

The Desperate Debtors

SHAYS' REBELLION



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Shays' Rebellion, January 1787, Springfield, Massachusetts

As a result of the Revolution, Americans were freed from the hated British taxes. While the war brought freedom, it did not produce a united United States. Most of the former colonists probably thought of themselves first as citizens of particular states, and second as citizens of a new American nation.

The Articles of Confederation established a weak central government. Could this new government solve the problems that the new nation would face? Each of the former colonies had new state governments. Could these governments deal effectively with their own problems and command the loyalty of their citizens? These were major political questions of the time.

There were economic as well as political problems. The war had been expensive. States had borrowed money to pay their soldiers and to buy supplies. Now these debts had to be repaid. The new state governments also needed money to pay their operating expenses. To raise money the states had to tax their citizens. Many citizens were poor and in debt and found it difficult to pay taxes and repay debts.

In Massachusetts these political and economic problems formed the background for a series of events which became known as Shays' Rebellion. Many feared these events would spell doom for the attempt to form a new nation.

The war had been especially costly for Massachusetts and the state was deeply in debt. Many citizens were also in financial trouble and had difficulty paying their taxes. In eastern Massachusetts, once wealthy merchants who had relied on the profitable West Indies trade, were losing money. The British still controlled the islands and were preventing American ships from trading there.

In western Massachusetts, farmers were also in financial trouble. Money was in short supply and prices for farm products were low. Farmers often found they could barely survive. Also, farmers had borrowed money to buy their land and supplies. These loans had to be repaid and state taxes had to be paid. Poor farmers could often do neither.

When debtors were unable to repay loans, their *creditors* (the people to whom they owed money) could take them to court. Debtors were taken to the Court of Common Pleas where the judges decided what was to happen. Sometimes a farmer's goods would be taken and sold at auction to get money to pay the creditors. Because people in the area had little money, a farmer's goods often sold for much less than they had originally cost. The farmer's land could also be taken as

part of the debt repayment. Furthermore, judges could send the farmer to jail until someone repaid his loan. Hundreds of debt-ridden farmers were unable to pay. In 1785, the Court of Common Pleas heard over 800 cases from Hampshire County alone.

The courts had been established by law, but many farmers wanted the laws changed. Some wanted the courts to be closed until economic conditions improved. Others wanted the state to print paper money and pass a law requiring creditors to accept that money. Many debts had to be paid in *specie* (gold or silver currency) but there was very little specie available. Many farmers believed that legalized paper money would solve their problems.

The farmers had other complaints. They felt the costs of government were too high. For example, they believed the governor's salary should be cut. They also objected to the high fees that lawyers were allowed to charge. Throughout the early 1780s, farmers met in county conventions and drew up petitions to the legislature asking that the laws be changed.

The new state government made some changes but not enough to ease the economic problems of the farmers. Governor James Bowdoin and other officials were distressed by the behavior of some of the westerners. It was one thing to request peacefully that laws be changed, but some farmers were taking the law into their own hands. As early as 1782, a mob of angry farmers had managed to close a session of the Court of Common Pleas in Berkshire County.

The legislature was unwilling to pass a paper money law. Such a law had been passed in Rhode Island but it had bad effects. Many merchants distrusted the new money and refused to accept it as payment. These merchants often left Rhode Island. The law had not solved the financial problems there.

More and more sessions of court were closed down by protesting farmers. One of the early leaders of the farmers, Samuel Ely, supposedly urged his men to get clubs and knock the wigs off the judges' heads. Many of the farmers had fought in the Revolution but now believed their own government, rather than the British, was against them. Such war veterans as Luke Day and Daniel Shays began organizing farmers to continue shutting down the courts.

Government officials were getting nervous. In New Hampshire, they heard that a mob of armed farmers had surrounded the legislature and only left when the state guard was called out. Massachusetts was struggling to solve its financial problems, and now it seemed there was the beginning of an armed rebellion.

Sam Adams, now a state senator, was determined to treat the rebellious farmers harshly. Adams had been a leader in urging the Revolution against England, but he did not think the farmers had a right to rebel against their own elected government. He worked to get a law passed that would punish the farmers but was unable to get enough votes for its passage.

The western farmers heard rumors about the proposed harsh laws. Some had heard the death penalty was going to be the punishment for closing down the courts. In the fall of 1786, a letter was sent to various western towns. The letter said that the legislature was going to enact the death penalty and urged farmers to organize, get weapons, select officers, and "be ready to turn out at a minute's warning." It was signed by Daniel Shays, although he later said he had not put his name to the letter.

Government officials discovered a copy of the letter. Now it seemed certain that an armed rebellion was coming. The farmers were organizing into groups of minutemen, and Daniel Shays must have been their leader. Now, Sam Adams was able to get enough votes. The Riot Act was passed. According to this law, the local sheriff could order rebel farmers to leave the area. If they refused to leave within one hour, they could be arrested, lose their property, and be physically punished. Another law permitted government officials to put in jail anyone they believed was harmful to the state.

In addition to the strict laws, a peace offering was passed. According to this law, the Indemnity Act, no rebels would be punished if they signed an oath of loyalty to the state and immediately stopped trying to shut down the courts.

News of the strict laws quickly reached the farmers, but the Indemnity Act had not gotten much publicity. A few days after its passage, a group of farmers shut down the court at Worcester. The sheriff had read the Riot Act but it did not move the farmers. Later officials captured a number of the rebel farmers and jailed them.

The news upset Daniel Shays. The government clearly meant to put down the farmers and not respond to their financial plight. It seemed the farmers would have to continue with their rebellion even more vigorously. But should Shays lead them? If he took the loyalty oath he might avoid punishment and possibly death. However, one of his advisors told him that the Indemnity Act would not apply to him because he was considered to be the leader of the rebels. There was no way of knowing for sure. General Rufus Putnam, an old friend of Shays and his commanding officer during the Revolution, urged him

to seek a pardon from the government. Shays decided against it.

News of the capture of some farmers and the strict new laws led Shays to sign a letter to be sent to the western towns. The letter began, "The seeds of war are now sown." It ended with an appeal for the towns to supply men and provisions for the continued struggle with the government. Massachusetts was divided between those who supported the farmers and those who supported the government.

News of the conflict in Massachusetts spread throughout the states. George Washington feared for the security of the new nation. He said, if the farmers had genuine complaints then the government should try to make changes, but government should not be overthrown. Washington wrote: "If they have real grievances, redress them, if possible; or acknowledge the justice of them, and your inability to do it at the moment. If they have not, employ the force of government against them at once."

Thomas Jefferson held a different view. He was in Paris at the time of the rebellion, but he later wrote: "I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. . . . It is medicine necessary for the sound health of government."

Shays became determined to give the government a strong dose of medicine. In January 1787, the Massachusetts government sent General Benjamin Lincoln with a force of about 4,000 men to put down the rebels. Shays knew the farmers needed more weapons and ammunition if they had to do battle with Lincoln. At Springfield there was a federal arsenal that held guns and ammunition. It was decided to march on the arsenal before Lincoln could get there.

It seems that Shays believed he could take the arsenal without bloodshed. Many of the 900 troops guarding the arsenal knew Shays and his men, so it was unlikely they would fire on them. Also, the commander of the arsenal troops had avoided using force in a previous encounter.

On January 25, Shays and over one thousand men marched to the front of the arsenal. The commander ordered his men to fire two warning shots over the heads of the farmers. The shots were fired to no effect. Shays' men marched forward and the commander ordered his men to fire at the farmers. They obeyed the order. Four of Shays' men were killed and the rest broke ranks and ran. Shays' army did not fire a single shot. They retreated in disarray.

General Lincoln's troops reached the area and pursued Shays'

retreating men. After marching through a freezing, snowy night, Lincoln's men surprised Shays' at Petersham. Many of Shays' men surrendered. Shays and others escaped into Vermont.

In the following months there were many skirmishes as the government troops tried to round up rebel farmers still at large. In the meantime, Governor Bowdoin and other government officials had to decide what to do with the captured rebels. Sam Adams believed that they should be hanged. Others wanted less severe punishment. Still others favored the granting of a general pardon. It was agreed that something should be done to show that government must be obeyed. It was decided that a few of the rebels should be hanged and the rest pardoned.

The decision to hang a few rebels was not popular. When John Hancock was elected governor and took office in June, he granted a general pardon. A year later, Daniel Shays formally received his pardon.

During the trouble in Massachusetts the central government under the Articles of Confederation had been unable to provide help. The weakness of the government in this case was one factor that led to the formation of a stronger central government, the one established by the Constitution.

The major sources for this story were:

Starkey, Marion L. *A Little Rebellion*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.

Taylor, Robert J. *Western Massachusetts in the Revolution*. Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1954.

ACTIVITIES FOR "THE DESPERATE DEBTORS"

Answer all questions on a separate piece of paper.

Historical Understanding

Answer briefly:

1. What were three reasons for the financial troubles faced by many Massachusetts citizens?
2. Why were people throughout the United States concerned about the turmoil in Massachusetts?

3. In what ways did Thomas Jefferson and George Washington differ in their opinions about Shays' Rebellion?

Reviewing the Facts of the Case

Answer briefly:

1. What was the Court of Common Pleas?
2. What could happen to farmers who did not pay their debts?
3. What changes in the laws did the farmers want?
4. What was the Riot Act? What was the Indemnity Act?
5. What did Shays urge people to do in his letter to the western towns?

Analyzing Ethical Issues

There is agreement on the answer to some questions. For other questions there is disagreement about the answer. We call these questions issues. Issues can be categorized as factual or ethical. A factual issue asks whether something is true or false, accurate or inaccurate. An ethical issue asks whether something is right or wrong, fair or unfair. Factual issues ask what *is*; ethical issues ask what *ought* to be.

For each of the following questions decide whether the issue is factual or ethical, as illustrated in this example.

Would Daniel Shays have been executed if he had surrendered and sought a pardon? *Factual.*

Should the legislature have passed a paper money bill? *Ethical.*

1. Could Shays' men have taken control of the arsenal?
2. Could the Massachusetts government have afforded to make the changes the farmers wanted?
3. Should John Hancock have followed Sam Adams' advice about the death penalty?
4. Would the rebellion have ended if Shays had followed Putnam's advice and sought a pardon?

5. Was it right for Shays to send the letter?

Think back over the story and identify and write down two factual questions and two ethical questions related to the Shays Rebellion.

Expressing Your Reasoning

1. General Rufus Putnam urged Shays to seek a pardon from the government. What would be the best reason for him to seek a pardon? What would be the best reason for him *not* to seek a pardon? Should Daniel Shays have sought the pardon? Why or why not?
2. Sam Adams believed the colonists were right in rebelling against England but the farmers of Massachusetts were wrong in rebelling against the state. Do you agree with Adams? Why or why not? Write a paragraph expressing your point of view.
3. *Seeking Additional Information.* In making decisions about such questions as those above, we often feel we need more information before we are satisfied with our judgments. Choose one of the above questions about which you would want more information than is presented in the story. What additional information would you like? Why would that information help you make a more satisfactory decision?