

## Shays' Rebellion

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Shays' Rebellion reflects early America's continued disdain for taxes and the emerging debate over the expansion of the federal government. The rebellion partially grew out of a response to the lack of representation of western agrarian Massachusetts in the Constitution of 1780 and the extreme economic distress created by the American Revolution. In the aftermath of the war, Massachusetts veterans returned home to disturbing conditions. They were unpaid for their wartime service, their crops yielded little money, and they faced outrageous taxes. By 1786 the situation was out of control and elected officials were not offering any sign of relief for their constituents. Rural residents began gathering in taverns and citing their common grievances against the state government. In August 1786 a long list of resolutions, including the abolition of the Court of Common Pleas, the end of payments to the federal congress, and the issuance of new paper money, was sent to the state government in Boston. The conservative state government under Governor James Bowdoin gave no reply.

The people were now determined to take action by force. They formed small groups called "Regulators" with the intention of stopping magistrate courts and land seizure. On August 29, 1,500 "Regulators" took control of the Northampton courthouse and prevented the Court of General Sessions from sitting. Within the next month, they succeeded in their efforts in Concord, Great Barrington, and Worcester. After the Worcester affair, Captain Daniel Shays was appointed by citizens of Pelham Hill to represent them on a Committee of Seventeen that would gather a force of "Regulators" in Hampton County. Shays' ability to recruit and train men was the deciding factor in his appointment to the Committee of Seventeen. Shays proceeded to recruit Captain Luke Day of West Springfield and Eli Parsons of Chicopee among others. They intended to stop the Supreme Court in Springfield from sitting on September 27 because it was feared that the Committee of Seventeen would be indicted. The government sent the state militia under the command of General William Shepard to Springfield with 800 men to stop Shays. General Shepard successfully surrounded the courthouse; however, because the forces of Daniel

Shays and Luke Day were within the vicinity of the courthouse, the Supreme Court was unable to hold a grand jury. There was no clear victor, yet both sides claimed victory.

The "Regulators," or "Shaysites" as they began to be called, continued to intimidate the courts throughout September and October of 1786, and by late October Daniel Shays was the sole leader of the movement. Although Shays' Rebellion appeared successful, it was limited to the west. The state militia captured rebellion leaders in the east, and the rebellion collapsed there. Throughout November and December 1786 Shays marched his forces through Worcester, Shrewsbury, Holden, and Grafton. On January 10, 1787, Governor Bowdoin ordered the arrest of Shays and other members of the Committee of Seventeen on charges of treason. Bowdoin also called up the state militia for 60 days under the leadership of General Benjamin Lincoln.

By January 1787, word had reached Philadelphia that a rebellion was under way in Massachusetts. Secretary of War Henry Knox was sent to ascertain the situation. Knox, an ardent federalist and advocate of a strong standing army, reported back to Congress that the rebels were anarchists wishing to abolish private property and incite civil war. Knox knew that neither Massachusetts nor the federal government had enough money to finance an army against the rebellion. Bowdoin and Knox devised a plan for Boston merchants to provide private loans to fund an army of 4,400 volunteers under General Benjamin Lincoln.

Meanwhile, Shays and his men were set to attack the federal arsenal in Springfield on January 25, 1787. When the "Shaysites" marched into Springfield, General Shepard met them with 1,200 men. In advance of Shays' arrival, Shepard illegally seized the federal arsenal to keep it from the rebels. When the rebels began their advance upon Shepard, he fired a howitzer cannon above their heads, to their left, and to their right. They continued their advance until Shepard ordered the cannon to be fired point-blank upon them. It killed three and wounded one. The entire rebel force turned and retreated to Ludlow. Shays regrouped and then marched to Petersham, where he was met by General Benjamin Lincoln's forces. In the early morning hours of February 4, 1787, the "Shaysites" were taken by surprise and defeated. Captain Daniel Shays and 300 of his men fled to New Hampshire, where they disbanded. Shays' Rebellion was over.

## 2 Shays' Rebellion

After the rebellion, leadership in Massachusetts transferred from the conservative Bowdoin to John Hancock, who pardoned Shays and others involved. The state tax laws that were the impetus for the rebellion were modified to eliminate oppressive practices such as imprisonment for debt. The ramifications of Shays' Rebellion upon the drafters of the Constitution in 1787 have been widely debated. While some have argued that the rebellion led the push for the new government, only nine speakers mentioned Shays' Rebellion at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and four of those nine did not sign the constitution.

SEE ALSO: American Revolution of 1776; Bacon's Rebellion; Fries's Rebellion; Whiskey Rebellion

### References and Suggested Readings

- Brown, R. D. (1983) Shays' Rebellion and Its Aftermath: A View from Springfield, Massachusetts, 1787. *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 40, 4 (October): 598–615.
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