

= Shays ' Rebellion =

Shays ' Rebellion was an armed uprising in Massachusetts ( mostly in and around Springfield ) during 1786 and 1787 . Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays led four thousand rebels ( called Shaysites ) in rising up against perceived economic injustices and suspension of civil rights ( including multiple eviction and foreclosure notices ) by Massachusetts , and in a later attempt to capture the United States ' national weapons arsenal at the U.S. Armory at Springfield . Although Shays ' Rebellion met with defeat militarily against a privately raised militia , it prompted numerous national leaders ( including George Washington , who came out of retirement to deal with issues raised by Shays ' Rebellion ) to call for a stronger national government to suppress future rebellions , resulting in the U.S. Constitutional Convention and according to historian Leonard L. Richards , " fundamentally altering the course of U.S. history . "

The rebellion took place in a political climate where reform of the country 's governing document , the Articles of Confederation , was widely seen as necessary . The events of the rebellion , some of which occurred after the Philadelphia Convention had been called but before it began in May 1787 , are widely seen to have affected the debates on the shape of the new government . The shock of Shays ' Rebellion drew retired General George Washington back into public life , leading to his terms as the United States ' first President . The exact nature and consequence of the rebellion 's influence on the content of the Constitution and the ratification debates continues to be a subject of historical discussion and debate .

= = Background = =

In the rural parts of New England , particularly in the hill @-@ towns of central and western Massachusetts , the economy during the American Revolutionary War had been one of little more than subsistence agriculture . Some residents in these areas had little in the way of assets beyond their land , and bartered with one another for goods or services . In lean times , farmers might obtain goods on credit from suppliers in local market towns who would be paid when times were better .

In the more economically developed coastal areas of Massachusetts Bay and in the fertile Connecticut River Valley , the economy was basically a market economy , driven by the activities of wholesale merchants dealing with Europe , the West Indies and elsewhere on the North American coast . Not surprisingly , the state government was dominated by this merchant class .

When the Revolutionary War ended in 1783 , the European business partners of Massachusetts merchants refused to extend lines of credit to them and insisted that they pay for goods with hard currency . Despite the continent @-@ wide shortage of such currency , merchants began to demand the same from their local business partners , including those merchants operating in the market towns in the state 's interior . Many of these merchants passed on this demand to their customers , although the popular governor , John Hancock , did not impose hard currency demands on poorer borrowers and refused to actively prosecute the collection of delinquent taxes .

The rural farming population was generally unable to meet the demands being made of them by merchants or the civil authorities , and individuals began to lose their land and other possessions when they were unable to fulfill their debt and tax obligations . This led to strong resentments against tax collectors and the courts , where creditors obtained and enforced judgments against debtors , and where tax collectors obtained judgments authorizing property seizures .

At a meeting convened by aggrieved commoners , a farmer identified as " 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 . "

Overlaid upon these financial issues was the fact that veterans of the war had received little pay during the war and faced difficulty collecting pay owed them from the State or the Congress of the

Confederation . Some of the soldiers , Daniel Shays among them , began to organize protests against these oppressive economic conditions . Shays was a farmhand from Massachusetts when the Revolution broke out ; he joined the Continental Army , saw action at the Battles of Lexington and Concord , Bunker Hill and Saratoga , and was eventually wounded in action . In 1780 , he resigned from the army unpaid and went home to find himself in court for nonpayment of debts . He soon realized that he was not alone in his inability to pay his debts and began organizing for debt relief .

= = Early rumblings = =

One early protest against the government was led by Job Shattuck of Groton , who in 1782 organized residents there to physically prevent tax collectors from doing their work . A second , larger @-@ scale protest took place in the central Massachusetts town of Uxbridge , in Worcester County , on Feb. 3 , 1783 , when a mob seized property that had been confiscated by a local constable and returned it to its owners . Governor Hancock ordered the sheriff to suppress these actions .

Most rural communities , however , attempted to use the legislative process to gain relief . Petitions and proposals were repeatedly submitted to the state legislature to issue paper currency . Such inflationary issues would depreciate the currency , making it possible to meet obligations made at high values with lower @-@ valued paper . The merchants , among them James Bowdoin , were opposed to the idea , since they were generally lenders who stood to lose from such proposals . As a result , these proposals were repeatedly rejected . Governor Hancock , accused by some of anticipating trouble , resigned citing health reasons in early 1785 . When Bowdoin ( a perennial loser to Hancock in earlier elections ) was elected governor that year , matters became more severe . Bowdoin stepped up civil actions to collect back taxes , and the legislature exacerbated the situation by levying an additional property tax to raise funds for the state 's portion of foreign debt payments . Even comparatively conservative commentators such as John Adams observed that these levies were " heavier than the People could bear . "

= = Shutting down the courts = =

Protests in the rural Massachusetts turned into direct action in August 1786 , after the state legislature adjourned without considering the many petitions that had been sent to Boston . On August 29 a well @-@ organized force of protestors formed in Northampton and successfully prevented the county court from sitting . The leaders of this and later forces proclaimed that they were seeking relief from the burdensome judicial processes that were depriving the people of their land and possessions . They called themselves Regulators , a reference to the Regulator movement of North Carolina that sought to reform corrupt practices in the late 1760s .

On September 2 Governor Bowdoin issued a proclamation denouncing such mob action , but took no military measures beyond planning militia response to future actions . When the court in Worcester was shut down by similar action on September 5 , the county militia ( composed mainly of men sympathetic to the protestors ) refused to turn out , much to Bowdoin 's amazement . Governors of the neighboring states where similar protests took place acted decisively , calling out the militia to hunt down the ringleaders after the first such protests . In Rhode Island , matters were resolved without violence because the " country party " gained control of the legislature in 1786 and enacted measures forcing its merchant elites to trade debt instruments for devalued currency . The impact of this was not lost on Boston 's merchants , especially Bowdoin , who held more than £ 3 @, @ 000 in Massachusetts notes .

Daniel Shays , who had participated in the Northampton action , began to take a more active role in the uprising in November , though he firmly denied that he was one of its leaders . On September 19 , the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts indicted eleven leaders of the rebellion as " disorderly , riotous , and seditious persons . " When the supreme judicial court was next scheduled to meet in Springfield on September 26 , Shays in Hampshire County and Luke Day in what is now

Hampden County ( but was then part of Hampshire County ) organized an attempt to shut it down . They were anticipated by William Shepard , the local militia commander , who began gathering government @-@ supporting militia the Saturday before the court was to sit . By the time the court was ready to open , Shepard had 300 men protecting the Springfield courthouse . Shays and Day were able to recruit a similar number , but chose only to demonstrate , exercising their troops outside Shepard 's lines , rather than attempt to seize the building . The judges first postponed the hearings , and then adjourned on the 28th without hearing any cases . Shepard withdrew his force , which had grown to some 800 men ( to the Regulators ' 1 @,@ 200 ) , to the federal armory , which was then only rumored to be the target of seizure by the activists .

Protests in Great Barrington , Concord , and Taunton were also successful in shutting courts down in those communities in September and October . James Warren wrote to John Adams on October 22 , " We are now in a state of Anarchy and Confusion bordering on Civil War . " Courts in the larger towns and cities were able to meet , but required protection of the militia , which Bowdoin called out for the purpose .

The Boston elites were mortified at this resistance . Governor 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 even proposed a new legal distinction : that rebellion in a republic , unlike in a monarchy , should be punished by execution . The legislature also moved to make some concessions to the upset farmers , saying certain old taxes could now be paid in goods instead of hard currency . These measures were followed up by one prohibiting speech critical of the government , and offering pardons to protestors willing to take an oath of allegiance . These legislative actions were unsuccessful in quelling the protests , and the suspension of habeas corpus alarmed many .

In late November warrants were issued for the arrest of several of the protest ringleaders . On November 28 a posse of some 300 men rode to Groton to arrest Job Shattuck and other rebel leaders in the area . Shattuck was chased down and arrested on the 30th , and was wounded by a sword slash in the process . This action and the arrest of other protest leaders in the eastern parts of the state radicalized those in the west , and they began to organize an overthrow of the state government . " The seeds of war are now sown " , wrote one correspondent in Shrewsbury , and by mid @-@ January rebel leaders spoke of smashing the " tyrannical government of Massachusetts . "

= = Rebellion = =

Since the federal government had been unable to recruit soldiers for the army ( primarily because of a lack of funding ) , the Massachusetts elites determined to act independently . On January 4 , 1787 , Governor Bowdoin proposed creation of a privately funded militia army . Former Continental Army General Benjamin Lincoln solicited funds , and had by the end of January raised more than £ 6 @,@ 000 from more than 125 merchants . The 3 @,@ 000 militia that were recruited into this army were almost entirely from the eastern counties of Massachusetts , and marched to Worcester on January 19 .

While the government forces organized , Shays , Day , and other rebel leaders in the west organized their forces , establishing regional regimental organizations that were run by democratically elected committees . Their first major target was the federal armory in Springfield . General Shepard had however , pursuant to orders from Governor Bowdoin , taken possession of the armory and used its arsenal to arm a force of some 1 @,@ 200 militia . He had done this despite the fact that the armory was federal , not state , property , and that he did not have permission from Secretary at War Henry Knox to do so .

The insurgents were organized into three major groups , and intended to surround and simultaneously attack the armory . Shays had one group east of Springfield near Palmer , Luke Day had a second force across the Connecticut River in West Springfield , and the third force , under Eli

Parsons , was to the north at Chicopee . The rebels had planned their assault for January 25 , but Luke Day changed this at the last minute , sending Shays a message indicating he would not be ready to attack until the 26th . Day 's message was intercepted by Shepard 's men , so the militia of Shays and Parsons , some 1 @, @ 500 men , approached the armory on the 25th not knowing they would have no support from the west .

When Shays and his forces neared the armory , they found Shepard 's militia waiting for them . Shepard first ordered warning shots fired over the approaching Shaysites ' heads , and then ordered two cannons to fire grape shot at Shays ' men . Four Shaysites were killed and twenty wounded . There was no musket fire from either side , and the rebel advance collapsed . Most of the rebel force fled north , eventually regrouping at Amherst . On the opposite side of the river , Day 's forces also fled north , also eventually reaching Amherst .

General Lincoln , when he heard of the Springfield incident , immediately began marching west from Worcester with the 3 @, @ 000 men that had mustered . The rebels moved generally north and east to avoid Lincoln , eventually establishing a camp at Petersham ; along the way they raided the shops of local merchants for supplies , taking some of them hostage . Lincoln pursued them , reaching Pelham , some 30 miles ( 48 km ) from Petersham , on February 2 . On the night of February 3 ? 4 , he led his militia on a forced march to Petersham through a bitter snowstorm . Arriving early in the morning , they surprised the rebel camp so thoroughly that they scattered " without time to call in their out parties or even their guards . " Although Lincoln claimed to capture 150 men , none of them were officers , leading historian Leonard Richards to suspect the veracity of the report . Most of the leadership escaped north into New Hampshire and Vermont , where they were sheltered despite repeated demands that they be returned to Massachusetts for trial .

= = Mopping up = =

Lincoln 's march marked the end of large @-@ scale organized resistance . Ringleaders who eluded capture fled to neighboring states , and pockets of local resistance continued . Some rebel leaders approached Lord Dorchester , the British governor of Quebec for assistance , who was reported to promise assistance in the form of Mohawk warriors led by Joseph Brant . ( Dorchester 's proposal was vetoed in London , and no assistance came to the rebels . )

The same day that Lincoln arrived at Petersham , the state legislature passed bills authorizing a state of martial law , giving the governor broad powers to act against the rebels . The bills also authorized state payments to reimburse Lincoln and the merchants who had funded the army , and authorized the recruitment of additional militia . On February 12 the legislature passed the Disqualification Act , seeking to prevent a legislative response by rebel sympathizers . This bill expressly forbade any acknowledged rebels from holding a variety of elected and appointed offices .

Most of Lincoln 's army melted away in late February as enlistments expired ; by the end of the month he commanded but thirty men at a base in Pittsfield . In the meantime some 120 rebels had regrouped in New Lebanon , New York , and on February 27 they crossed the border . Marching first on Stockbridge , a major market town in the southwestern corner of the state , they raided the shops of merchants and the homes of merchants and local professionals . This came to the attention of Brigadier John Ashley , who mustered a force of some 80 men , and caught up with the rebels in nearby Sheffield late in the day . In the bloodiest encounter of the rebellion , 30 rebels were wounded ( one mortally ) , at least one government soldier was killed , and many were wounded . Ashley , who was further reinforced after the encounter , reported taking 150 prisoners .

= = Consequences = =

Four thousand people signed confessions acknowledging participation in the events of the rebellion ( in exchange for amnesty ) ; several hundred participants were eventually indicted on charges relating to the rebellion . Most of these were pardoned under a general amnesty that only excluded a few ringleaders . Eighteen men were convicted and sentenced to death , but most of these were

either overturned on appeal , pardoned , or had their sentences commuted . Two of the condemned men , John Bly and Charles Rose , were hanged on December 6 , 1787 . Shays himself was pardoned in 1788 and he returned to Massachusetts from hiding in the Vermont woods . He was , however , vilified by the Boston press , who painted him as an archetypal anarchist opposed to the government . He later moved to the Conesus , New York , area , where he lived until he died poor and obscure in 1825 .

The crushing of the rebellion and the harsh terms of reconciliation imposed by the Disqualification Act all worked against Governor Bowdoin politically . In the gubernatorial election held in April 1787 , Bowdoin received few votes from the rural parts of the state , and was trounced by John Hancock . The military victory was tempered by tax changes in subsequent years . The legislature elected in 1787 cut taxes and placed a moratorium on debts . It also refocused state spending away from interest payments , resulting in a 30 % decline in the value of Massachusetts securities as those payments fell in arrears .

Vermont , then an unrecognized independent republic that had been seeking statehood independent from New York 's claims to the territory , became an unexpected beneficiary of the rebellion due to its sheltering of the rebel ringleaders . Alexander Hamilton broke from other New Yorkers , including major landowners with claims on Vermont territory , calling for the state to recognize and support Vermont 's bid for admission to the union . He cited Vermont 's de facto independence and its ability to cause trouble by providing support to the discontented from neighboring states as reasons , and introduced legislation that broke the impasse between New York and Vermont . Vermonters responded favorably to the overture , publicly pushing Eli Parsons and Luke Day out of the state ( but quietly continuing to support others ) . After negotiations with New York and the passage of the new constitution , Vermont became the fourteenth state .

= = Impact on Constitution = =

Thomas Jefferson , who was serving as ambassador to France at the time , refused to be alarmed by Shays ' Rebellion . In a letter to James Madison on January 30 , 1787 , 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 . " In contrast to Jefferson 's sentiments George Washington , who had been calling for constitutional reform for many years , wrote in a letter to Henry Lee , " 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 . "

= = = Influence on Constitutional Convention = = =

At the time of the rebellion , the weaknesses of the federal government as constituted under the Articles of Confederation were apparent to many . A vigorous debate was going on throughout the states on the need for a stronger central government , with Federalists arguing for the idea , and Anti @-@ Federalists opposing them . Historical opinion is divided on what sort of role the rebellion played in the formation and later ratification of the United States Constitution , although most scholars agree it played some role , at least temporarily drawing some anti @-@ Federalists to the strong government side . By early 1785 many influential merchants and political leaders were already agreed that a stronger central government was needed . A convention at Annapolis , Maryland , in September 1786 of delegates from five states concluded that vigorous steps needed to be taken to reform the federal government , but it disbanded because of a lack of full representation , calling for a convention of all the states to be held in Philadelphia in May 1787 . Historian Robert Feer notes that several prominent figures had hoped that convention would fail , requiring a larger @-@ scale convention , and French diplomat Louis @-@ Guillaume Otto thought the convention was intentionally broken off early to achieve this end .

In early 1787 John Jay wrote that the rural disturbances and the inability of the central government

to fund troops in response made " the inefficiency of the Federal government [ become ] more and more manifest . " Henry Knox observed that the uprising in Massachusetts clearly influenced local leaders who had previously opposed a strong federal government . Historian David Szatmary writes that the timing of the rebellion " convinced the elites of sovereign states that the proposed gathering at Philadelphia must take place . " Some states , Massachusetts among them , delayed choosing delegates to the proposed convention , in part because in some ways it resembled the " extra @-@ legal " conventions organized by the protestors before the rebellion became violent .

= = = Influence on Constitution = = =

The convention that met in Philadelphia was dominated by strong @-@ government advocates . Delegate Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut argued that because the people could not be trusted ( as exemplified by Shays ' Rebellion ) , the members of the federal House of Representatives should be chosen by state legislatures , not by popular vote . The example of Shays ' Rebellion may also have been influential in the addition of language to the constitution concerning the ability of states to manage domestic violence , and their ability to demand the return of individuals from other states for trial . The rebellion also played a role in the discussion of a number of the executives . While mindful of tyranny , delegates of the Constitutional Convention thought that the single executive would be more effective in responding to national disturbances . Federalists cited the rebellion as an example of the confederation government 's weaknesses , while opponents such as Elbridge Gerry thought that a federal response to the rebellion would have been even worse than that of the state . ( Gerry , a merchant speculator and Massachusetts delegate from Essex County , was one of the few convention delegates who refused to sign the new constitution , although his reasons for doing so did not stem from the rebellion . )

= = = Influence on ratification = = =

When the constitution had been drafted , Massachusetts was viewed by Federalists as a state that might not ratify it , because of widespread anti @-@ Federalist sentiment in the rural parts of the state . Massachusetts Federalists , including Henry Knox , were active in courting swing votes in the debates leading up to the state 's ratifying convention in 1788 . When the vote was taken on February 6 , 1788 , representatives of rural communities involved in the rebellion voted against ratification by a wide margin , but the day was carried by a coalition of merchants , urban elites , and market town leaders . The state ratified the constitution by a vote of 187 to 168 .

Historians are divided on the impact the rebellion had on the ratification debates . Robert Feer notes that major Federalist pamphleteers rarely mentioned it , and that some anti @-@ Federalists used the fact that Massachusetts survived the rebellion as evidence that a new constitution was unnecessary . However , Leonard Richards counters that publications like the Pennsylvania Gazette explicitly tied anti @-@ Federalist opinion to the rebel cause , calling opponents of the new constitution " Shaysites " and the Federalists " Washingtonians " . David Szatmary argues that debate in some states was affected , particularly in Massachusetts , where the rebellion had a polarizing effect . Richards records Henry Jackson 's observation that opposition to ratification in Massachusetts was motivated by " that cursed spirit of insurgency " , but that broader opposition in other states originated in other constitutional concerns expressed by Elbridge Gerry , who published a widely distributed pamphlet outlining his concerns about the vagueness of some of the powers granted in the constitution and its lack of a Bill of Rights .

The military powers enshrined in the constitution were soon put to use by President George Washington . After the passage by the United States Congress of the Whiskey Act , protest against the taxes it imposed began in western Pennsylvania . The protests escalated and Washington led federal and state militia to put down what is now known as the Whiskey Rebellion .

= = Memorials = =

The events and people of the uprising are commemorated in the towns where they lived and those where events took place . Sheffield erected a memorial ( pictured above ) marking the site of the " last battle " , and Pelham memorialized Daniel Shays . US Route 202 , which runs through Pelham , is called the Daniel Shays Highway . A statue of General Shepard was erected in his hometown of Westfield .

In the town of Petersham , Massachusetts , a memorial was erected in 1927 by the New England Society of Brooklyn , New York . The memorial commemorates General Benjamin Lincoln , who raised 3 @, @ 000 troops and routed the rebellion on February 4 , 1787 . It ends with the line , " Obedience to the law is true liberty . "