

Group 1 Reading: Shays' Rebellion

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Armed rebellion in the newly-formed United States of America led to the creation of a stronger central government.

Overview

- In August 1786, Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays led an armed rebellion in Springfield, Massachusetts to protest what he perceived as the unjust economic policies and political corruption of the Massachusetts state legislature.
- Shays' Rebellion exposed the weakness of the government under the Articles of Confederation and led many—including George Washington—to call for strengthening the federal government in order to put down future uprisings.
- The rebellion, which revived the rhetoric of the American revolution, shaped debate over the proper scope and authority of the US government that ultimately resulted in the creation of the US Constitution.
- Daniel Shays and the plight of farmers and veterans

In the eighteenth century, farmers in western Massachusetts were outraged at the taxes levied by a distant and unsympathetic government; they rebelled. The government responded by attempting to suppress the rebellion.

If you thought the government in the description is Great Britain, think again! The rebellion described above did not occur in 1776, nor did it involve Great Britain. The farmers in question—led by the very revolutionaries who had fought against such taxes in the American war for independence—were rebelling against taxes imposed by the state government of Massachusetts.

Daniel Shays, born in Massachusetts in 1747 to Irish immigrants, was a landless farm laborer when the Revolutionary War broke out. He joined the local militia, fought in the Battles of Bunker Hill, Saratoga, and Lexington, and rose to the rank of captain in the Fifth Massachusetts Regiment. He was wounded in battle and never got paid for his military service. When in 1780 he returned home to Brookfield, a rural area west of Boston, he found that he was being taken to court for debts that went unpaid while he was off fighting the war. Since he had not been compensated for his service, he had no way of paying these debts.

After attending several town meetings, Shays discovered that many other veterans and farmers were in the same situation. They banded together to petition the Massachusetts state legislature for debt relief. The legislature was at that time dominated by Eastern banking and merchant elites who did not understand the plight of rural communities. All proposals for debt relief were rejected.



Poor quality engraving depicting Daniel Shays and Job Shattuck in Revolutionary-era garb. Engraving depicting Daniel Shays and Job Shattuck, featured on the cover of Bickerstaff's Boston Almanack, 1787. Image credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Massachusetts Governor John Hancock—signer of the Declaration of Independence—had refused to prosecute debtors for back taxes. But, in early 1785—perhaps anticipating trouble ahead—he resigned his post, claiming poor health. He was replaced by James Bowdoin, who took a much more confrontational approach. While Bowdoin initiated civil actions to collect delinquent tax debts, the state legislature imposed even more taxes.

Shays's Rebellion and its consequences

The protest movement, in which Shays took active part and eventually assumed a leadership role, revived the rhetoric of the American revolution and the colonists' grievances with British rule. Rural laborers opposed the economic policies and perceived corruption of Massachusetts state politics. Having just fought a revolution inspired in large part by opposition to British tax policies, they resented the state's levying of burdensome taxes and the onerous terms of credit imposed by the banks. Job Shattuck, a farmer from Groton, led a protest in 1782, during which he and his followers physically prevented tax collectors from collecting on rural workers. The following year, in the town of Uxbridge, a mob seized confiscated property and returned it to its former owners.

In August 1786, the Massachusetts legislature adjourned without addressing the petitions for debt relief from the state's rural communities. On August 29, a group of protestors, calling themselves the Regulators, converged on Northampton to stop the county court from convening.

In response, Governor Bowdoin drew up contingency plans to use the militia to quash any such actions in the future. On September 5, protestors shut down the court in Worcester and Governor Bowdoin ordered the militia to quell the protest. The militia, however, sympathized with the protestors and refused the governor's order, leading Bowdoin to recruit and fund a new private militia.

On January 25, 1787, Shays led a group of nearly 1,200 protestors on a march to the federal armory in Springfield. Bowdoin's private militia was waiting for them, and the resulting skirmish left four of Shays's followers dead and 20 wounded. Popular uprisings like Shays's rebellion raised the urgent question of whether the democratic governments formed after the American Revolution could survive. Under the Articles of Confederation, Congress had extremely limited powers. It did not have the authority to fund troops to suppress the rebellion, nor was it empowered to regulate commerce and thereby mitigate the economic hardships of rural workers. General George Washington came out of retirement to promote a strong national government that would be capable of dealing effectively with popular discontent. Shays's rebellion led Washington and other Nationalists—including Alexander Hamilton and James Madison—to proclaim the Articles of Confederation inadequate and urge support for the Constitution produced by the [Constitutional Convention](#) in 1787.

The specter of armed upheavals like that led by Shays strengthened the convention delegates' conviction that the national government needed to be more powerful. Moreover, it changed the opinion of those delegates who had been arguing on behalf of the more limited powers of government under the Articles of Confederation. As a direct result of Shays's Rebellion, the [US Constitution](#) granted powers to the states to suppress future violence.

In 1788, Daniel Shays was granted a pardon by the state of Massachusetts, and he was able to return home from Vermont, where he had been in hiding out in the woods. He was also belatedly paid for his five years of service in the Continental Army during the American Revolution.