

### **Small Farmer: Jacob Cornish**

Jacob Cornish was born in 1763 on the frontier of North Carolina. Jacob's grandfather, Peter had worked for a shipwright in Liverpool, England. The shipbuilder saw his business prosper, but Peter's wages stayed the same. When he settled in America, Peter established the family farm so that he might improve his own life prospects rather than build profits for the owner of a business. Jacob's father, Samuel, raised his son to tend carefully to their small plot of land so they would not have to depend on anyone else for their support. Jacob married in 1779. After his wedding, he returned to his post in the Continental Army to fight the British efforts to control American lives and make profits at the expense of the colonists. Although his farm suffered in his absence, he knew his sacrifice was necessary in order to preserve the life that his father and grandfather had worked so hard to establish.

As a small farmer, Jacob Cornish knew he would not become wealthy. However, he could support his family. But farming was an uncertain life. A drought could lead to a year when the family did not have enough to get through to the next harvest. He knew that he might have a more stable income if he moved his family east and sought employment with a craftsman or merchant. However, farming allowed him to be his own boss. He made the decisions about his property, and his family kept all of the profits that resulted from their labor. On the hardest of days in the field he would remind himself that he had an opportunity that many men of his social status did not enjoy in other nations.

**1. How might Cornish's past influence his feelings about the kinds of livelihood that the government should encourage? About government regulation of property?**

**2. Would Cornish be more likely to support the new Constitution or the old Articles of Confederation?**

Cornish regularly attended town meetings where local issues were decided and national politics were discussed. In these meetings Cornish and his neighbors dealt face-to-face about issues concerning their community. Because they knew each other and how their decisions would affect the prosperity of their community, they were able to settle many issues effectively after lengthy discussion. To Cornish, this was the beauty of self-government. The people who lived in communities controlled the decisions that would affect those communities instead of decisions being made by some out-of-touch official from an overgrown national government.

But now, just a few short years after the Revolution, he and his fellow farmers were becoming concerned about the direction of the new government. Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, had pushed his new financial plan through Congress. This plan would greatly expand the role of the federal government in the economy and take power from local communities. In order to stabilize the economy and pay off the war debt, Hamilton's plan called for the nation to assume any state war debts not already paid. Many of the southern states had repaid their debts, but some of the northern merchant states had not. The southerners would have to pay the bill for those northern merchants who had not met the obligations they took on when they borrowed the money. Southern money would be used to support northern economies.

## **1. Why would farmers oppose assumption of state debts?**

As if this was not enough, the money to pay for assumption of state debts would be raised by an excise tax on whiskey. This would have a devastating effect on small farmers who turned grain into whiskey. These whiskey farmers would suffer the burden of a tax that would be used to help wealthy merchants in the northeast. Small farmers bartered for most of their needs. Whatever cash they could scrape together was needed to pay the speculators who had been allowed to buy settlers' land from the government. The excise tax would drain any cash out of the farm country and send it all to the east. The tax was only on whiskey now, but what was to stop the government from taxing Cornish's tobacco tomorrow?

### **1. Why do farmers think the excise tax is unfair to them?**

Secretary Hamilton's way of settling the debt and stabilizing the economy was to rob the farmers while he coddled his precious merchants. His tariff would help new industries in the north to prosper. But the South got most of its manufactured goods from England. The tariff would raise the cost of the goods that Cornish bought at the market. Meanwhile, with fewer profits coming from America, the British were likely to buy smaller amounts of American farm products like tobacco and cotton! Farmers would make less money at the same time that the price of goods was rising.

Cornish knew that much of the trouble in France was caused because the peasants and middle class were expected to pay to support the livelihoods of the wealthy. Under Hamilton's plan, he could see little difference between the situations of small farmers in America and the working classes in France. He and his fellow farmers needed to exercise their rights as free men and let President Washington know before it was too late that they would not accept oppression from any government.

### **1. From the perspective of the small farmer, how might attempting to make the United States an industrial nation harm democracy?**

## **2. How does the situation of the small farmers compare to that of the French Revolutionaries?**

## **3. What historical examples might the small farmers cite to support their position?**

## **4. Would Cornish be more likely to support the Federalists or the Republicans?**