



Daniel Shays

Few rebellions ever had a more reluctant leader than Daniel Shays. Though he had as many grievances as any in Massachusetts, he at first avoided conflict, letting others take arms against the state government. Eventually, he decided to act, and the mantle of leadership was thrust upon his shoulders.

As you read, think about why thousands of Massachusetts residents believed that an armed rebellion was their only hope for relief from economic hardship and oppression.

Times were hard for people in Massachusetts following the Revolutionary War. As in the other new states, ruinous inflation had robbed their money of much if its value. Yet the state government in Boston levied unusually high property taxes on farms, and farmers had no way to pay them. Debt became epidemic and foreclosures mounted. Desperate farmers armed themselves and marched on courts to prevent them from foreclosing and forcing many farmers into debtors' prisons.

Daniel Shays of Pelham, Massachusetts, was one of many suffering economic hardship. Born into poverty around 1747, he had scratched out a living as a hired farm worker before the Revolutionary War. As a hobby, he drilled men and boys on the village green in the manual of arms. After the battle at Lexington, he joined the fight against the British, performing gallantly at the Battle of Bunker Hill. He eventually became a captain and fought under the command of Lafayette, who awarded him a sword for gallant service.

After the war, Shays won election to various local offices, but like so many others, he sank deeply into debt, finding it necessary to sell Lafayette's sword. Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress had held up the veterans' pensions that would have aided Shays and other veterans.

When Pelham's local militia marched off to close the court at Northampton, Massachusetts, Shays refused to go with them, hoping for a peaceful resolution. When the state militia responded by firing on the rebels, Shays was drawn into the conflict. "The seeds of war are now sown," he proclaimed.

In the winter of 1787, Shays and his forces marched on the federal arsenal at Springfield to obtain the arms they needed to pursue their rebellion. However, the state militia sent them scattering into a blinding snowstorm. A few days later, the militia routed the rebels once again, and Daniel Shays fled into Vermont. A price of 150 pounds was offered for his capture and return to Massachusetts to stand trial for treason.

Shays spent the next few years in flight, from Vermont to Canada. A popular ballad of the time proclaimed his fate: "My name was Shays; in former days; / In Pelham I did dwell sir; / But now I'm forced to leave that place, / Because I did rebel, sir." Shays finally won a pardon after expressing regret for "not having trusted for relief to the wisdom and integrity of the ruling power." In 1825 he died in New York—in the same obscurity and poverty into which he had been born.

Questions to Think About

1. What was the economic situation in Massachusetts following the Revolutionary War?
2. Why did the rebels make the courts their target?
3. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** How might success in the Revolutionary War have caused the dissatisfied citizens of Massachusetts to resort to rebellion?