

Debate on Shays' Rebellion

A Massachusetts Farmer's Account

APUSH 2018



"What a triumph for the advocates of despotism, to find that we are incapable of governing ourselves."

George Washington, 1787

Daniel Shays

Shays was a farmer from Massachusetts and a veteran of the Revolutionary War. After the war he found himself without money and in debt. He felt that the Massachusetts Constitution, that was adopted in 1780, was done by wealthy businessmen for the benefit of the wealthy. He felt farmers were not fairly treated when paying taxes or voting. Farmers were losing their homes, farms and possessions because they could not pay taxes and were thrown into prison, In 1786, Shays became the leader of a group of approximately 1000 men who were ready to fight against the court, but was forced to abandon the cause, fleeing to Vermont where he was pardoned before he died the following year.



The Facts

Shays' Rebellion erupted a few years after the Revolutionary War when debt-ridden **Massachusetts** farmers tried to close down the courts in an attempt to save their farms from foreclosure. These events demonstrated to the nation that a weak central government created under the **Articles of Confederation** was inadequate to solve the severe economic problems gripping the country and was incapable of dealing with outbursts of rebellion. It was in the shadow of Shay's Rebellion that Congress approved the **Philadelphia Convention** to consider revisions to the Articles of Confederation. Out of that Convention our **Constitution** was born.

Fictional Account of Real Events

My name is William Jonas. I am a farmer from the town of Hubbardston, Massachusetts, in Worcester County, located in the middle of the state. Farming is hard here. The growing season is short, the winters long and harsh.

Since the end of the Revolution things have not gone well for the farmers in Massachusetts. Many of us left our homes to fight the British at Lexington, Bunker Hill and later Saratoga in New York. When we got back from the fighting, our farms were in poor shape. While waiting for our back wages from the Continental Congress, we borrowed money to buy livestock, tools and seed.

Our overdue wages never came. Then the price of corn fell. Worse, the state legislature in Boston increased the property tax. The legislature also passed a head tax that made the poor pay at the same rate as the rich. Even though we could not pay, our creditors badgered us for money.

Worcester County, Summer 1786

There was one hope. We organized a county convention to prepare a petition asking the legislature for help. Some wanted to take stronger action. As one farmer proclaimed,

"I have lost a great deal...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."

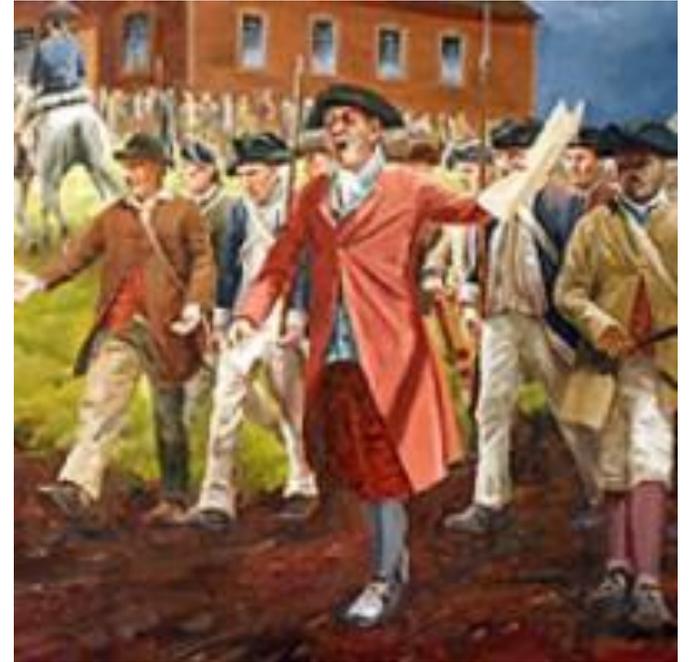
That man was gaveled out of order, but his point was made with us.

We finally settled on a list of grievances.

- FIRST: The present system of taxation operates unfairly between the poor and the wealthy classes.
- SECOND: The tax rates have been set too high.
- THIRD: There is a shortage of cash money, and farm goods are not accepted as payment for debts and taxes.
- FOURTH: Court and lawyer fees are set too high.
- FIFTH: State government officials are being paid fattened salaries.
- SIXTH: The state capital at Boston should be moved inland.

List of Grievances

As the day for the opening of the court in Worcester approached, we still had not heard anything from the legislature. So we had a town meeting in Hubbardston to decide what to do. We read a letter sent around the county calling for us to follow the example of the farmers of Hampshire County and march to the court.



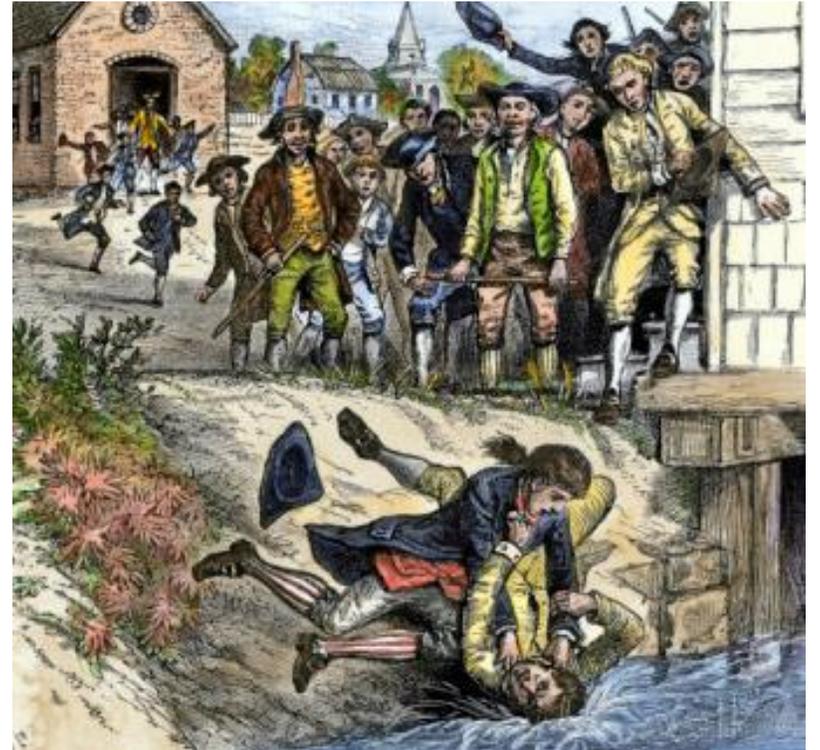
If we could prevent the court from opening, none of us could go to jail for being in debt. Some citizens at the meeting cautioned that this would be an act of rebellion, even treason. In the end, most of us decided to march.

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Worcester County, September 5, 1786

About 200 of us from several towns paraded into

Worcester on the court day. Armed with muskets and clubs, we took up a position outside the courthouse. We were determined to allow no judge to pass.



After a while we could see Sheriff Greenleaf leading the judges towards the courthouse.

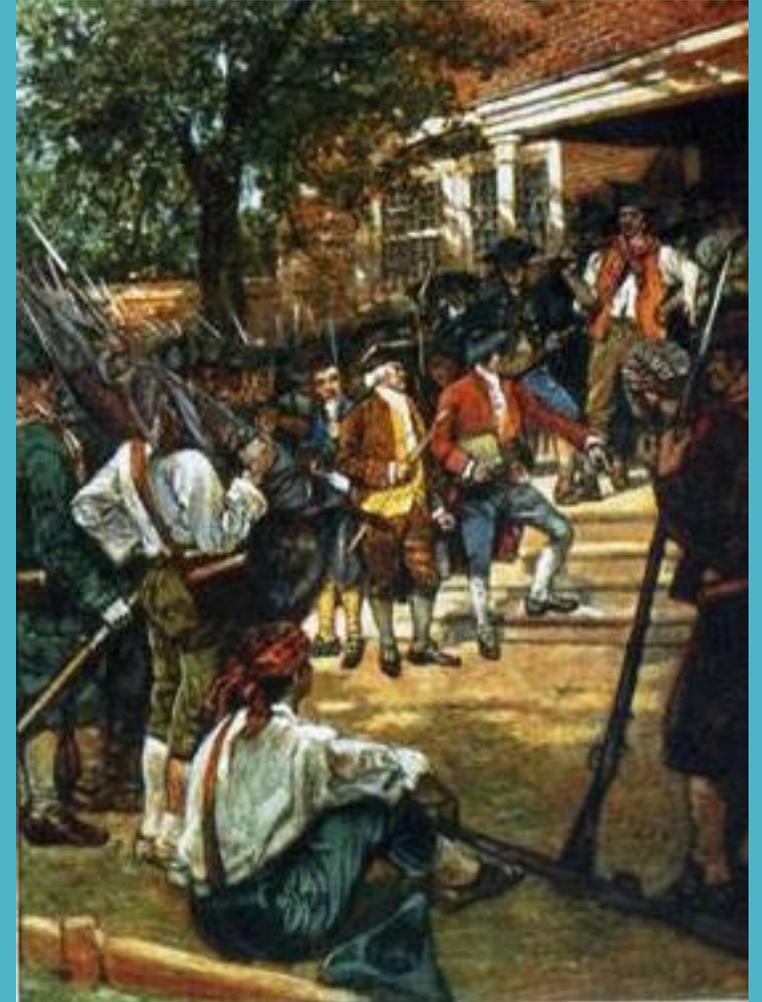
Judge Ward advanced until the bayonets were pressing against his stomach. "*Open the doors,*" he ordered. "*Who commands these people?*" Nobody answered. "*I say who is your leader?*"

Adam Wheeler, replied, "*I am not the leader, but I can tell you what we're here for. We've come to relieve the distresses of the people. There will be no court until they have redress of their grievances.*"

"*I am not afraid of your bayonets!*" Judge Ward shouted stubbornly. "*I shall prove to you that you have been deceived and deluded.*" He then lectured us for two hours on the dangers of rebellion and treason. His final words to us were, "*May the sun never shine on rebellion in Massachusetts!*" Judge Ward adjourned the court session to November 21 and we went home.

Hubbardston, Sept.–Oct. 1786

We still waited for a reply from the legislature to our county convention petition. At last, in October, we heard from the state legislature. It finally passed a law that allowed our farm goods as payment for taxes, but the representatives in Boston addressed none of our other grievances. Instead, the legislature and **Governor Bowdoin** passed a **Riot Act**. They also authorized sheriffs to put those who marched against the courts into jail without charge.



November-December 1786

On November 21, we marched once more to the courthouse in Worcester when Judge Ward again tried to start the court session. In our hats we wore sprigs of hemlock--the sign of our cause throughout the state. Sheriff

Greenleaf read the Riot Act to us and told us to disperse. We told him that we would go away only when the judges did away with their high court fees.

"If you think court costs are too high," Sheriff Greenleaf said, *"I'll hang every one of you gentlemen with the greatest of pleasure without charge."* We all laughed as the sheriff spoke because someone came up to him from behind and stuck a sprig of hemlock into his hat. Court did not open on that day.

We still did not have a real leader. Then Daniel Shays came to town. Daniel Shays was from Pelham in Hampshire County and a former captain in the Continental Army. I recognized him from the Battle of Bunker Hill. All farmers almost immediately looked to him for leadership. We cheered as Daniel Shays marched into Worcester with 350 armed men. On December 3, Governor Bowdoin called up 170 militiamen to make sure the court opened in Worcester. There were about 200 of us, with Daniel Shays in command, waiting when they arrived at the courthouse. For a time we stood facing each other eye to eye. Then the militia withdrew. There would be no bloodshed on that day.

December, 1786 – January , 1787

Daniel and his lieutenants, **Luke Day** and **Eli Parsons**, came up with a plan to seize the Springfield Arsenal to hold out against the state militia. The militia was marching from Boston under the command of **General Benjamin Lincoln**, a famous Revolutionary general.

On January 25, we got near the arsenal, we found it already defended by about 900 Hampshire County militiamen. We outnumbered the militia a little bit, but they had a cannon. Worse still, they were neighbors and even kinsmen. Could we ever shoot at them? Could they shoot at us? Still, we advanced.



General Sheppard ordered the cannon fired over our heads as we marched onward. The cannon discharged a second time. The shot fired passed above us, not believing that Massachusetts men would harm other Massachusetts men. Then the cannon let loose a third time and blasted directly into our center ranks.

"Murder! Murder!" cried several of our men. Through the smoke we could see one...two...three of our friends cut down and another dying in the snow. Disbelief. All was confusion as we ran for our lives. For me the Rebellion was over. I just heard about the rest of the story from the others.

General Lincoln and his state army arrived in Springfield two days after the incident at the arsenal. Shays' men fled northeastward. When General Lincoln caught up with them after a blizzard, he took 150 prisoners. The rest scattered to their homes or crossed the border into Vermont with Daniel Shays. The Massachusetts legislature wanted Shays' men sentenced in trial and punished severely.

Sam Adams, argued that they should be treated harshly. *"In monarchy the crime of treason may admit of being pardoned or lightly punished,"* he allowed, *"but the man who does rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death."*



A dozen men were sentenced to hang. The others got pardons. A bounty was put on the heads of Daniel Shays and three other rebel leaders who escaped to Vermont.

In April 1787, state elections were held, **John Hancock** was the new governor and the legislature became more moderate. The new government cancelled the death sentences. It also lowered taxes, released debtors from jail and passed other acts alleviating the grievances that had started the rebellion in the first place.

The following month, the Constitutional Convention began its deliberations in Philadelphia. For men like George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, Shays' Rebellion had been a warning. Next time the forces of law and order might not be so lucky.

About one year after the rebellion had been crushed, Daniel Shays and his lieutenant, Eli Parsons, exiled and still hiding out in Vermont, petitioned Gov. Hancock and the legislature for a pardon and permission to return to Massachusetts.

DEBATE:

Should Daniel Shays be pardoned and allowed to return to Massachusetts?

1. Five students will assume the roles of John Hancock and four members of the Massachusetts Legislature who will argue for Daniel Shays' pardon.
2. Five students will assume the roles of Sam Adams and four other members of the Massachusetts Legislature who will oppose the pardon.

**Team 1 John Hancock
FOR SHAYS**

1. Emilio Rabell
2. Manuel Candelas
3. Valeria Pérez
4. Angélica Santiago
5. Alejandra Bustillo

**Team 2 Sam Adams
AGAINST SHAYS**

1. Manuel Rexach
2. Jan Ortega
3. Claudia Martinez
4. Claudia Santiago
5. Marina Grillasca

Debate Format:

1. Each team should gather arguments for its side from the account of Shays' Rebellion narrated above. Team members should also do additional library research.
2. Each team will be given a chance to present its own arguments and also to question the opposite side.
3. **The rest of the class will take the roles of Massachusetts legislators. You have to ask questions or make comments during the debate between the teams.** Student legislators should develop a list of reasons for and against granting the pardons. These should be present in your position papers and used as arguments during the debate.
4. After the debate has been concluded, the Dais, as the Massachusetts Legislature, will decide which side won the debate according to the reasoning presented by both teams.

Write a Position Paper discussing the following: (50 points)

1. If you had been a Massachusetts citizen in 1786, who would you have supported: Daniel Shays or Gov. Bowdoin? Why?
2. During Shays' Rebellion those supporting the court-closings called the Massachusetts government a tyranny. At the same time those who opposed Shays and his actions said things like, "Monarchy is better than the tyranny of the mob." Who do you think was right? Why?
3. What is your position and reasons for and against granting the pardon?

For Further Reading

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

Vaughn, Alden T. "The 'Horrid and Unnatural Rebellion' of Daniel Shays." *American Heritage*, June 1966, pp. 50–53.

EVALUATION

The Massachusetts Legislature should be listening and taking notes on the arguments presented by each side and preparing a list of pros and cons for granting the pardon. You must be ready to make questions after each round of the debate. Your arguments should be included in your position paper.

All participants need to have an **active role** in the debate and or question sessions and will be graded according to the following:

- a. Quality of arguments presented in speech and during rebuttal
- c. Knowledge of subject of discussion by all members of debate teams and the Massachusetts Legislature.
- d. Quality of answers to questions asked
- e. Quality of questions to other participants
- f. Argument and research of your position paper.

Agenda:

Topics of discussion:

- a. Situation in Massachusetts between farmers and the legislature
- b. Parties in the controversy
- c. Motives for the rebellion
- d. Shay's responsibility in the facts: Should he be or not pardoned for the rebellion?