

Shays' Rebellion

Shays' Rebellion was an armed uprising in central and western Massachusetts (mainly Springfield) from 1786 to 1787. The rebellion is named after Daniel Shays, a veteran of the American Revolutionary war.

The rebellion started on August 29, 1786, and by January 1787, over one thousand Shaysites had been arrested. A militia that had been raised as a private army defeated an attack on the federal Springfield Armory by the main Shaysite force on February 3, 1787, and four rebels were killed in the action. There was a lack of an institutional response to the uprising, which energized calls to reevaluate the Articles of Confederation and gave strong impetus to the Philadelphia Convention which began on May 17, 1787. Shays' Rebellion produced fears that the Revolution's democratic impulse had gotten out of hand.



Daniel Shays and Job Shattuck, the two main rebels.

Daniel Shays

Daniel Shays was a poor farmhand from Massachusetts when the Revolution broke out. He joined the Continental Army where he fought at Battle of Lexington, Battle of Bunker Hill, and Battle of Saratoga, and was eventually wounded in action. In 1780, he resigned from the army unpaid and went home to find himself in court for the nonpayment of debts. He soon found that he was not alone in being unable to pay his debts, and once even saw a sick woman who had her bed taken out from under her because she was also unable to pay.^[1]

Mounting financial crisis

Shays' Rebellion saw some of its opening salvos in Central Massachusetts, in the town of Uxbridge, in Worcester County, on Feb. 3, 1783.^[2] ^[3] Gov. John Hancock suppressed local riots, after a request by Colonel Nathan Tyler of Uxbridge.^[2] ^[3] Lieutenant Simeon Wheelock, of the Town of Uxbridge died at Springfield, in 1786, while on duty, protecting the Armory.^[4] Shays's Rebellion caused George Washington to emerge from retirement to advocate a stronger national government.^[5]

The financial situation leading to the rebellion included the problem that European war investors (among others) demanded payment in gold and silver; there was not enough specie in the states, including Massachusetts, to pay the debts; and through the state, wealthy urban businessmen were trying to squeeze whatever assets they could get out of rural smallholders. Since the smallholders did not have the gold that the creditors demanded, everything they had was confiscated, including their houses.

At a meeting convened by aggrieved commoners, a farmer, Plough Jogger, encapsulated the situation:

"I have been greatly abused, have been obliged to do more than my part in the war, been loaded with class rates, town rates, province rates, Continental rates and all rates...been pulled and hauled by sheriffs, constables and collectors, and had my cattle sold for less than they were worth...The great men are going to get all we have and I think it is time for us to rise and put a stop to it, and have no more courts, nor sheriffs, nor collectors nor lawyers."

It was decided that the legislature (General Court) in Boston would be petitioned.^[6]

Veterans of the Continental Army, like General Charles Logan Harding aggrieved because they had been conscripted, had to fight with no payment to help them pay for their living, and because they were treated poorly upon discharge, including being locked up in debtors' prison, began to organize their neighbors, the besieged farmers, into squads and companies in order to halt the confiscations.^[7] Veteran Luke Day of West Springfield,

Massachusetts asked the judges holding the confiscatory hearings to adjourn until the Massachusetts legislature met. Throughout Massachusetts, newly organized farmers and veterans faced militia at courthouse thresholds. But sometimes the farmers and veterans were the militia, and often the majority of the militias sided with the veterans and farmers.^[8]

What caused Shays to take on the situation as a revolutionary cause was that on September 19, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts indicted eleven leaders of the rebellion as "disorderly, riotous, and seditious persons." Incensed by the indictment, Shays organized seven hundred armed farmers, most of them war veterans, and led them to Springfield. As they marched their ranks grew, and some of the militia joined along with additional reinforcements from the countryside. Boston elites were mortified at this resistance. The judges first postponed hearings for a day, then adjourned the court. Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin commanded the legislature to "vindicate the insulted dignity of government." Samuel Adams claimed that foreigners ("British emissaries") were instigating treason among the commoners, and he helped draw up a Riot Act, and a resolution suspending *habeas corpus* in order to permit the authorities to keep people in jail without trial. Adams proposed a new legal distinction: that rebellion in a republic, unlike in a monarchy, should be punished by execution.^[9]

The legislatures also moved to make some concessions to the upset farmers, saying certain old taxes could now be paid in goods instead of money. However, this only led to increasing confrontations between farmers and militia.^[10]

Henry Gale, a co-leader

George Gale, in *The Gale Family Records* wrote the following in 1866:

As early as 1771 the records of the town of Princeton, Massachusetts, show that Captain Henry Gale, a co-leader of Shays' Rebellion, had in that town a good farm valued at 185 Pd. with three buildings and a good stock of cattle, and in 1778 Henry removed to that town where he resided until he moved to Barre, Vermont in about 1790.

In Princeton he lived in comparative independence. And being a man of good education, he occupied a high social position, and after the close of the Revolution, he joined heartily in the discussions of the every day: how an independent but bankrupt state might be galvanized into life and a circulating medium in the shape of money established. But while these subjects were racking the brains of the wise and good patriots of the country, the amnesty proclamation had restored Boston and other large towns to wealthy loyalists, who had left the state with the British army when they evacuated Boston.

These wealthy men, having lost all sympathy for the rebel country and people on their return, commenced indiscriminately prosecution for the collection of their old claims, most of which had been outstanding during the war. This alarmed the otherwise quiet creditors, and particularly as "**Greenbacks**" as a legal tender did not then exist and any debtor to the amount of \$5 could be ordered to jail. So great was the rush of business to the courts that 2000 cases were said to have been entered at one term of the court at Worcester, Massachusetts.

The people in alarm held public meetings and petitioned the legislature for relief. The legislature setting in Boston under the influence of Boston merchants and Boston lawyers, who were also reaping a great harvest in high fees, refused the desired relief under the plea that they had no power, a plea generally reported too when there is a lack of disposition.

The people then petitioned the courts that they adjourned over without granting the judgments, until some kind of relief could be afforded by the legislature, but the courts declared they would not be instructed in their duty by the people, while Judge Artemas Ward, in a speech of two hours long from the steps of the Court House in Worcester declared to the people that their "conduct was treason and the punishment of treason was death."

Thus the people of Worcester and other interior counties were for two years ground between two millstones, the courts and the jails, with nothing but bankruptcy and imprisonment staring them in the face. To soldiers who had so lately vindicated their rights by their swords and had learned for seven years to treat the word

"traitor" as a by-word, it was no hard affair to fly to arms, not to overthrow their government but simply to temporarily stop the courts in granting judgments in civil causes.

The people in many counties organized into companies, chose their officers, marched to the Court Houses and prohibited the holding of the courts. Henry Gale was captain of a company from Princeton and his brother Abraham was captain of a company from Grafton, Vermont. Daniel Shays, a brave officer in the Revolutionary War, became the commander and general leader. Thus matters run a short time when the Governor order out 4,000 men and the "Rebels" disbanded, not however in Springfield until they were fired on and three men killed.

The "Rebels" studiously avoided bloodshed. But this tragedy, in the best style of the books, was to terminate in a farce. Judge Artemas Ward, who was a military man, but no lawyer, had only vindicated his military arm leaving his judicial arm still in limbo. As the judge had boldly threatened the Rebels with the punishment made and provided for "treason," he caused indictments to be found against the supposed leaders in the different counties and convicted what did not slip through his hands by the verdict of the jury. From the court records in Boston a copy of the indictment and judgment, the material part of which is as follows:

"At the Supreme Judicial Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts began and holden at Worcester on the last Tuesday of April AD 1787. "The Jurors of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts upon their oaths present that Jacob Chamberlain of Dudley in the same county, Gentleman, Henry Gale of Princeton in the same county, Gentleman, Josiah Jennison Jr. of Spencer in the same county Yeoman, being members and subjects of the Commonwealth aforesaid" . . . "that upon the 5th day of Sept. 1786 and on diverse other days and times as well before that time as since at Worcester within the said county of Worcester falsely and traitorously did devise and conspire to levy war against this Commonwealth and then and there with a great number of rebels and traitors against the Commonwealth aforesaid, viz.: with drums beating fifes playing and with guns, pistols, bayonets, swords, clubs and diverse other weapons as well offensive as defensive did falsely and traitorously prepare, order wage and levy a public and cruel war against the Commonwealth, and then and there with force and arms aforesaid wickedly and traitorously did assault, imprison, captivate, plunder, destroy, kill and murder diverse of the liege subjects of the said Commonwealth, etc." Under this indictment Jacob Chamberlain and Henry Gale were arrested and put upon their trial. They plead not guilty and put themselves on "God and their country." The court in its great clemency assigned to them James Sullivan and Levi Lincoln, Esq. as counsel two of the most noted enemies of the Rebels that were practicing at the bar; the lawyers being all hostile to the "Rebels" to a great extent.

Mr. Chamberlain was acquitted and Capt. Gale convicted of treason and sentenced to "be taken to the Gaol of the Commonwealth from whence he came and from thence to the place of execution and there hanged by the neck until he be dead." When the day of execution arrived the old soldier was, by the sheriff, marched to the gallows with great solemnity, the rope adjusted around the neck of the prisoner, solemn prayers said by the clergy and when all was ready to send the prisoner to eternity, the sheriff cautiously drew from his pocket the Governor's reprieve and read it to the gaping crowd and the prisoner was then withdrawn, and soon after fully pardoned.^[11]

The end of the rebellion

After several years of *ad hoc* popular conventions sending petitions to the Massachusetts General Court for tax and debt relief, and protesters shutting down local courts to prevent judges from enforcing debt collection, Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin took action.^[12] Governor Bowdoin was unsympathetic to the farmers' cause and he dispatched a militia financed by Boston merchants headed by former Revolutionary War General Benjamin Lincoln as well as General William Shepard's local militia of 900 men to protect the Springfield court so that it could continue to process property confiscations.^[13] The rebels were dispersed in January 1787 with over 1,000 arrested. Bowdoin declared that Americans would descend into "a state of anarchy, confusion, and slavery" unless the rule of the law was upheld.^[14]



This monument marks the spot of the final battle of Shays' Rebellion, in western Massachusetts in Sheffield.

Shays sent a message to Luke Day proposing to seize weapons from the Springfield armory on January 25, 1787, before Lincoln's 4,000-man combined Boston and Springfield militia could arrive. Day's response that his forces would not be ready until January 26 was never received by Shays (a real-world example of the Two Generals' Problem). Shays's militia approached the armory not knowing they would have no reinforcements.^[15]

General Shepard's forces were unpaid and without food or adequate arms. Shepard had requested permission to use the weaponry in the Springfield Armory, but Secretary of War Henry Knox had denied the request on the grounds that it required Congressional approval and that Congress was out of session. Shepard reached the armory before Shays, and, ignoring Knox, Shepard's militia commandeered the weapons stored there.

When Shays and his forces neared the armory, they found Shepard's militia waiting for them. Shepard ordered a warning shot; the two cannon present were fired directly into Shays's men. Four of the Shaysites were killed, twenty wounded. There was no musket fire from either side. Crying "Murder!", for they never thought that their neighbors and fellow veterans would fire at them, the rebels fled north. On the opposite side of the river, Day's forces also fled north. The militia captured many of the rebels on February 4 in Petersham, Massachusetts; by March there was no more armed resistance.

Shepard reported to his superiors that he had made use of the armory without authorization, and returned the weapons in good condition after the armed conflict had ended.

Several of the rebels were fined, imprisoned, and sentenced to death, but in 1788 a general amnesty was granted. Although most of the condemned men were either pardoned or had their death sentences commuted, two of the condemned men, John Bly and Charles Rose, were hanged on December 6, 1787.^[16] Shays himself was pardoned in 1788 and he returned to Massachusetts. Sometime afterwards, he moved to the Conesus, New York, area where he lived until he died poor and obscure in 1825.^[10] He is buried in the Union cemetery.

Consequences

Thomas Jefferson, who was serving as an ambassador to France at the time, refused to be alarmed by Shays' Rebellion. In a letter to a friend, he argued that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing. "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure."^[17] In contrast to Jefferson's sentiments George Washington, who at the time was urging many through letters about forming a better and more energetic national government through the union of the states, in a letter to Henry Lee wrote in regards to the rebellion, "You talk, my good sir, of employing influence to appease the present tumults in Massachusetts. I know not where that influence is to be found, or, if attainable, that it would be a proper remedy for the disorders. Influence is not government. Let us have a government by which our lives, liberties, and properties will be secured, or let us know the worst at once."^[18]

Ultimately, however, the uprising was the climax of a series of events of the 1780s that convinced a powerful group of Americans that the national government needed to be stronger so that it could create uniform economic policies and protect property owners from infringements on their rights by local majorities. Men like Charles Harding helped to spread concepts created during Shays' Rebellion. These ideas stemmed from the fear that a private liberty, such as the secure enjoyment of property rights, could be threatened by public liberty - unrestrained power in the hands of the people. James Madison addressed this concept by stating that "Liberty may be endangered by the abuses of liberty as well as the abuses of power."^[17]

Notes

- [1] Zinn, Howard. *A People's History Of The United States*. New York: Harper, 1985. 71-72
- [2] "Quelling the opening salvos of Shay's rebellion" (<http://www.alexautographs.com/l-colrev.htm>). alexautographs.com. . Retrieved 2007-11-10.
- [3] *Supplement to the Acts and resolves of Massachusetts: Vol. 1, p. 148* (http://books.google.com/books?id=sjiAzbmKX14C&pg=PA148&lpg=PA148&dq=Sherrif+sent+to+Uxbridge,+by+John+Hancock,+1783&source=bl&ots=0A5wzZjJ4u&sig=FqHrlFCpoalpRG8RTkkb_JnErv&hl=en&ei=ouWVSpLwIuCFmQej0uTlCg&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2#v=onepage&q=&f=false). google books. . Retrieved 2009-08-26.
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- [5] Richards, Leonard L. (2002). *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. pp. 1–4, 129–30.
- [6] Zinn, Howard. 1995. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper. p. 91
- [7] Zinn, 1995, 91
- [8] Zinn, 1995, 91-93
- [9] Zinn, 1995, 93-94
- [10] Zinn, Howard. 1995. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper. p. 71
- [11] , George Gale, LL. D. (1866) *The Gale Family Records* (Galesville, Wisconsin: Leith & Gale, Printers) pp. 79-80. Available at Google Books ([http://books.google.com/books?id=LhjXLLb06fYC&dq="The+people+in+many+counties+organized+into+companies"&source=gbs_navlinks_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=LhjXLLb06fYC&dq=))
- [12] Swift, 1969, pp. 37-41
- [13] Zinn, 1995, 93.
- [14] Zinn, Howard. 1995. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: Harper. p. 72
- [15] Brinkley, Alan (2010). *The Unfinished Nation Sixth Edition*. New York, New York: McGraw Hill. ISBN 978-0-07-338552-5.
- [16] Richards (2002) p. 41
- [17] Foner, Eric. "Give Me Liberty! An American History." New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2006. 219
- [18] Lodge, Henry Cabot. "American Statesmen: George Washington" Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1889. Vol. II, pg.26

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Further reading

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External links

- Selected Bibliography of Shay's Rebellion (<http://www.history.army.mil/reference/EarlyRepub/SHAYS.htm>) compiled by the United States Army Center of Military History

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