
Shay's Rebellion (1786-1787)

Economic conditions were particularly troubled in Massachusetts. The British Orders in Council of 1783 dealt a severe blow to the state's agricultural, shipping, and shipbuilding trades. Making matters worse, the state legislature had voted to pay off the state's Revolutionary War debt in three years. Between 1783 and 1786, taxes on land rose more than 60 percent.

Desperate farmers in western Massachusetts demanded cuts in property taxes and adoption of stay laws to postpone farm foreclosures. The lower house of the Massachusetts legislature passed relief measures in 1786, but eastern creditors persuaded the upper house to reject the package.



Shays' Rebellion.
Seizure of courthouse by rebels. Shays is standing on top step with musket on shoulder, refusing to admit the judges into the building.

Local courts started to seize property, farm implements, and even the furniture and clothing of the farmers such as Daniel Shays (1747-1825), a Revolutionary war veteran. In late August 1786, a thousand farmers in Northhampton County shut down the county court. Frightened state leaders in Boston appealed for public support. Easterners raised £5000 to send an army led by the former Continental Army general Benjamin Lincoln to suppress the rebellion.

In January 178, Shays and his followers attacked the federal arsenal at Springfield but were driven off. In early February the army routed the rebels. These setbacks, along with tax relief from the assembly and amnesty for the rebellion's leaders, ended the uprising. Shay's Rebellion, however, held broader significance. It convinced national leaders that only a strong central government could save the republic from chaos.

-Source: David Brion Davis and Steven Mintz, *The Boisterous Sea of Liberty: A Documentary History of America from Discovery Through the Civil War.* (1998)

Document #1: George Washington, “Letter to Henry Knox” (December 26, 1786)

“...Lamentable as the conduct of the Insurgents of Massachusetts is, I am exceedingly obliged to you for the advice respecting them;... I feel, my dear Genl. Knox, infinitely more than I can express to you, for the disorders which have arisen in these States. Good God! who besides a tory [Loyalist] could have foreseen, or a Briton predicted them! [...]

There are combustibles in every State, which a spark might set fire to. In this State [Virginia] a perfect calm prevails at present, and a prompt disposition to support, and give energy to the federal System is discovered...”

Questions

- 1. What factors were responsible for the economic distress in Massachusetts?**
- 2. What demands did Daniel Shay's rebels make?**
- 3. How was the rebellion ended?**
- 4. What lesson(s) did George Washington take from the rebellion?**
- 5. How might this rebellion (and other problems under the Articles of Confederation) have affected public support for a new constitution with a stronger national government? Explain.**