

THE SHAYS REBELLION

Bob Haigis

As many of you know who follow my adventures in another local publication, my wife and I travel the world over enjoying different cultures and history often in remote places. It's also exciting when we discover something worthwhile that happened right in our own back yard – especially when that something turns out to have had a monumental influence on the forming of a nation, as the following story indicates.

*

*

*

A farmer's life is difficult, and not very rewarding – at least monetarily speaking. I know: been there, done that! If the weather, insects, animals and taxes don't do you in, the infamous rocks and boulders that seem to erupt forever out of our New England soil eventually make it so hard to raise any kind of crops, that you just give up.

Back in the eighteenth century in central and western Massachusetts, farming was a way of life – in fact it *was* life: there weren't many super markets around then. It provided the substance necessary for humans to survive.

Around 1784 however, nature aside, the most destructive element turned out not to be any of the above, but rather the government of the newly formed State of Massachusetts.

It seems ironic that the colonies in our fledgling country fought a bloody war to rid us of tyranny and oppression only to have our own leaders and heads of state become as ruthless and inhumane as the ones we had just gotten rid of.

In the years immediately following the end of the American Revolution, this country was in chaos. No formal federal government had been set up, and the newly formed states struggled to adopt articles of confederation and constitutions to govern their citizens. In addition, no national currency had yet been established.

Extreme hardships were created when, following their time of service in the Continental Army, thousands of soldiers returned home hopefully to get back to living their lives. Unfortunately for many of them, situations and conditions at home had deteriorated, which created difficulties from the start.

As in any war, having much of the male population away from home, sometimes for years as it was in the Revolutionary War, also resulted in extreme hardships for those left behind.

When the troops finally came home, in addition to many finding run down farms and desperate families waiting for them, they were presented with towering debt and taxes that they had no way of paying: the taxes had been imposed on the lands and homes by the State, to pay for the astronomical cost of the war.

Additionally, the beleaguered farmers were required to pay a polling tax from funds they didn't have, and thus were prevented from voting. The high cost of lawsuits

made it impossible for the average citizen to fight the often-unjust decisions by the courts.

Many of the veterans had been given government certificates as pay for their enlistments, which were either traded off at huge discounts, or were worthless. Many never got paid at all for their service to the new nation

In total frustration from holding worthless IOUs, merchants, shippers and other suppliers turned to the State to force payment of owed debts. To this end, the State began a system that they hoped would quiet the creditors, and at the same time would generate needed tax revenues: to the farmers striving to survive, it spelled disaster.

The State created Debtors' Courts to satisfy the outcry by the creditors. By 1784, furniture, grain and livestock, along with personal property and entire farms were being seized by the courts, and often sold for far below the intrinsic value. The collected funds were applied to the debts, but were frequently so little that not much debt reduction resulted.

In addition to the confiscation of property, the State had another totally counterproductive method that supposedly would resolve the situation. In much the same way that the English had treated the colonists (which was one of the reasons for the Revolution) the owner of the property was either flogged at a public place, and/or thrown into prison.

Incredibly, the creditors had complete control over how long the prisoners remained confined. All they had to do was pay the courts a pittance for room and board to house the "hostage", and there he remained, often jammed together in a rotting dungeon along with as many as fifteen other unfortunates in the same cell.

By 1786 the mistreatment had spread to neighboring states, and had become intolerable. Something had to be done, and all eyes were on Massachusetts.

Continual pleas to the State Legislature and Governor James Bowdoin fell on deaf ears as conditions continued to deteriorate. The Legislature made a few token changes to the laws, but bowing to the pressure of the creditors, nothing of consequence was done.

Finally, in mid August of 1786, the smoldering unrest exploded in a violent display of protest. As they had back in 1774 and 1776, the farmers and citizens of central and western Massachusetts formed groups and banded together to stage protests against the oppressive government. The difference was that this time it was *their own* government they were protesting.

For the better part of the next six months, the beleaguered farmers stormed and occupied one courthouse after another: the rationalization being that if the courts could not meet, therefore no judgments could be rendered. They also engaged in skirmishes and firefights with anyone who opposed them, and managed to keep the central part of the state in constant upheaval. The first incident occurred at the courthouse in Northampton.

A mob of rebels stormed the building, and effectively blocked the entrance of any of the court officials. This action was followed closely by attacks on the courts at Great Barrington, Worcester Springfield and Concord. These particular facilities were targeted due to the fact that they had been grossly unfair to the poorer classes of citizens.

All of these actions proceeded with virtually no opposition. Finally, unable to get any assistance from either the State or the non-existent Federal Government, Governor

Bowdoin and other wealthy citizens and merchants of Boston raised funds and created their own private army to combat the insurrection.

A short time after the disturbances began in earnest, a previous non-participant by the name of Daniel Shays joined the group of protestors.

Thirty nine year old Shays, was born in Hopkinton and migrated to Pelham. He had been a Captain in the Continental Army, and served under Washington. He was a decorated veteran and had taken part in the battles of Lexington, Bunker Hill and Saratoga.

However, Shays' achievements weren't merely that he was a decorated soldier. He had reached the rank of Captain and was somewhat of a novelty having risen up through the ranks in a time and in an army that only gave officer commissions to the wealthy who either paid for the ranks, or had political pull

Evidently believing that the newly formed government of Massachusetts could resolve its own problems without violence and interference from its citizens, he had been reluctant to partake in the rebellion. However, as conditions deteriorated in the fall of 1786, Shays finally joined the insurgents.

It wasn't long after he entered the fracas, that Shays was recognized as a natural leader and organizer, and must have appeared as a redeemer to his fellow farmers.

His actions brought so much attention to him, that his name was given to the uprising, and it has been called Shays' Rebellion ever since.

Although Shays and his followers firmly believed in what they were trying to accomplish, they never considered themselves as trying to overthrow the infant State or Federal Governments. It must have been with alarm and much distress that they heard that they had been branded traitors, and would most likely face the gallows for their delinquency.

Attempting to gain access to arms and ammunition to strengthen their position, Shays, along with two other leaders and some 2500 followers, staged a poorly planned attack on the Federal Arsenal at Springfield on January 25th, 1787. The facility being very well stocked with weapons and powder, the insurgents knew that if they could get their hands on the stockpiles, they would be in complete control of the area.

However, due to a change in plans, an unexpected piece of bad luck and well-led defenders of the arsenal, the attack failed. The scenario went something like this.

The plans of the attack were changed by one of Shays' other commanders; a courier carrying information on the changes was captured; and the commanding officer at the arsenal turned out to be Major General William Shepard.

The fifty-year-old commander was a gentleman farmer of Westfield, and had served as a colonel for eight years in the Continental Army. He suspected that the insurgents might go after the arsenal, so was there to defend the facility when Shays and his followers arrived.

Shepard was in command of the local militia, and was more than qualified to head the troops. However, the arsenal being a federal facility, he should have obtained authorization from Secretary of War Henry Knox to enter it. Doing what he saw as his duty, he took it upon himself (without the authorization) to keep the rebels from seizing the much-needed arms and ammunition, which he did.

After slogging through four feet of snow to reach the site, the rebels were turned back by Shepard and his men, who went so far as to use cannon shot on them, killing four

and wounding several. The unfortunate invaders then blundered into a force of 4400 troops led by General Benjamin Lincoln.

The contingent headed by Lincoln, was the private army created by the citizens in the Boston area who had raised funds to hire and outfit the troops.

Lincoln had been authorized by the backers to recruit followers from both eastern and western Massachusetts. He had no trouble securing the services of over 4000 troops from Eastern Massachusetts, but was greatly disappointed when few from the area west of Worcester rallied to his call. However, the force he commanded was more than large enough to confront Shays' band of followers.

The battle at the arsenal was the turning point in the rebellion, and the pursuing Lincoln captured many of the dissenters in the following days. Following another major event in Petersham in which Lincoln managed to surprise Shays and his followers, there was little doubt that the rebellion was over. Shays managed to escape again, and fled to Vermont not long afterward.

Following the incidents at Springfield and Petersham, the Massachusetts Government under Governor Bowdoin, along with his wealthy supporters, finally pulled out all stops, and declared unconditional war on the insurgents. Cries for their blood echoed from all around Boston, and the State Government finally backed the private army that had been formed, sending funds and supplies.

Around the same time, the "Disqualification Act" was passed by the Legislature in Boston. This document essentially declared that no participant in the uprising could hold any political or civil position for years. Included but not limited to were: voting, serving on juries, holding any public office, or being employed in many capacities including teaching. In addition, all members were to be imprisoned.

Of course many of the proposed punishments were absurd, especially as there wasn't anywhere near enough jail space in all of New England to hold all the insurgents, and additionally there was considerable sympathy for the rebels, even among the elite.

To this end, it was decreed that most of the mutineers would be pardoned if they subscribed to certain conditions dictated by the State, which included taking an oath and paying a stiff fine. However, many - including those that refused "to return to the flock" - would be hunted down, sent to jail, and probably hanged.

The fine in its self must have evoked many a laugh, as the farmers of the state had always used the barter system to purchase articles. Aside from that, it was the absence of money that had sparked the whole affair in the beginning.

Sporadic and clearly uncoordinated attacks continued for another month, when on February 27th 1787 the uprising finally ended in the area near Sheffield. In a skirmish there, four insurgents were killed, and over thirty wounded. Although there were additional incidents, none held any place of importance. The uprising was essentially over.

Strangely, it appears that even the defenders had finally tired of the scrap, and following Sheffield, most of General Lincoln's troops just went home. Ironically, in the following months, Lincoln - along with other original opponents of the uprising - quietly began to support leniency for the rebels.

Then, in a major turn of events, popular John Hancock was elected governor and ousted the very much-disliked Bowdoin. In addition, a newly elected legislature drastically reduced the overpowering taxes, and immediately issued a blanket pardon for

all those who took an oath of allegiance, restoring full citizen rights to some four thousand.

However, excluded from the pardons were Daniel Shays and a number of other leaders of the uprising. The final list named some fourteen members and heads of the insurrection that were to be hanged.

With the election of Hancock and a new Legislature however, leniency became the rule of the day, and one by one each of the accused was pardoned after taking the oath of allegiance. Evidently considerable credence was given to the fact that most of the leaders of the uprising were decorated veterans of the Revolutionary War.

Shays himself petitioned for clemency from Vermont, and finally was granted amnesty in 1788. He lived the remainder of his long life in New York State until his death in 1825.

Additionally, common sense dictated that to continue a vendetta against the insurgents would only foster bad feelings and resentment that could be the seedbed for future uprisings.

Of the entire two thousand or so participants in the rebellion, only two wound up being hanged: and they for unrelated crimes.

The courts took a much more lenient course in the settlement of claims by creditors, and the Legislature passed a law which ended the right of creditors to have debtors imprisoned. At a stroke of a pen, hundreds of prisoners were turned loose to return to their homes and farms.

Shays' Rebellion, although short lived and of pretty much on a small scale, none the less had the attention of the entire nation. Realizing the seriousness of the situation and its implications for the forming of the new Federal Government, George Washington became concerned and came out of retirement to voice his apprehension.

He realized that if the Constitutional Convention in 1787 wasn't very mindful as to how they framed our Constitution and Bill of Rights, there could be dire consequences in the future. Evidence indicates that Shays' Rebellion and the Massachusetts episode invoked much discussion on the floor of the convention.

Based on the information I uncovered researching for this article, it is clear that the participants in Shays' Rebellion accomplished much more than they ever dreamed of. Some historians even go so far as to consider Shays' Rebellion to be the last battle of the Revolutionary War.

It appears that we today have a small group of oppressed Western Massachusetts farmers led by Daniel Shays, to thank for the spirit of our Constitutions, both on the State and Federal Level.

Selected Bibliography:

Shays's Rebellion – Richards

The First American Revolution – Raphael

The First Commander-in-Chief of the American Revolution – Ward

Several "on line" sites.

Also, I wish to acknowledge the help of the Uxbridge Library Staff for their assistance in accumulating data for this article.

Comments/questions: grbob@charter.net

