to enforce the excise tax. He knew that other tax collectors had suffered attacks and public humiliation. These farmers claimed they were acting with the same justification that Patriots had in resisting unfair British taxation. Neville did not believe

that was so. Americans passed these laws; not some remote government who gave the people no voice in its decisions. Neville believed that the farmers' actions were more like the lawless mobs in France who had brought down the legal government and seen the country break down into total lawlessness. In France, there was now no authority to protect peoples' lives or property. The whims of the mob decided who lived and died. Estates that had been held in a family for generations were taken from them by force. If the U.S. government did not take a firm stand at the first sign of a mob uprising, Neville feared that the same thing could happen in this country.

**1. How do the actions of the rebels compare those taken by the patriots during the war with Britain?**

**2. What lessons does Neville take from the revolution in France? Would the farmers agree?**

When United States Marshall David Lennox came to Allegheny County in order to serve court summonses for those refusing to register their stills, Neville volunteered to escort him. He knew that this could be dangerous, but he stood firm in his belief that the law must be upheld. While attempting to serve William Miller, he and Lennox were surrounded by a large group of discontented farmers. After a heated argument, the government officials were allowed to leave.

A rumor circulated that Miller would be arrested and taken to Philadelphia by Lennox. A crowd of angry, armed men surrounded Neville's home in attempt to intimidate Lennox. As Neville tried to force the men off of his property, he fired a shot killing Oliver Miller (son of William Miller). Neville's slaves then opened fire, dispersing the angry mob. The situation escalated when a few days later a local militia of more than 500 men marched on Neville's home. Although no local citizens answered his call for help, eleven members of the state militia from Fort Pitt came to his defense. A gun battle broke out between the state militia and the locals. Both sides suffered casualties before the state soldiers surrendered. Neville's home and other properties were burned to the ground.

**1. Why was Neville so dedicated to the enforcement of the excise tax?**

**2. What actions would he want Washington to take against the rebels?**