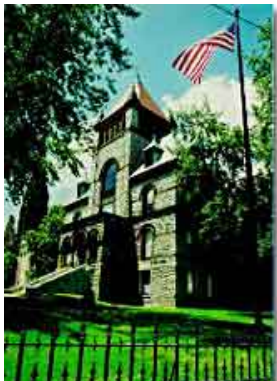


Shays' Rebellion



Northampton courthouse
The modern day Northampton courthouse, built in 1884 on the same site as the courthouse where Shays' Rebellion occurred.

The crisis of the 1780s was most intense in the rural and relatively newly settled areas of central and western Massachusetts. Many farmers in this area suffered from high debt as they tried to start new farms. Unlike many other state legislatures in the 1780s, the Massachusetts government didn't respond to the economic crisis by passing PRO-DEBTOR LAWS (like forgiving debt and printing more PAPER MONEY). As a result local sheriffs seized many farms and some farmers who couldn't pay their debts were put in prison.

These conditions led to the first major armed rebellion in the post-Revolutionary United States. Once again, Americans resisted high taxes and unresponsive government that was far away. But this time it was Massachusetts's settlers who were angry with a republican government in Boston, rather than with the British government across the Atlantic.

The farmers in western Massachusetts organized their resistance in ways similar to the American Revolutionary struggle. They called special meetings of the people to protest conditions and agree on a coordinated protest. This led the rebels to close courts by force in the fall of 1786 and to liberate imprisoned debtors from jail. Soon events flared into a full-scale revolt when the resisters came under the leadership of DANIEL SHAYS, a former captain in the Continental Army. This was the most extreme example of what could happen in the tough times brought on by the economic crisis. Some thought of the SHAYSITES (named after their military leader) as heroes in the direct tradition of the American Revolution, while many others saw them as dangerous rebels whose actions might topple the young experiment in republican government.

JAMES BOWDOIN, the governor of Massachusetts, was clearly in the latter group. He organized a military force funded by eastern merchants, to confront the rebels. This armed force crushed the movement in the winter of 1786-1787 as the Shaysites quickly fell apart when faced with a strong army organized by the state. While the rebellion disintegrated quickly, the underlying social forces that propelled such dramatic action remained. The debtors' discontent was widespread and similar actions occurred on a smaller scale in Maine (then still part of Massachusetts), Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania among others places.

While Governor Bowdoin had acted decisively in crushing the rebellion, the voters turned against him in the next election. This high level of discontent, popular resistance, and the election of pro-debtor governments in many states threatened the political notions of many political and social elites. SHAYS' REBELLION demonstrated the high degree of internal conflict lurking beneath the surface of post-Revolutionary life. National leaders felt compelled to act to put an end to such popular actions that took place beyond the bounds of law.



Insurgents of Shays' Rebellion
Patriots or traitors? Farmers from western Massachusetts followed petitions for economic relief with insurgency in the fall of 1786. A group of protestors, led by Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays, began a 6-month rebellion by taking over the Court of Common Pleas in Northampton; the goal was to prevent the trial and imprisonment of debt-ridden citizens.

Do Now

Directions: Answer the following questions and highlight or underline the text that answers each.

1. Why were Shay's and his followers angry?
2. How did Shay's try to handle the dispute?
3. Why did Bowdoin fail in his reelection to reap the benefit of suppressing the rebellion?

10 Days That Unexpectedly Changed America: The Shay's Rebellion

Directions: Answer the following questions while you watch the film. Be prepared to discuss and hand in the questions.

1. Daniel Shays felt that he had the right to be protected from debt and decline. Why did he believe the government was obligated to provide this protection?
2. Do you think it was significant that Daniel Shays was a Revolutionary war veteran?
3. What were the major complaints of Shays and his followers? What do you think they saw as the goals of the rebellion? Did these goals change over time?
4. Why was Shays' Rebellion considered to be the United States' first civil war?
5. Americans soon learned after the war that the Articles of Confederation were too weak. How did Shays' Rebellion reveal these weaknesses?
6. What provisions were included in the Articles for a federal government? Did limiting the powers of the federal government negatively impact the nation's development? Explain.
7. What could have been included in the Articles to help the emerging nation recover from war?
8. What role did Shays' Rebellion play in the creation of the Constitution? If Shays' Rebellion had been a peaceful protest, do you feel it would have had the same impact? Explain.
9. What was the Riot Act? Why was it significant?
10. What punishment did Shays and the lead rebels receive for their actions? Do you think their treatment was just?