

### Hard Times for Farmers

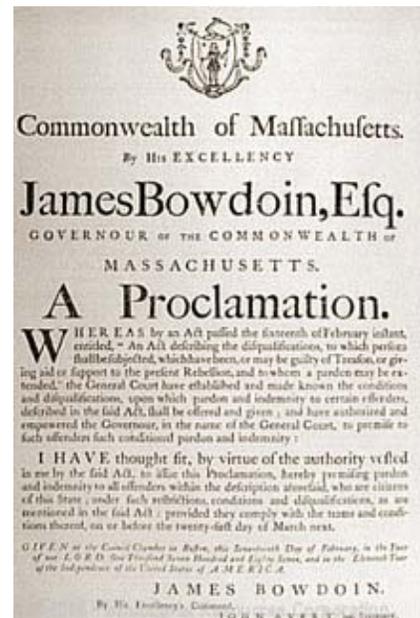
The Revolutionary War started when the colonists rebelled against the British. The war was decided in the colonists' favor, but that does not mean that the colonists suddenly agreed about everything. When British rule was over, people had different ideas of what they wanted the new United States to be. Fears of corrupt government, heavy taxes, and even civil war were on the minds of Americans.

In 1786 a group of frustrated farmers in Massachusetts rebelled against the wealthy class. Their land was being seized by sheriffs because they could not make payments on their land and had too little money to pay taxes. In Massachusetts at the time, people paid high taxes, and it was very difficult to borrow money. These two facts caused many people to go into debt.

The debt problem was made worse when the state government refused to pass laws that would help debtors. Some farmers who could not pay their debts ended up in prison. To stop the courts from taking more land, the farmers joined together and shut down courthouses across the state. The farmers found a leader in Daniel Shays. The Massachusetts farmers' struggle is known in history as Shays's Rebellion.

### The Life of a Poor Farmer

Daniel Shays was born in the small town of Hopkinton in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1747. His parents had come to the British colony from Ireland in the 1730s. As a young man, Shays moved about 40 miles west of Hopkinton to Brookfield. He became a farm laborer, a typical job for a man in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in at this time. Life as a farm laborer was very difficult. No matter how hard he worked, Shays remained a poor man. He married Abigail Gilbert in 1772, and his first son was born one year later in 1773. The couple soon moved to the town of Shutesbury, where Shays began to muster with the colonial militia. War with Britain was near. Daniel Shays marched to the Battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775. He also fought in the



Shays's Rebellion frightened conservatives throughout the country. This proclamation, signed by Governor James Bowdoin, pardoned those who had participated in the rebellion if they swore an oath to the state and surrendered all firearms.

Battle of Bunker Hill and at Fort Ticonderoga. He was promoted to Lieutenant and was known for being able to gather men to fight. He joined the Fifth Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Army where he was again promoted. As a captain, he fought in battles at Saratoga and Stony Point. Shays was honored by General Lafayette for his efforts in war. He resigned from the army in 1780 and returned to his family, who now lived in Pelham.

### Shays's Struggles Continue

Once again a farmer, Shays struggled to make ends meet. Farming in Massachusetts was not easy, because the landscape is rocky and hard to till. However, poor farm land had one advantage: it was inexpensive. Shays could finally own his land. After the war, states tried to pay off war debt. Many raised taxes. Some states, such as Rhode Island, began printing paper money that could be used to pay off debts. Shays's own state of Massachusetts decided not to do this. Instead, the only legal currency was coin. Coins were backed by the value of gold and silver, but there was little of that in circulation. Farmers in Massachusetts had no way of paying their taxes. They soon found their properties being taken by the state.



A depiction of the last battle in Shays's Rebellion. The Massachusetts militia defeated the rebel farmers in Springfield. As the militia closed in, the rebels declared every man for himself.

Daniel Shays was brought into court twice for unpaid debts in 1784. The pressure of having to pay off impatient merchants as well as state tax collectors increased the farmers' resentment of the upper class. The farmers did not think it was fair for the wealthy to rule over the poor. The farmers decided to block the entrances to the courthouses. In this way, no official action could be taken against farmers who owed state taxes. The farmers also hoped to free imprisoned debtors.

### Called to Leadership

The Pelham selectmen—town government leaders—asked Shays to lead the farmers to the Northampton courthouse, but Shays refused. He did not want to be a leader of the Regulators, as the groups were known. Although he was sympathetic to the cause, his focus was on farming. However, a month later, Shays changed his mind and once again led men to the courthouse to express their displeasure. He presented the list of grievances and demands to the Springfield Supreme Judicial Court. Shays negotiated with General William

Shepard, and the judges peacefully left the Northampton courthouse. It was there that Shays emerged as a leader of the farmers' cause. The government, however, portrayed Shays as a villain rather than a rebellious farmer. He was known as the man who removed the judges from the highest court in the state.

State authorities took notice once the rebel farmers began to close the courts. Harassing judges and disrupting court cases were frowned upon. Because the rebels were attacking a visible symbol of state authority, the judicial system, the governor James Bowdoin called up the local militias to stop them.

In December 1786, Shays helped raise his own army of Regulators to stand against the government. He acted on behalf of the farmers while continually denying being their leader. Although Shays did not want confrontation, he wanted the people to be prepared for it. Because many of the farmers did not own guns, a plan was made to raid the Springfield Arsenal. The arsenal had guns, ammunition, and barracks to provide shelter from the winter's harsh weather.

### **Tensions Grow**

In January 1787, the farmers, or Regulators as they were called, attacked the arsenal. Even though the Regulators outnumbered the militias by two to one, the Regulators' flanks were cut in half by another advancing militia. The Regulators just did not have enough weapons to fight back. The governor's men defeated the Regulators in 12 minutes. The Regulators fled into the snowy hills, pursued by the governor's militias. After an overnight march in harsh weather, the rebels scattered. Shays led men to South Hadley and then to Pelham, where they set up camp for a short time.

Soon General William Shepard and General Benjamin Lincoln were again chasing the Regulators. The militia was determined to capture Shays and his men. In their eyes, the Regulators' actions were a kind of treason, or disloyalty. Lincoln's men caught up to Shays's Regulators on February 3. Instead of fighting, the Regulators fled. Daniel Shays headed north and escaped to Vermont.

While Shays was in hiding, the new governor of Massachusetts, John Hancock, began to smooth over the rebellion. He pardoned and released captured Regulators. Hancock wanted to fix the problem rather than chase farmers around the countryside. In June 1787, Hancock officially pardoned Daniel Shays, and Shays returned to his home in Pelham.

**The Widespread Impact of the Rebellion**

Daniel Shays's time as an army leader was over. However, Shays's Rebellion contributed to a call for a general convention of the states. This convention became known as the first Constitutional Convention of 1787. Shays and his followers helped make the country aware of the ever-growing problems people were facing. The Articles of Confederation—the United States' first Constitution—had failed. It was clear that the nation needed a stronger central government, one that could issue a currency to be used in all states and regulate the economy. Shays was not responsible for the new U.S. Constitution, but his actions were reminders of what could happen to a country left without a united government. Shays's Rebellion forced the government to act.

Shays was awarded a pension for his years of service in the Continental Army. He moved to upstate New York in 1795 and returned to farming. When Shays's wife died, he married an innkeeper in Sparta, New York. He remained in Sparta for the rest of his life. Daniel Shays died on September 29, 1825, at the age of 78.

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** Why do you think Daniel Shays was sympathetic to farmers?
  - A.** He made money on the food they grew.
  - B.** He too had been brought to court for debts.
  - C.** He thought he could make money off the farmers.
  - D.** He wanted to buy their farms.
  
- 2.** What was one impact of Shays leading the Regulators to the courthouse?
  - A.** The Constitution was overturned.
  - B.** The Regulators disbanded because they knew they would lose.
  - C.** The courts were closed.
  - D.** Shays was captured at the courthouse.
  
- 3.** Why did Lincoln and Shepard continue to chase the Regulators?
  - A.** Shays had stolen a lot of money, and they were determined to get it back.
  - B.** They were trying to avoid going back to Massachusetts.
  - C.** Neither would be paid until they captured Shays.
  - D.** The chaos caused by Shays and the Regulators threatened the state government.
  
- 4.** Historians have different views of Daniel Shays. Do you think Daniel Shays was a villain or a hero? Provide details and evidence to support your answer.