

Daniel Shays Biography

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Biography

Daniel Shays (ca. 1747-1825), American Revolutionary War captain, is best known for leading a rebellion of western Massachusetts farmers in 1786-1787 seeking relief from oppressive economic conditions.

Daniel Shays was born in Middlesex County, Mass. His father had emigrated from Ireland as an indentured servant. Barely educated, Daniel began work as a farm laborer. At the start of the Revolution he joined the local militia. He rose to captain in the 5th Massachusetts Regiment of the Continental Army. Those who served with Shays recalled him as a brave soldier and a good officer.

In 1780 Shays returned to western Massachusetts, a region suffering economic dislocation from the war. The farmers were particularly hurt by the scarcity of money created by the decline of the state's shipping, fishing, whaling, and distilling industries and by the heavy taxes imposed to prosecute the Revolution. Shays suffered with his neighbors. Elected to local office, he was soon representing them in county conventions (between 1782 and 1786), at which petitions were drawn reciting the farmers' distress and demanding relief for debtors in the form of paper money, reduction in government expenditures, restraints on court and attorney fees, and suspension of debt executions. Though Shays managed to keep his farm, other farmers saw mortgage foreclosures take everything but the clothes off their backs. Debtors were imprisoned and even sold to work off their debts.

In 1786 farmers in western Massachusetts organized, took up arms, and forced the courts to suspend sessions. Though Shays headed one of these "regiments," he later denied being the "generalissimo" of the rebellion. Other leaders took no orders from him, but Shays did head the largest band of insurgents, some 1,200, which sought to seize the Federal arsenal at Springfield in January 1787. They were repulsed and scattered by militia. The remainder, pursued by an army of state troops, were surprised on Feb. 4, 1787, and captured in great numbers. Some, like Shays, fled the state. The rebellion was over by the end of February, although intermittent fighting occurred until the summer. Finally pardoned, as were all of the rebels, Shays lived in New York until his death on Sept. 29, 1825.

Perhaps the most significant impact of Shays' Rebellion was the impetus it gave the movement to replace the Articles of Confederation by a new constitution, creating a stronger national government.