
Shay's Rebellion And The Necessities Of It

“I hold it that a little rebellion, now and then, is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. Unsuccessful rebellions, indeed, generally establish the encroachments on the rights of the people, which have produced them. An observation of this truth should render honest republican governors so mild in their punishment of rebellions, as not to discourage them too much. It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.”
(Thomas Jefferson)

Daniel Shays was an American Revolutionary War captain, a farmer famous for being one of the leaders of Shays' Rebellion. This rebellion was a populist uprising against controversial debt collection and tax police in Massachusetts in 1786 to 1787. Daniel Shays was born in 1747 in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, the son of Irish immigrants Patrick and Margaret Shays. Shays was the second of six. Barely educated, Daniel spent his time working as a farmer laborer during his years. In 1772, he married Abigail Gilbert, and they settled in Brookfield, Massachusetts where they had six children. At the start of the Revolution War he joined the local militia and rose to captain in the 5th Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Army by 1777. He was involved in the Battle of Bunker Hill. He also fought against the British in the Battle of Lexington and the Battle of Saratoga. He was wounded during the war and was resigned from the military unpaid in 1780. Upon returning home, he was being taken to court for unpaid debts, which he had no way of paying these debts because he has not been paid fully for his military services. “After returning from the war, Daniel Shays was alarmed to discovered that many of his fellow veterans and farmers were in the same financial situation as he was.” (Wikipedia.org) Veterans claim that they were treated unfairly, and businessmen were trying to squeeze money out smallholder in order to pay their own financial debt to European war investors.

Rural communities in Massachusetts tried a petition the legislature in Boston, but it was dominated by the eastern merchant interests and did not respond well to this petition. The petition and proposal included a request on the issue paper currency. Making it possible to meet obligations made at high values with lower valued paper. Danvers explains “During the war with Great Britain, Congress and the 13 states (formerly colonies) flooded paper currency into the economy, in an effort to meet the needs for supplies for the army and militia.” (p. 208) Every state disturbed their own paper currency. They could not determine the value paper money because no one had a definitive answer. After the end of the Revolution War in 1783, an economic depression has affected the whole economy.

The depression hit those the hardest in New England states. With no gold or silver available, many families could not repay their debts. During the prosperous war many farmers had taken out loans to improve their farms, equipment, livestock, and land. When the depression hit, brought lower prices on crops and other goods. Farmers found themselves in a situation whether could not feed themselves or maintain their families. There was no money left for repaying back any debts or taxes. Danvers explains, “If a man could not pay his debt, he could be thrown into debtors' prison, until it was paid off or he could even sell into servitude to work off his debt.” (p. 209) Once in prison, there was no way to work off one's debt. Debtors prison was often small, cramped cells, filled with mold and mildew. People who were imprisoned for a

long period of time suffered health problems, ranging from malnutrition to boils and putrid sores. Many men who had fought for American Independence were thrown in debtors' prison over the smallest debt they own. Danvers explains, "Shays, a former captain in the Revolutionary War, admitted to crowds gathered at the tavern that even though he had not lost his farm to foreclosure, he doubted he would be able to hold onto it much longer." (p. 210) Shays emphasized that how the courts only worked for the wealthy. The division between the farmers and merchants have been excited since its earliest colonial days.

Shortly after the Declaration of Independence was declared in July 4, 1776 the new formerly country needed a set of laws to apply to all states. The Article of Confederation served as the written document were it established the functions of the national government. The colonist, however were concerned if the United States put too much power on central government all states will vanish. Eventually, in January 25, 1787 Shays' takes the armory in Springfield, Massachusetts, but they were stopped by militia. The Rebellion was eventually put down, but it shows the weakness inherent in the Article of Confederation. It highlighted the weakness of not having one central government that could interfere. The government gave most of the power to the states, and little power to central government. It became clear that the Article of Confederation left the national government too weak to unite and direct any fledgling country. McLaughlin explains, "In 1786 the enlargement and improvement of the Confederation received consideration from a grand committee which proposed the addition of seven articles and attempted especially to provide for the collection of taxes." (p. 121) Congress did nothing, in fact it got worse than helpless deputies refused to lay resolution before Congress. Congress lack the power to intervene in state problem to maintain peace. Shays' Rebellion forced George Washington and other Americans to reconsider the Confederation system and the assumption behind it.

Shays' Rebellion inspired other communities to stand up against the urban aggression. Danvers explains, "The King William County Courthouse in Virginia, was burned to the ground in May 1787, destroying all records. In Maryland, the Charles County court house was closed, and in South Carolina, the Camden County Courthouse was closed, preventing any legal proceedings from taking place." (p. 214) It made people reconsider about everything they thought and how a farmer from Massachusetts was able to bring justice for veteran's troops. Another, movement Shays' Rebellion mobilized both Anti Federalists and Federalists. A huge debate was going on throughout the states on the need for a stronger central government, with the Federalists arguing for the idea, and Anti Federalists opposing them. At the end, Federalists won the debate about the role of the central government in states affairs and it supported a new Constitution at the Philadelphia Convection in September 1787.