

THE SHAYS REBELLION IN
MASSACHUSETTS
1786-1787

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Sigfried Tafel Synnestvedt

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Robert E. Brown
Major professor

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THE SHAYS REBELLION IN MASSACHUSETTS

1786-1787

By

Sigfried Tafel Synnestvedt

A THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Chapter</u>	<u>Page</u>
I Introduction	1
II The Rebellion, First Phase	6
III The Rebellion, Suppression and Conclusion	46
IV The Influence of the Shays Rebellion on the Formation of the Constitu- tion of the United States	75
V Interpretations of Shays Rebellion	94
VI Conclusions	112
Bibliography	115

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

. Daniel Shays, a Revolutionary War veteran, has given his name to an armed insurrection in Massachusetts which stretched over a period of more than eight months, in 1786-87, and which involved the population of the newly independent commonwealth in petitions for redress of grievances, forcible stoppage of the courts, militia action against armed groups, and an indeterminate amount of public censure both American and European.

The Shaysites wanted the General Court to relieve certain specific pressures stemming from high taxes, lack of sufficient circulating medium, disruptions of trade and manufacturing, and war debts, public and private. They established as their immediate objective to secure relief, the stoppage of the courts, first merely the lower ones, Court of Common Pleas and General Sessions of the Peace, but eventually disruption of the proceedings of the Supreme Judicial Court of the State.

At first little action was taken against them but the disturbances increased and the General Court, after redressing some of the grievances, finally felt obliged to declare a state of rebellion in existence and took measures to suppress it through use of four thousand

militia-men. This "army" under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln succeeded in dispersing the Shaysites and in restoring peace and quiet throughout the state. By summer of 1787 the Shays Rebellion was at an end.

— Short lived as it was, it was not without influence on the formation of the Constitution of the United States. Many important and influential contemporaries felt that it was one more indication that the Articles of the Confederation were inadequate and in need of change, and they acted accordingly, eventually producing a new Constitution.

Study of the Shays Rebellion may be justified not so much by its length, the number of people killed, or some other actual event connected with it, but rather because, first, it has not been very extensively or adequately covered by historians and, second, the opinions generally expressed on the subject are somewhat contradictory among themselves and at times in opposition to the evidence at hand. This problem of interpretation will be discussed at greater length in Chapter V, but the few important monographs on the incident deserve mention here.

First to be cited by secondary writers and undoubtedly the most important work on Shays Rebellion was that written by the contemporary historian George Richards

Minot. This short book, History of the Insurrections in Massachusetts,¹ first published in 1788, a year after the uprisings, has had a tremendous influence on later writers, an influence which can hardly be exaggerated. Nearly every author who even mentioned the incident cited him as a prime source, and even those writers who used neither footnotes nor bibliographical references usually included direct quotations or little changed paraphrases of Minot's study.

The fact that he was a personal observer and that as Clerk of the House during the troubles and later Secretary of the Massachusetts Ratifying Convention he had a direct chance to influence decisions, made his study worthy of careful attention. However, certain important reservations need to be made when one is using his book. As a contemporary work it was necessarily incomplete since all evidence was not at Minot's command or else he failed to make use of it. Furthermore, the author was a Boston born, Harvard graduate and came from a well-to-do merchant family. It is assumed that such a background may have had an influence on his point of view.²

¹ George Richards Minot, The History of the Insurrections in Massachusetts in the Year Seventeen Hundred and Eighty-Six and the Rebellion Consequent Thereon (Worcester, Mass., 1788).

² Dumas Malone, ed., The Dictionary of American Biography, 20 Vols. (New York, 1934), XIII, 31.

Ellery Bicknell Crane, an active member of the Worcester Society of Antiquity during the latter half of the nineteenth century, prepared a paper, "Shays Rebellion," which deserves notice here despite the fact that it is short and somewhat lacking in the trappings of scholarship. The author was reported to have made a rather thorough study of the problem and covered the subject in outline form in a level-headed and unbiased manner.³

One further monograph completes the list of Shays Rebellion studies. This is the one by Joseph Parker Warren titled "The Confederation and the Shays Rebellion" which developed the part Congress played in quelling the troubles but did not detail other phases of the Insurrection or trace ideas on its nature.⁴

Of course, the several more general studies of the period or area gave the Rebellion some attention but none of the treatments looked at were long enough or detailed enough to be classed as monographs. Some of these were: Adams, New England in the Republic, Fiske, The Critical Period, Nevins, The American States During and After the

³ Ellery Bicknell Crane, "Shays Rebellion," Collections of the Worcester Society of Antiquity, V, 61-111; Conversation with E. B. Crane, requoted from George F. Daniels, History of the Town of Oxford Massachusetts (Worcester, 1892), p. 149.

⁴ Joseph Parker Warren, "The Confederation and the Shays Rebellion," American Historical Review, XI, 42-67, (October, 1905); Warren also wrote a monograph, Rebellion in Massachusetts which was not available for use in this study there being only one MS copy in the Harvard College Library.

Revolution, and Beard, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States.⁵

In the still broader studies such as multi-volume histories of the United States or text books of American history, the Rebellion is mentioned, at least, the space allotted to it varying from a line or two to several pages.

The chapter organization of this thesis fell logically into four basic parts. Chapter II covers most of the causes of the uprising and develops the actual train of events up to the time the General Court declared a state of rebellion. That date marked a change in the nature of the affair and Chapter III takes up there and continues the tale of events through the end of the troubles in the summer of 1787. Both these chapters are based, essentially, on the chronological approach. Chapter IV is entitled "The Influence of the Shays Rebellion on the Formation of the Constitution of the United States" and attempts to develop, topically, this idea. The last chapter is devoted to "Interpretations" of the Rebellion and an effort is made to point out the inadequacies or inaccuracies of many of the generally accepted ideas on the Insurrection.

⁵ James Truslow Adams, New England in the Republic 1776-1850 (Boston, 1926), pp. 149-66; John Fiske, The Critical Period in American History 1783-1789 (Boston, 1888), pp. 180-82, 218, 243, 316, 319, 325; Allan Nevins, The American States During and After the Revolution, 1775-1789 (New York, 1924), pp. 217-20, 533-38; Charles A. Beard, An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States (New York, 1937), pp. 40.

CHAPTER II

THE REBELLION -- FIRST PHASE

The unrest in Massachusetts was not a sudden happening of 1786. Rather it was a somewhat lengthy and slow growth of discontent caused largely by the war and war conditions. The preliminary disturbances dated back to 1781 when "conventions for the consideration of grievances began to be held in western Massachusetts."¹ These gatherings sought to alleviate two principle pressures, the nearly worthless condition of state securities and back pay for the continental soldiers. The war had forced the state into debt and many of its citizens had become privately encumbered as well.²

Such a situation had much influence on the result of the February 11, 1782, meeting of a Hampshire County convention at Hadley at which a somewhat fiery ex-preacher, Samuel Ely, appeared. He apparently attracted a following and in April led a group bent on disturbing the holding of the sessions of the Court of Common Pleas and the Supreme Judicial Court in Northampton. The attempt was not successful and Ely was arrested and held for trial during the following Superior Court meeting. He was given a six months

¹ Charles Oscar Parmenter, History of Pelham Massachusetts 1738 to 1898 Including the Early History of Prescott (Amherst, Mass., 1898), p. 367.

² John M. Stowe, History of the Town of Hubbardston (Hubbardston, Mass., 1881), p. 55.

jail sentence and fined ~~£~~ 50 for disturbing the peace, but a mob demanded and received his release in June. Three of this group were arrested and held as hostages until Ely was produced which eventually took place.³

This Hadley convention and another of twenty-six towns in the neighboring county at Worcester in April prompted Joseph Hawley, an observer, to remark on the danger of the situation. He wrote: ". . . they are a fierce set of men, and the Government will find, you may rely upon it that the Government will find, that these people, unless they are speedily satisfied on these two heads will in these parts pay no taxes and there will not be men enough here to compell them to do it."⁴ He added that if the grievances were not redressed "the situation might threaten the entire American cause, for the insurgent spirit was spreading rapidly and infecting all walks of life."⁵

Instead of subsiding, agitation actually increased in 1783. Thirteen towns in Hampshire County met at Hatfield in March and voted to pay no taxes to the state,⁶

³ E. Francis Brown, Joseph Hawley, Colonial Radical (New York, 1931), pp. 184-85; Daniel White Wells and Reuben Field Wells, A History of Hatfield Massachusetts (Springfield, 1910), p. 199.

⁴ Letter from Joseph Hawley to Ephraim Wright, requoted from Brown, Joseph Hawley, p. 186.

⁵ Letter from Joseph Hawley to Caleb Strong, requoted from ibid., p. 188.

⁶ Wells, History of Hatfield, p. 200.

while the Town Records of Lancaster revealed a vote to send members to a county convention at Worcester in April.⁷ The following month a group armed with clubs tried to prevent the judges from holding court in Springfield but were repulsed by the sheriff and his deputies.⁸ About this same time the town of Hubbardston voted to send a petition to the General Court requesting an abatement of taxes,⁹ and throughout the summer, groups gathered in various places.¹⁰ The Tender Act which had been passed the summer before and which made "neat cattle and other articles of personal property" legal tender, helped to keep these disturbances from becoming overly tumultuous.¹¹

There was somewhat less agitation during 1784 and 1785 but peaceful conventions were held fairly regularly.¹²

⁷ Town Records of Lancaster, requoted from Henry S. Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster Massachusetts (Clinton, 1889), p. 246.

⁸ Mason A. Green, Springfield 1636-1886 History of Town and City (Boston, 1888), p. 308; W. L. Smith, "Shays Rebellion," requoted from William D. Herrick, History of the Town of Gardner Massachusetts (Gardner, 1878), p. 78.

⁹ Town Records of Hubbardston, requoted from Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 64.

¹⁰ Brown, Joseph Hawley, p. 189.

¹¹ Josiah Howard Temple, History of the Town of Palmer Massachusetts (Springfield, 1889), p. 200.

¹² Joseph Edward Adam Smith, The History of Pittsfield (Berkshire County), Massachusetts, From the Year 1734 to the Year 1800, 2 Vols. (Boston, 1869), I, 397.

Two of these gatherings, in Hampshire and Worcester Counties, petitioned the General Court for divisions of their counties to ease the difficulty and expense of getting to the courts at the southerly located capitals of Springfield and Worcester.¹³

All of these scattered discontents and uprisings were the mutterings of a people burdened with post-war problems, mutterings which became fairly loud shoutings in 1786 when the Shays Rebellion really got started. On June 29 the towns of Groton, Shirley, Pepperell, Townsend and Ashby met at Groton, Middlesex County, to lay the ground work for a convention.¹⁴ Their efforts bore fruit on August 23 when eighteen towns were represented at Concord and a list of grievances was drawn up.¹⁵ This list was very similar to the one set forth by the Hampshire County meeting at Hatfield which had convened the day before.¹⁶ The Hatfield group, fifty towns strong,¹⁷ sent in the following set of grievances:

¹³ Wells, History of Hatfield, p. 200; Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster, p. 247.

¹⁴ Samuel Adams Drake, History of Middlesex County Massachusetts, 2 Vols. (Boston, 1880), I, 392.

¹⁵ G. R. Minot, Insurrections, p. 52.

¹⁶ Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170.

¹⁷ Wells, History of Hatfield, p. 200.

- (1) The existence of the Senate.
- (2) The present mode of representation.
- (3) The officers of government not being annually dependent on the representatives of the people, in General Court Assembled, for their salaries.
- (4) All the civil officers of the government not being annually elected by the representatives of the people, in General Court Assembled.
- (5) The existence of the Courts of Common Pleas and General Sessions of the Peace.
- (6) The fee table [courts] as it now stands.
- (7) The present mode of appropriating the impost and excise.
- (8) The unreasonable grants made to some officers of government.
- (9) The supplementary aid.
- (10) The present mode of paying governmental securities.
- (11) The present mode adopted for the payment and speedy collection of the last tax.
- (12) The present mode of taxation as it operates unequally between landed and mercantile interests.
- (13) The present method of practice of attorneys at law.
- (14) The want of a sufficient medium of trade to remedy the mischiefs arising from the scarcity of money.
- (15) The sitting of the General Court in the town of Boston.
- (16) The present embarrassments on the press [tax on advertising in newspapers].
- (17) The neglect of the settlement of important matters depending between the Commonwealth and Congress, relating to monies and averages.

They advocated:

- (18) An emission of paper currency.
- (19) A revision of the Constitution.
- (20) An immediate special session of the General Court called by the Governor to consider redress of grievances.
- (21) and that the people abstain from all mobs and unlawful assemblies.

These complaints and proposed solutions were important inasmuch as they represented a full and typical list of grievances presented by county conventions or town meetings.¹⁸

¹⁸ Convention Records, requoted from Minot, Insurrections, pp. 34-6; Lucius R. Paige, History of Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1630-1877 With a Genealogical Register (New York, 1877), p. 165; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170.

Furthermore they and many others served very well to indicate the nature of the basic causes for all the unrest.¹⁹ For example the public debts of the state of Massachusetts and their interest were very real, rather large, and one of the important reasons for hardships and subsequent discontents. Probably the most reliable figures available are those from an address by the General Court to the people

¹⁹ Variouslly quoted or requoted from Town Records: Paige, History of Cambridge, p. 165; Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 78; Samuel A. Bates, ed., Records of the Town of Braintree 1640-1793 (Randolph, Mass., 1886), p. 568; Ezra S. Stearns, History of Ashburnham (Ashburnham, Mass., 1887), p. 214; William Lincoln, History of Worcester, Massachusetts (Worcester, 1862), pp. 116-17; Alonso Lewis and James R. Newhall, History of Lynn, 1629-1864, 2 Vols. (Lynn, Mass., 1890), I, 352; Instructions to Representative from the People of the town of Lancaster as printed in Isaiah Thomas, ed., Worcester Magazine Containing Politicks, Miscellanies, Poetry and News (Worcester, 1786-87), pp. 532-34; Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster, pp. 249-51; Lemuel Shattuck, A History of the Town of Concord (Boston, 1835), pp. 137-38; Minot, Insurrections, pp. 34-36; Worcester County Convention Proceedings as printed in Worcester Magazine (1786-87) pp. 246-47; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170; Instructions to Representative from the people of the town of Dedham, as printed in Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 134; Joseph Merrill, History of Amesbury and Merrimac (Haverhill, Mass., 1880), pp. 301-02; Wilson Waters, History of Chelmsford (Lowell, Mass., 1917), p. 356; Andrew E. Ford, History of the Origin of the Town of Clinton, Mass., 1653-1865 (Clinton, 1896), p. 103; Frederick Clifton Pierce, History of Grafton (Worcester, 1879), p. 78; Samuel Abbott Green, Groton During the Revolution (Cambridge, 1900), pp. 3-4; Hampshire County, John Stetson Barry, The History of Massachusetts Commonwealth Period, 3 Vols. (Boston, 1857), III, 227; George Wingate Chase, The History of



of Massachusetts on the state of the Commonwealth.²⁰ According to that document the various debts were:

- (1) Internal State Debt: £ 1,326,446.
- (2) Portion of National Debt (Foreign) £ 353,925.
- (3) Portion of National Debt (Domestic) £1,211,906.

The money in the state treasury amounted to only £49,705, which, when subtracted, left a total of approximately £2,850,000 outstanding. Figures from other sources vary little from these, and several writers compared the total to the pre-war debt of less than £100,000.²¹ The estimates

Haverhill (Lowell, Mass., 1861), p. 439; Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 55; Leominster, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 629-31; Charles Hudson, History of the Town of Marlborough, Middlesex County, Massachusetts, From its First Settlement in 1657 to 1861 with a Brief Sketch of the Town of Northborough (Boston, 1862), p. 191; Thomas Weston, History of the Town of Middleboro (Boston, 1906), pp. 578-79; New Braintree, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 106-07; Newbury-Port, ibid., pp. 120-30; S. F. Smith, History of Newton, Massachusetts (Boston, 1880) pp. 386-87; James Russell Trumbull, History of Northampton Massachusetts, 2 Vols. (Northampton, 1902), II, 500; Smith, History of Pittsfield, pp. 412-13; Francis S. Drake, The Town of Roxbury, Its Memorable Persons and Places (Boston, 1905), p. 39; Green, History of Springfield, pp. 312-14; William A. Benedict, History of the Town of Sutton, Massachusetts From 1704 to 1876 (Worcester, 1878), pp. 125-26; Josiah Gilbert Holland, History of Western Massachusetts, 2 Vols. (Springfield, 1855), I, 249; Worcester Magazine, (1786-87), p. 367.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 444.

²¹ See figures in Nevins, The American States During and After the Revolution, p. 534; Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 371; Seth Chandler, History of the Town of Shirley, Mass. (Fitchburg, Mass., 1883), p. 127; Barry, History of Massachusetts, III, 222; Crane, "Shays Rebellion," Coll. of the Wor. Soc. of Antiquity, V, 62; Emory Washburn, "Memoir of the Honorable Levi Lincoln," Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings (Boston), XI, 58.

of what the full amount was in dollars are not too reliable but for purpose of comparison they vary between \$10,000,000 and \$15,000,000.²² Finally, legal annual interest on the internal debt came to more than £88,000²³ and on the total to about £180,000²⁴ and the people were said to have compared the paying of this interest "with a canker than consumed their substance without lessening their burdens."²⁵

Besides these national and state obligations, there were the local or town debts. According to the author of the History of Pittsfield, "every town was heavily indebted for money expended in local exigencies [due to the war], such as filling quotas of men, demands for military supplies, &c."²⁶ The records of Woburn, for example, reveal a town debt of £1304 and an annual interest of £133.²⁷

²² Smith, History of Pittsfield, p. 390; Lilley Brewer Caswell, The History of the Town of Royalston, Massachusetts (Royalston, 1917), p. 413; J. W. D. Hall, "Reminiscences" Collections of the Old Colony Historical Society, 1878 (Taunton, Mass., 1879), pp. 79-80; Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster, p. 245.

²³ Washburn, "Memoir," Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, XI, 58.

²⁴ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 345-47.

²⁵ Minot, Insurrections, p. 8.

²⁶ Smith, History of Pittsfield, p. 390.

²⁷ Town Records of Woburn requested from Samuel Sewall, The History of Woburn, Middlesex County, Massachusetts (Boston, 1868), p. 406.

The discontent generated among the war veterans because of inability or failure on the part of the state to pay salaries due and promised mustering-out allotments was another cause for insurrection.²⁸ The amount owed to the soldiers was about \$250,000, according to secondary sources.²⁹

Not only were these debts a burden and the paying of interest a "canker worm," but the people felt, as may be seen in the grievance lists, that the costs of their government were too high. From such widely scattered places as Cambridge, Gardner, Braintree, Ashburnham, Worcester, Lynn, Lancaster, Concord, and Hampshire, Worcester and Middlesex Counties, to mention only a few, came instructions plainly stating that the salaries of the public officers should be lowered. The attorney general and chief magistrate were mentioned most often, but the compensations of the members of the house and others also came in for public censure.³⁰ While the salaries were thought to be a

²⁸ "Report of the Committee of the Army on the Depreciation of the Currency" as printed in the Worcester Magazine and Historical Journal, pub. by C. C. Baldwin and Wm. Lincoln (Worcester, 1826), pp. 167-68.

²⁹ Barry, History of Mass. III, 222; Chandler, History of Shirley, p. 127; Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 371.

³⁰ Holland, History of Western Mass., I, 249; Braintree Town Records, p. 568; Lewis, History of Lynn, I, 352; Town of Lancaster, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 532-34; Town of Dedham, ibid., p. 134; Stearns, History of Ashburnham, p. 214.

real grievance, a look at the actual cost of government does not reveal exorbitant remunerations although in terms of actual buying power they were probably ample. According to a report on the proceedings of government printed in the Worcester Magazine the salaries of the public officers were as follows:

Governor £1,100 per year
 Lt. Governor £250 per year
 Chief Justice £375 per year
 Other Justices £350 (each) per year
 Treasurer £350 per year
 Secretary £250 per year
 President of Harvard College £220 per year
 Professors of Harvard College £100 (each) per year
 Clerk of the House £120 per year
 Members of Congress 26s per day³¹

The General Court, in a statement which tended to minimize the cost of government, pointed out that a total of only £3,625 was paid to the Governor, Secretary, Treasurer, Judges of the Supreme Court, and Commissary General.³²

The taxes levied to pay off the debt, its interest, and government expenses were severely criticized by many of the people, usually on the grounds that they were too high and unequally placed.³³ Governor Bowdoin asked for

³¹ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 363.

³² Ibid., p. 444.

³³ Holland, History of Western Mass., I, 249; Braintree Town Records, p. 568; Weston, History of Middleboro, p. 579; Ford, History of Clinton, p. 103; Hudson, History of Marlborough, pp. 191-92; Town of Lancaster, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 532-34; Town of Dedham, ibid., p. 134; Town of Worcester, ibid., p. 367; Town of New Braintree, ibid., pp. 106-07; Town of Newbury-Port, ibid., pp. 120-30; Smith, History of Pittsfield, pp. 412-13; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 500; Green, History of Springfield, pp. 312-14.

and received a tax assessment for 1786 of over £300,000 of which £145,000 was for the state's quota of the federal needs and £100,000 for the beginning payments on the notes which had been given to the soldiers as pay.³⁴ He had even more ambitious plans for 1787 and 1788. The tax assessments for each of those years for payment of the debt alone were set at £386,250.³⁵ There was also some feeling among the people that too large a percentage was being paid by the "rateable polls" which, according to figures given in various places, little exceeded ninety-thousand persons in the state.³⁶ The same people who felt this way believed that commerce should have been more heavily taxed. Most of the official lists of wrongs included mention of this unevenness of the assessment and asked that the impost and excise levies be increased.³⁷

³⁴ Mass. Acts and Laws (1786), pp. 351-58, 368-91; Adams, New England in the Republic, p. 143.

³⁵ Bowdoin's Address to the Legislature, June 1786, as printed in the Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 128.

³⁶ Samuel Eliot Morison, on the Constitution of 1780 as printed in the Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, I, 391; Nevins, The American States During and After the Revolution, p. 536; Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 371.

³⁷ Green, History of Springfield, pp. 312-14; Town of Worcester, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 367; Town of Lancaster, ibid., pp. 532-34; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 500; Hudson, History of Marlborough, p. 191; Ford, History of Clinton, p. 103; Braintree Town Records, p. 568.

Furthermore, some towns and counties felt they had been rated too high, and such places as Newbury-Port, Braintree, Lancaster, Concord, Hampshire County, Middlesex County, and Clinton, made specific remarks to this effect.³⁸

One other tax was mentioned as a grievance, that on newspaper advertising. The Worcester Magazine had been a newspaper and was turned into a magazine by its editor Isaiah Thomas, purely and simply to escape this tax. In editorials he kept hammering away at the provision and presented evidence which indicated that some newspapers had been driven out of business,³⁹ while at least one county convention felt that the tax actually amounted to a restriction on the freedom of the press.⁴⁰

All of these tax grievances, however, were based on the same trouble, i.e., the State of Massachusetts was actually trying to raise the taxes in the post-war period and pay off all debts as soon as possible. The difficulties arose because the total tax burden, other

³⁸ Town of Newbury-Port, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 129-30; Town of Lancaster, ibid., pp. 532-34; Braintree Town Records, p. 568; Shattuck, History of Concord, pp. 137-38; Barry, History of Mass., III, 227; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170; Ford, History of Clinton, p. 103.

³⁹ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 146.

⁴⁰ Hampshire County Convention records requested from Minot, Insurrections, pp. 34-6.

things considered, was too great and the state was attempting to meet its obligations too rapidly.

Private debts were repeatedly mentioned as a cause for the uprisings. One writer claimed that "fully one half of the citizens in the State were in debt"⁴¹ and another gave evidence from Worcester County Court Records that placed the actions on private debts in 1784 and 1785 at nearly two thousand each year at a time when there were less than fifty thousand people in the area.⁴² A contemporary letter from Pittsfield indicated that many were being deprived of their holdings simply because their cumulative financial obligations were too great for them. "Here I have made an advantageous purchase, and live in the midst of those who owe," wrote this observer. "I Have some other purchases about me, and I have a number of mortgages in the neighborhood; so that I shall, in all probability, be a considerable landholder in a little time."⁴³ An 1869 publication vividly described the wrongs of the debtor laws, which aggravated the situation: There are many yet living who remember how their young eyes were shocked by the gaunt forms, long unkempt hair, grizzly beard, and claw-like hands, of men who, with sunken

⁴¹ Green, History of Springfield, p. 301.

⁴² Thomas Gage, The History of Rowley Anciently Including Bradford, Boxford, and Georgetown (Boston, 1840), p. 295.

⁴³ Letter from Major Van Schaak to his brother, late summer, 1786, requoted from Smith, History of Pittsfield, I, 409.

eyes, peered from behind grated windows, where they had lain for years, guilty of no worse crime than the incurring of a trifling debt, which, perhaps, some unforeseen political or commercial convulsion had rendered them unable to pay; and, in 1786, not a few of these poor creatures, blue with prison mould, were those who had fought long for freedom, and were still largely the creditors of the country whose laws made them the tenants of a debtor's jail.⁴⁴

At least one county convention stated the same idea in slightly less glowing terms but just as emphatically.⁴⁵ A plan for lessening private debt troubles was placed on the records by Groton (and others) when it voted to "put a stop to all law suits of a civil nature until there is greater circulation of money."⁴⁶

This solution was in line with the thoughts of many of the people and the very fact that nearly all the grievance lists mentioned lawyers and their fees as being exorbitant indicated that the problem of private debts was very real and widespread. The extent of the ill feeling toward the profession which was getting rich on the

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 393.

⁴⁵ Town Records of Concord, requoted from Shattuck, History of Concord, pp. 137-38.

⁴⁶ Town Records of Groton, requoted from Samuel Abbott Green, Groton Historical Series, A Collection of Papers Relating to the History of the Town of Groton Massachusetts, 3 Vol. (Cambridge, 1887), I, 3; Waters, History of Chelmsford, p. 356; Smith, History of Pittsfield, pp. 412-13.

hardships of the people⁴⁷ was plainly outlined by the citizens of Braintree. The town "humbly request[ed] that there may be such laws compiled as may crush or at least put a proper check or restraint on that order of Gentlemen denominated Lawyers the completion of whose modern conduct appears to us to tend rather to the destruction than the preservation of this Commonwealth."⁴⁸ In Gardner the belief prevailed that the lawyers should be "annihilated."⁴⁹

However, not only the lawyers and their fees were felt to be intolerable. The existence of the lower courts -- Court of Common Pleas and General Sessions of the Peace -- along with excessive court costs all the way around were denounced as being unnecessary or unfair.⁵⁰ Evidently these

⁴⁷ Town of New Braintree, Worcester Magazine (1786-1787), pp. 106-07; Town of Dedham, ibid., p. 134; Smith, History of Newton, pp. 386-87; Green, Groton Hist. Series, I, 3-4; Lewis, History of Lynn, I, 352; Hudson, History of Marlborough, pp. 191-92; Braintree Town Records, p. 568.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 568.

⁴⁹ Town Records of Gardner, Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 78.

⁵⁰ Town of Dedham, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 134; Town of New Braintree, ibid., pp. 106-07; Town of Worcester, ibid., p. 367; Town of Lancaster, Ibid., pp. 532-34; Ford, History of Clinton, p. 103; Green, History of Springfield, pp. 312-14; Stearns, History of Ashburnham, p. 214; Pierce, History of Grafton, p. 78; Smith, History of Pittsfield, pp. 412-13; Holland, History of Western Mass., I, 249; Green, Groton Hist. Series, pp. 3-4; Hudson, History of Marlborough, pp. 191-92; Braintree Town Records, p. 568.

lower courts were, to a certain extent, a needless expense inasmuch as very few cases reportedly were finally settled there⁵¹ and these were first to be interfered with when men actually took up arms. As early as 1782 the people of Hubbardston had asked for an enlargement of the jurisdiction of Justices of the Peace to \$20 and this came to be, along with an expansion of the duties of the Supreme Judicial Court, the proposed substitute for the lower bodies.⁵²

The lack of a circulating medium amounted to an important grievance in the eyes of most of the people. Its frequent mention in the town petitions and instructions, and the solutions offered for its alleviation indicated this.⁵³ One cure, of course, was the advocacy of an emission of paper currency. The state was divided on this point and not simply on east-west lines. Groton, Middleboro, Middlesex County and Hampshire County all openly

⁵¹ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 165-66.

⁵² Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 55; Town of Lancaster, Worcester Magazine, pp. 532-34; Town of Worcester, ibid., p. 367; For details of the proposed new workings see editorial from the Independent Chronicle, requoted from ibid., pp. 165-66.

⁵³ Weston, History of Middleboro, p. 579; Stearns, History of Ashburnham, p. 214; Smith, History of Pittsfield, pp. 412-13; Holland, History of Western Mass., I, 249; Green, Groton Hist. Series, pp. 3-4; Braintree Town Records, p. 568.

and officially advocated an issue of paper money, while Springfield, Newbury-Port, Dedham, Ashburnham, and Newton opposed any such plan.⁵⁴ One opposition editorial in the Worcester Magazine somewhat facetiously held that "the scarcity of money is the only thing will save this people -- this alone can produce industry and economy, without which no people can be virtuous and happy."⁵⁵ It can hardly be concluded, however, that the majority of the people felt this way. Other solutions included the above-mentioned suspension of civil suits and the substitution of payment in kind for both public and private obligations. Wood, butter, cheese, pork, beef, corn, and wheat were suggested as possible articles of exchange.⁵⁶

The cost of living in post-war Massachusetts was quite low, but when the shortage of currency is considered it was no doubt difficult for many to make ends meet. Two contemporary writers described the abundance of agriculture: "Provisions we abound in: beef, veal, mutton,

⁵⁴ Green, Groton Hist. Series, I, 3-4; Weston, History of Middleboro, p. 579; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170. Barry, History of Mass., III, 227; Green, History of Springfield, pp. 312-14; Town of Newbury-Port, Worcester Magazine, pp. 129-30; Town of Dedham, ibid., p. 134; Stearns, History of Ashburnham, p. 214; Smith History of Newton, pp. 386-87.

⁵⁵ From "A Cure for Hard Times," editorial in the Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 81.

⁵⁶ Ibid., No. XLI, Vol II, front page (no number); Weston, History of Middleboro, p. 579; Braintree Town Records, p. 568.

and lamb, in the spring, summer, and fall, we buy at two pence lawful per pound; in winter, beef and mutton at two and a half and three pence; everything else in proportion, and very plenty. . . ."⁵⁷ and "Accounts from the country contain the agreeable tidings of prospects of a most plentiful harvest -- the fields are loaded with Nature's richest and most luxuriant gifts, and throughout the whole State, never were the labors of industry rewarded in greater abundance."⁵⁸ The second observer went on to say, "Shame, then, come on ye, ye idle complainers of hard times," indicating his failure to understand fully the economics involved. The low prices were not low enough for people with almost no cash and were too low to give farmers a needed profit to pay off their debts and to increase their buying power and make them consumers of goods of manufacturing and commerce.

"Move the General Court from Boston to some country town" was the cry raised in nearly every village outside the capital and this item held a prominent place on the grievance lists. At least twenty of the meetings or conventions sampled in this study from as widely scattered places as Concord, Braintree, and Ashburnham voted for a removal of the legislature from its traditional

⁵⁷ Letter from Major Van Schaak to his brother, late summer, 1786, Smith, History of Pittsfield, I, 410.

⁵⁸ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 242.

seat.⁵⁹ These efforts to have the Court moved were nearly successful in 1787 when a House Committee reported that Concord was a suitable place, and although the latter town did become the seat of government for a short time in 1792 due to a small-pox epidemic in Boston, the bill never became a law.⁶⁰

The war had seriously disrupted commerce in the United States, particularly in New England, and whether they knew it or not, some of the Shays' grievances stemmed from this decay. Traditionally and mercantilistically the Americans had done most of their trading with England, which flow was stopped, of course, by the fighting. Some of the slack was taken up by new trading to the West Indies and by smuggling, but these channels were closed when France and other European countries returned to mercantilism after the war, and excluded American ships from

⁵⁹ Stearns, History of Ashburnham, p. 214; Pierce, History of Grafton, p. 78; Town of Worcester, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 367; Town of Lancaster, ibid., pp. 532-34; Hudson, History of Marlborough, pp. 191-92; Merrill, History of Amesbury and Merrimac, pp. 301-02; Green, Groton Hist. Series, I, 3-4; Weston, History of Middleboro, p. 579; Shattuck, History of Concord, pp. 137-138; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170; Worcester County, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 246-47; Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 55; Braintree Town Records, p. 568; Paige, History of Cambridge, p. 165; Barry, History of Mass., III, 227; Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 78.

⁶⁰ Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 391.

their colonial trade.⁶¹ On top of this, the Mediterranean pirates preyed on American trade in that area and the country was not in a position to stop such interruptions.⁶²

Jefferson used whale oil and fish as an illustration of the situation in New England commerce.

Before the war those states depended on their whale oil and fish. The former was consumed in England, and much of the latter in the Mediterranean. The heavy duties on American whale oil now required in England exclude it from that market; and the Algerines [sic] exclude them from bringing their fish into the Mediterranean. France is opening her port for their oil, but in the meanwhile, their ancient debts are pressing them and they have nothing to pay with.⁶³

Furthermore, Britain was much in need of an outlet for goods in 1783 and proceeded to flood the markets of her former colony and good customer with British manufactures. This practice naturally harmed not only American commerce but the development of industry here.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, Jan. 30, 1787, Paul L. Ford, ed., The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 10 Vols. (New York, 1894), IV, 361; Morison, Maritime History of Massachusetts, p. 36.

⁶² Letter from John Jay to Thomas Jefferson, Dec. 14, 1786, Henry P. Johnston, ed., The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay, 1782-1793, 3 Vols. (New York, 1891), III, 222-23; Letter from the treasury board to John Adams, Oct. 31, 1786, The Works of John Adams Second President of the United States: With a Life of the Author, Notes and Illustrations, 10 Vols., ed. by Charles Francis Adams (Boston, 1853), VIII, 418.

⁶³ Jefferson, Writings, IV, 345-46.

⁶⁴ Letter from Benjamin Franklin to Wm. Hunter, Nov. 24, 1786, Albert H. Smyth, ed., The Writings of Benj. Franklin, 10 Vols. (New York, 1907), IX, 548; Bradford Kingman, History of North Bridgewater, Plymouth County, Massachusetts (Boston, 1866), p. 243.

This languishing state of New England manufacturing concerned many of the citizens of Massachusetts. They believed that a part, at least, of their difficulties stemmed from the bad state of industry and included in their grievance lists requests for encouragements to domestic business in the form of bounties.⁶⁵

Some attributed the causes of unrest to high living, war time standards of thought, and a desire for foreign luxuries. They accused the discontented elements of the population of letting such weaknesses overcome the will to pay taxes and debts. A letter signed "a cobbler" in April 1786 suggested that the people spend less on liquor and snuff especially because of the hard times.⁶⁶ General Lincoln wrote to General Washington: "Among those [reasons for the insurrections] I may rank the ease with which property was acquired, with which credit was obtained and debts were discharged in the time of the war. Hence people were diverted from their usual industry and economy; a luxurious mode of living crept into vogue"⁶⁷ Minot mentioned the "relaxation of manners, and . . . free

⁶⁵ Town of Newbury-Port, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 129-30; Town of New Braintree, ibid., pp. 106-07; Town of Lancaster, ibid., pp. 532-34; Merrill, History of Amesbury and Merrimac, pp. 301-02; Shattuck, History of Concord, pp. 137-38; Braintree Town Records, p. 568.

⁶⁶ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 23.

⁶⁷ Letter from General Lincoln to General Washington, Dec. 1786, requoted from Green, History of Springfield, p. 306.

use of foreign luxuries" as one of the causes for the peoples' distress.⁶⁸ Another contemporary wrote:

But whether all the grievances we complain of originated from government, is a subject of very serious enquiry. Cannot we trace many of them in luxurious, dissipated living, in idleness, in want of temperance, honesty, industry, frugality and economy. Surely these are the sources from which many spring and a reformation in these respects will operate a cure of almost all the evils that at present distress us.⁶⁹

The Secretary of State wrote to Joseph Hosmer in a similar vein⁷⁰ and an editorial in the Independent Chronicle carried the same idea.⁷¹ The most complete and seemingly simple solution to this problem was offered by Noah Webster:

It is a fact, demonstrated by correct calculation, that the common people in this country drink Rum and Tea sufficient every year to pay the interest of the public debts . . . The best way to redress grievances is for every man, when he gets a sixpence, instead of purchasing a pint of Rum or two pounds of Tea, to deposit his pence in a desk, till he has accumulated enough to answer the calls of the collector. Every man who does this sacredly redresses his own grievances.⁷²

Such opinions must be taken with some question since they were expressed by persons opposed to the Shays

⁶⁸ Minot, Insurrections, p. 28.

⁶⁹ Town Records of Haverhill, requoted from Chase, History of Haverhill, p. 439.

⁷⁰ Letter from the Secretary of State to Joseph Hosmer, Boston, Sept. 10, 1786, requoted from Shattuck, History of Concord, p. 133.

⁷¹ Editorial from the Independent Chronicle, requoted from Worcester Magazine, (1786-87) p. 177.

⁷² Letter from Noah Webster to Timothy Pickering, Aug. 10, 1786, "Letters of Noah Webster, 1786-1840," Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, XLIII, 131.

views.

A further accusation, not too well supported, was made by similar thinking opponents to the effect that Great Britain was responsible for the Rebellion. One writer referred to a letter in the Massachusetts Archives which intimated that the Insurrection was partly due to the influence of Britain and British sympathizers "who wished to see the Government meet with disaster"⁷³ and some of the prominent men of the time felt the same way.⁷⁴ However, evidence of such meddling is scanty or virtually non-existent and it cannot be listed as a major cause of the Rebellion.

These, then, were the primary causes of the tumults. Minot, a personal observer, summed them up thus:

A heavy debt lying on the state, added to ~~the~~ burdens of the same nature, upon almost every incorporation within it; a decline, or rather an extinction of publick credit; a relaxation of manners, and a free use of foreign luxuries; a decay of trade and manufactures, with a prevailing scarcity of money; and, above all, individuals involved in debt to each other, are evils which leave us under no necessity of searching further for the reasons of the insurrection which took place.⁷⁵

⁷³ Waters, History of Chelmsford, p. 366.

⁷⁴ Letter from John Jay to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 9, 1787, Jay, Correspondence, III, 232; Letter from Samuel Osgood to John Adams, Nov. 14, 1786, Adams, Works, VIII, 419-20; Letter from George Washington to David Humphreys, Oct. 22, 1786, Washington, Writings, XXIX, 27; Letter from George Washington to Henry Knex, Feb. 25, 1787, Ibid., 169.

⁷⁵ Minot, Insurrections, p. 28.

This, with two exceptions was a fairly accurate and observant summation. He laid too great stress on private debts and failed to note that the attempt to meet the public obligations was too speedy. It is important to realize, moreover, that these "insupportable burdens"⁷⁶ were largely a result of the war "in which the labor of our citizens has been divested from its proper objects," and not the unjust orderings of an aristocratic ruling class.⁷⁷

These many causes of discontent, best outlined at the Hatfield Convention, were instrumental in bringing about similar meetings all over the state. Grievance lists and resolutions came from conventions in Leicester, August 15,⁷⁸ Paxton, September 26,⁷⁹ and again on November 26, in Worcester County,⁸⁰ in Lenox, in September in Berkshire County,⁸¹ in Hadley, November 7,⁸²

⁷⁶ Worcester County Convention Address to the People, requoted from Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 405.

⁷⁷ Editorial in the Independent Chronicle, requoted from ibid., p. 177.

⁷⁸ Worcester County Convention Proceedings, requoted from ibid., p. 246-47; Barry, History of Massachusetts, III, 225; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 485; Wells, History of Hatfield, p. 200.

⁷⁹ Worcester County Convention Proceedings, requoted Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 318; Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 56.

⁸⁰ Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 78; Worcester County Convention Proceedings, requoted from Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 405.

⁸¹ Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 490.

⁸² Ibid., 499.

and Hatfield again January 2, 1787, in Hampshire,⁸³ and once more in Concord, October 3.⁸⁴ Beside these convention lists, many individual towns sent in their sentiments. Not all of them condoned violent methods but the very fact that they did send in such similar petitions asking for redress was an indication that many sympathized with the movement as far as its aims were concerned and merely disagreed with the resort to arms. One observer wrote in hope:

that the general voice of the people might be taken . . . and let the majority . . . decide the controversy. We wish that immediate stop may be put to the further effusion of human blood . . . let those people of the neutral part (viz.) Those who have not taken an active part on either side . . . let Government know that the major part of the people are not content with the present mode of proceeding tho' they wish not to be active in the shedding of the blood of their brethren and country men.⁸⁵

Among the towns reported to be in more or less active sympathy with Shays were the following: Ashburnham, Groton, Fitchburg, Lunenburg, Grafton, Great Barrington, Hubbardston, Needham, North Brookfield, Oxford, Hardwick, Worcester, Woburn, Ware, Whately, Townsend, Shrewsbury, Rehoboth, Princeton, Shirley, Greenwich, and Uxbridge,

⁸³ Hampshire County Convention Proceedings, requested from Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 405, 511.

⁸⁴ Shattuck, History of Concord, p. 137.

⁸⁵ J. Hubbard, "Manifesto," Sedwick II Papers, X, requested from Oscar Handlin and Mary F. Handlin, Commonwealth; a Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts 1774-1861 (New York, 1947), pp. 47-8.

to list only those specifically admitted to be so, usually reluctantly, by their historians.⁸⁶

Opposition or disapprobation was reported in the following towns: Lexington, Haverhill, Roxbury, Concord,

⁸⁶ Town Records of Ashburnham, March 14, 1787, re-quoted from Stearns, History of Ashburnham, p. 213; Green, Groton During the Revolution, p. 113; Rufus C. Torrey, History of the Town of Fitchburg and Lunenburg (Fitchburg, Mass., 1865), p. 100; Pierce, History of Grafton, p. 78; Charles J. Taylor, History of Great Barrington (Berkshire County) Massachusetts (Great Barrington, 1882), p. 305; Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 53; George Kuhn Clark, History of Needham, Massachusetts, 1711-1911 (Cambridge, 1912), p. 438; Josiah Howard Temple, History of North Brookfield Massachusetts (Boston, 1887), p. 245; Daniels, History of Oxford, pp. 149, 553; Abijah J. Marvin and Others, History of Worcester County Massachusetts 2 Vols. (Boston, 1879), I, 102, 103, 554 (for Hardwick and general remarks); Sewall, History of Woburn, pp. 406-07; Arthur Chase, History of Ware Massachusetts (Cambridge, 1911), p. 94; Ithamar Bard Sawtelle, History of the Town of Townsend Middlesex County, Massachusetts, 1676-1878 (Fitchburg, Mass., 1878), pp. 214, 219-20; Andrew H. Ward, A History of the Town of Shrewsbury (Worcester, 1826), p. 32; Town Records of Rehoboth, requoted from Leonard Bliss, Jr., The History of Rehoboth, Bristol County, Massachusetts (Boston, 1836), p. 136; Francis Everett Blake, History of the Town of Princeton, 1759-1915, 2 Vols. (Princeton, Mass., 1915), I, 246; Caswell, History of Royalston, p. 413; Chandler, History of Shirley, p. 128; Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 422-23; (Greenwich); Ibid., pp. 373-74, (Uxbridge); James Monroe Crafts, History of the Town of Whately Massachusetts, 1661-1899 (Orange, Mass., 1899), p. 236.

Boston, Worcester, and Medford.⁸⁷ The last three refused at times to attend conventions usually on the grounds that such gatherings were either unconstitutional or unnecessary. Minot, however, believed them to be perfectly in accord with the fundamental law of the state although he too disagreed with their actions.⁸⁸

Further disapproval came from such prominent citizens of Massachusetts as Noah Webster, Mercy Warren, Henry Farwell, Oliver Prescott, Samuel Adams, and James Bowdoin.⁸⁹ On the other hand not all those of good name and property standing were government supporters. Thomas Jefferson

⁸⁷ Town Records of Lexington, March 28, 1787, requoted from Charles Hudson, History of the Town of Lexington (Boston, 1868), p. 230; Town Records of Haverhill, Oct. 10, 1786, requoted from Chase, History of Haverhill, pp. 438-39; Town Records of Boston, XXXI, 125-32, 298-300; Selectmen's Records of Roxbury, Worcester Magazine (1786-1787), p. 324; Town Records of Concord, Sept. 9, 1786, requoted from Shattuck, History of Concord, pp. 131-32; Town Records of Worcester, requoted from Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 242; Town Records of Medford, ibid., p. 261.

⁸⁸ Minot, Insurrections, p. 22.

⁸⁹ Letter from Noah Webster to Timothy Pickering, Sept. 13, 1786, Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, XLIII, 132; Letter from Mercy Warren to John Adams, May 7, 1789, Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll. (Warren-Adams Correspondence) LXXIII, 312; Letters of Farwell and Prescott requoted from Green, Groton During the Revolution, pp. 272-77; Requoted from William V. Wells, The Life and Public Services of Samuel Adams (Boston, 1865), p. 222 ff.; Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll., Vol. VI, Bowdoin and Temple Papers, *passim*.

received a report which said, "Men who were of good property, and owed not a shilling, were involved in the train of desparadoes to suppress the courts."⁹⁰ Similar observations were made elsewhere.⁹¹ Personal decisions seem to have been based on interests rather than on class lines.

The Hatfield convention, despite its issuance of provision number twenty-one which advised the people to "abstain from all mobs and unlawful assemblies"⁹² and despite the fact that it was generally conducted in a peaceable and orderly manner⁹³ stirred up strong feelings in the minds of a portion of the population. Late in August an armed group of about 1500 men took possession of the court house at Northampton, Hampshire County, and prevented the sitting of the Court of Common Pleas.⁹⁴ One writer described the scene thus: "Armed some with muskets, some with bludgeons, and some with swords, with

⁹⁰ Letter from Ed. Carrington to Thomas Jefferson, June 9, 1787, Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, 2nd Series, XVII, 463.

⁹¹ Sawtelle, History of Townsend, p. 219; Green, Groton During the Revolution, p. 34.

⁹² Convention Records, requoted from Minot, Insurrections, pp. 34-6; Paige, History of Cambridge, p. 165; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170.

⁹³ Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 367.

⁹⁴ Court Clerk's Records, requoted from Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 84; Chase, History of Haverhill, p. 437.

drums beating and fifes playing, the mob held possession of the Court House till midnight, when they quietly dispersed.⁹⁵

The other town and county gatherings had a similar effect and because grievances had not been redressed, opposition to government began to increase. During the same month a similar group prevented the Common Pleas session from transacting business at Great Barrington, Berkshire County.⁹⁶ Another party, variously estimated at from 800 to 2000 persons held up the September session of the same court, also in Great Barrington. They went further than in August when they released the debtors from the county jail.⁹⁷

On the 11th and 12th of August a Groton insurrectionist, Job Shattuck, appeared at Concord.⁹⁸ He was a man past mid-life, the son of a respectable farmer and himself a large land-owner.⁹⁹ As a Revolutionary Army officer

⁹⁵ Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 488.

⁹⁶ Temple, History of Palmer, p. 203.

⁹⁷ Taylor, History of Great Barrington, p. 306; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 490.

⁹⁸ Note from Job Shattuck to Justices, requoted from Shattuck, History of Concord, p. 135.

⁹⁹ Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 392.

he had brought some fame to himself and to his home by his exploits during the war.¹⁰⁰ Now, backed by a force of several hundred men, he sent the following note "To the Honorable Justices of the Court of General Sessions of the Peace and Court of Common Pleas for the county of Middlesex:"

The voice of the people of this county is, that the Court of General Sessions of the Peace and Court of Common Pleas shall not enter this court-house until such time as the people shall have a redress of a number of grievances they labor under at present, which will be set forth in a petition, or remonstrance, to the next General Court.¹⁰¹

He followed this with: "Since writing the within, it is agreed that the Court of Sessions may open and adjourn to the last Tuesday of November, next without going into the court house."¹⁰² Shattuck and his men were successful.¹⁰³

About a month and a half after these successful efforts, however, Shattuck and two minor leaders, Parker and Page, were captured by a group of light horse from Boston.

¹⁰⁰ Green, Groton During the Revolution, p. 66.

¹⁰¹ Note from Job Shattuck to Justices, requoted from Shattuck, History of Concord, p. 135.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 489-90; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 171; Shattuck, History of Concord, p. 136.

Shattuck was badly wounded in the encounter and was taken, along with the others, to a Boston jail where he received good medical care and the sympathy of the people for his sufferings. There he remained during the greater part of the Rebellion.¹⁰⁴

Another group later in August was also successful in keeping the lower courts from meeting at Worcester despite a two hour speech damning rebellious methods by a fearless and intrepid, if somewhat bellicose, Judge Ward. After his unsuccessful harangue the court met at the United States Arms Tavern where the Court of Sessions was adjourned to the 21st of November and the Court of Common Pleas sine die.¹⁰⁵

In September the Supreme Judicial Court Meeting at Springfield in Hampshire County was threatened by the insurgents, but some loyal militia under General Shepard protected the court house and the justices opened session. However, "the proceedings amounted to a mere ceremony" because the grand jury did not appear and the court was

¹⁰⁴ Account in the Massachusetts Gazette, requoted from Green, Groton Hist. Series, I, 8-9; Shattuck, History of Concord, p. 139; Green, Groton During the Revolution, 66.

¹⁰⁵ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 278; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 439; Lincoln, History of Worcester, pp. 119-20.

adjourned in two days. The armed men on both sides, reported as 2000, were the first to participate in any action against the higher court.¹⁰⁶

A similar, though unsuccessful action took place against the October term of the Supreme Court in Taunton, Bristol County. The body of insurgents there was much smaller than the one at Springfield.¹⁰⁷

These disturbances prompted the Governor to call out the militia, but due to the amount of sympathy for the insurgents and their cause the task was not an easy one. In September after he had issued his call "Doubts . . . arose [as to] how far reliance could be placed on the troops"¹⁰⁸ The sheriff of Worcester reported that a sufficient force could not be collected¹⁰⁹ and a letter to Bowdoin about the same time discussed the reluctance on the part of many men in the area to respond to the summons, particularly in the towns of

¹⁰⁶ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 327; Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 88.

¹⁰⁷ Frank Walcott Hutt, A History of Bristol County Massachusetts, 3 Vols. (New York, 1924), I, 89.

¹⁰⁸ Lincoln, History of Worcester, p. 123.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

Sterling, Lancaster, and Harvard.¹¹⁰ Another contemporary writer bore out this testimony: "Although the militia . . . had been ordered by the General to appear in arms for the defense of government, it served only as a pretext for the malcontents to carry into execution, with greater facility, their designs for its [the courts] abolition."¹¹¹ Furthermore, "some of the militia were so impressed by the numbers and bearing of the insurgents that they deserted their colors and enlisted under Shays."¹¹² At least one company in Middlesex County was ordered by its captain to be ready to march the following day. The men met that night, voted to support Shays and elected new officers from the ranks.¹¹³ The town of Woburn refused to aid the government militarily and voted "not to give any encouragement to the men called for, to go into the present expedition," nor "to aid nor assist in the present

¹¹⁰ Letter from Wm. Greenleaf to James Bowdoin, Feb. 17, 1787, requested from Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll., 7th Series, VI, 139-40.

¹¹¹ "Gracchus" (essay). A contemporary account by Doctor Whiting, Sept. 11-12, 1786, requested from Taylor, History of Great Barrington, p. 307.

¹¹² Herrick, History of Gardner, pp. 85, 88; Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 59; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170.

¹¹³ Edward Church Smith and Philip Mack Smith, A History of the Town of Middlefield Massachusetts (Menasha, Wis., 1924), p. 72.

expedition." The same town later voted not to pay any money to "those persons that were drafted into the Government's service."¹¹⁴ According to Crane, the least biased writer on the movement, it was estimated in September 1786 that at least three quarters of the people of the commonwealth favored Shays and opposed the government troops. "If the people," Bowdoin said, "would not be obedient to orders issued for their own safety (referring to the failure of the militia to respond to his call) the consequences were imputable only to themselves."¹¹⁵

Finally the General Court passed an act which provided for strict punishment for militia men who failed to appear when ordered, who deserted, or who did not carry out commands. However, this did not become law until March of 1787, an indication of the early strength of and sympathy for the Rebellion and of the fact that the legislature was moderate because of its realization that the insurgents had strong, popular support.¹¹⁶

There can be little doubt but that the Rebellion was most prevalent and most "violent" in the three large

¹¹⁴ Town Records of Woburn, requoted from Sewall, History of Woburn, pp. 406-07.

¹¹⁵ E. B. Crane, "Shays Rebellion", Coll. of the War. Soc. of Antiquity, V, 76-79.

¹¹⁶ Massachusetts Acts and Laws (1787), p. 622.

western counties of Berkshire, Hampshire, and Worcester, or that the section from Middlesex County west contained the main discontent. However, with the possible exceptions of Boston and its immediate environs the sympathy was spread fairly thoroughly over the eastern areas as well as the west (see grievance list towns). Even Boston joined the landslide and turned Bowdoin out in the spring elections,¹¹⁷ and one writer believed there were, at one time during the Rebellion, indications that the capital was ready for revolt.¹¹⁸ Moreover, Bowdoin personally directed the sheriff and militia of Barnstable County to be on the alert and ready for expected trouble, an indication that even the state's easternmost county was affected with ferment.¹¹⁹

However, the true extent of the disaffection at the beginning of the disturbances cannot be reliably estimated since the fall session of the General Court redressed many grievances and undermined much of the rebellious spirit. Many evidently came to feel that armed

¹¹⁷ Town Records of Boston, XXXI, p. 145.

¹¹⁸ Wm. L. Smith, "Shays Rebellion" quoted from Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 91.

¹¹⁹ Letter from Gov. Bowdoin to the sherriff and militia of Barnstable County, quoted from Frederick Freeman, The History of Cape Cod; The Annals of Barnstable County, 2 Vols. (Boston, 1860), I, 551.

intervention was not necessary after all that had been done by the legislature up to December was taken into account. In fact an attempt to stop the courts at Concord in December failed, partly because the insurrectionist leader from Bristol refused to enter in. He felt that the General Court had done so much for the people that violent measures were no longer necessary.¹²⁰ Later writers have expressed the idea in general terms, particularly E. B. Crane.¹²¹

The Massachusetts Acts and Laws were, however, the most revealing source of information on the early redress by the General Court. There may be found the passage of acts designed to relieve many of the grievances, and discussions of other moves toward further alleviation which failed of passage for one reason or another.

One of the most important bills put through was an act providing for the more easy payment of the specie taxes which had been assessed previous to the year 1784. Towns and persons were permitted to pay their back taxes at various places throughout the state, from Great Barrington to Boston, in such articles as beef, pork, Indian corn,

¹²⁰ Minot, Insurrections, p. 76.

¹²¹ Crane, "Shays Rebellion," Coll. of the Wor. Soc. of Antiquity, V, 80; Alden Bradford, History of Massachusetts 1775-1789 (Boston, 1825), p. 269.

wheat, barley, butter, leather, lumber, whale oil, tobacco and more than ninety other products of farm and shop.¹²²

A second important and needed act was the one which suspended the laws for the collection of private debts in specie. There were certain limitations. For example, if a creditor was hard put, and many were both debtors and creditors, he could make arrangements to collect all or part of the debt in specific articles, but not cash. The law was first enacted for eight months but was several times extended and eventually carried into 1788.¹²³

The Act for establishing a mint for the coinage of gold, silver, and copper was designed to relieve the scarcity of circulating medium.¹²⁴

The empty treasury problem was attacked several ways. An excise tax was placed on various articles including wine, rum, tea, coffee, cocoa, sugar, lemons, watches, coaches and chariots,¹²⁵ and an impost duty was also levied.¹²⁶ The sale of public lands (in Maine) by lottery was decided upon as a further source of income, \$163,200

¹²² Mass. Acts and Laws (1786), pp. 504-07.

¹²³ Ibid., (1786, 1787), pp. 525, 636, and 656.

¹²⁴ Ibid., (1786), p. 489.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 537.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 526.

to be exact,¹²⁷ and this was done as evidenced by advertisements in a current periodical.¹²⁸

Possibly the loudest grievance was softened by the "Act for rendering processes at law less expensive." It limited the number of lawyers to one on either side in any case before the Court of Common Pleas, and set some restrictions on their fees.¹²⁹ This helped, but the popular clamor for further control showed that the problem had not been solved entirely.¹³⁰

Three other laws helped quiet several grievances. These were: An act for the relief of poor prisoners which provided for the release from jail of persons committed for debts;¹³¹ an Act for determining at what times and places the several courts of General Sessions of the Peace and of Common Pleas were to be held;¹³² and a bill regulating the fees of public officers.¹³³ (All three of these came in the spring of 1787.)

¹²⁷ Ibid., pp. 513-16.

¹²⁸ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 479.

¹²⁹ Mass. Acts and Laws (1786), pp. 517-21.

¹³⁰ "Diary of John Q. Adams" Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, 2nd Series, XVI, 343.

¹³¹ Mass. Acts and Laws (1787), p. 650.

¹³² Ibid., p. 599.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 602.

An inducement to take advantage of these concessions was offered by a November 15th act which provided for indemnity to Shays offenders if they subscribed to an oath of allegiance before January 1, 1787. Such were exempt "from all criminal prosecutions to which they may be liable on account of their illegal proceedings."¹³⁴ It was, for all practical purposes, extended by a further law which allowed the Governor to grant pardons and indemnity beyond the January 1st deadline.¹³⁵

All of these concessions tended to undermine the rebellious spirit and quiet the feelings of discontent, but several repressive measures plus the fact that the legislature had not redressed all grievances worked for a continuance of unrest on the part of some. The measures which kept the ferment alive were: the various militia acts,¹³⁶ the act to prevent "Routs, Riots, and tumultuous Assemblies, and the evil consequences thereof,"¹³⁷ the act which decided that two-thirds of the impost and excise duties would go to pay interest on state notes,¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Ibid., (1786), p. 522-23.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 555.

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 495-502 and (1787), p. 546.

¹³⁷ Ibid., (1786), pp. 502-03.

¹³⁸ Ibid., (1786) p. 526.

and the act which temporarily suspended the writ of habeas corpus.¹³⁹ Furthermore, there was the hope on the part of the rebels that they could hold out until a new legislature was chosen.¹⁴⁰

Finally the General Court felt obliged to declare a state of rebellion in existence and prepared to take firm measures if disturbances continued. By November 1st the scattered uprisings had been termed a formal rebellion and the Insurrection took on a slightly different aspect.¹⁴¹ But the fact that the government waited this long before declaring a rebellion was evidence of the popular support for the insurrectionists.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 510.

¹⁴⁰ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 415, 440.

¹⁴¹ Mass. Acts and Laws (1786), pp. 502-03.

CHAPTER III

THE REBELLION -- SUPPRESSION AND CONCLUSION

From November on the Rebellion gradually built up to a climax, then subsided until by the spring of 1787, peace once again returned to Massachusetts. This result was not accomplished, however, until there had been a loss of life and a good deal of bitterness on both sides.

November 1786, saw the appearance of Daniel Shays as the principal figure in the Rebellion.¹ Shays was born in Hopkinton, Massachusetts, in 1747, of poor parents who were reportedly unable to give him much of the benefits of an early education.² At various times he was a hired man for a Daniel Gilbert of Brookfield³ and for a Mr. Brinley of Framingham.⁴ He was forawhile a resident of Brookfield where he met and married Abigail Gilbert in 1772, but lived most of his life in Pelham, Massachusetts, and seemed to consider it his home town.⁵ Prior to his army service he "resided [in Pelham] as a respected citizen, who was honored by election to positions of trust

¹ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 415, 440.

² Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 391; Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 100.

³ Marvin and Others, History of Worcester County, I, 339.

⁴ Chandler, History of Shirley, p. 704.

⁵ Temple, History of North Brookfield, p. 245.

and responsibility"⁶ and took command (of the Rebellion) not as instigator or prime mover, but only after armed force had been used in several places. The fact that he did not appear until November indicated this.⁷

Shays had apparently served with some distinction in the American forces under Washington. He was a captain in the Revolutionary Army, spent time at West Point, and was present at Bunker Hill, the capture of Burgoyne, and the storming of Stony Point.⁸ One of his soldiers remarked that "Capt. Shays who rose against our state government Belong in our regt. in the three years service and [was] respected as a very good officer, was very good to his men."⁹ However, there seems to have been some doubt about the legitimacy of his commission and some have claimed that he was "involved in . . . questionable pecuniary transactions and dishonorably dismissed." Such an accusation has not been substantiated but it was true that he left

⁶ Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 366.

⁷ Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 57; Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 415, 440.

⁸ C. M. Hyde and Alexander Hyde, The Centennial Celebration and Centennial History of the Town of Lee, Massachusetts (Springfield, 1878), p. 156; Chandler, History of Shirley, p. 704.

⁹ Remark of Henry Hallowell of Lynn requested from Howard Kendall Sanderson, Lynn in the Revolution (Boston, 1909), I, 180.

the army about 1780 before the war was over.¹⁰

In his first appearance in the Rebellion Shays was instrumental in preventing the sitting of the court in Worcester. He arrived there November 21st at the head of about eight hundred men, principally from Princeton, Shrewsbury, and Hubbardston, although other places were represented, forced the Court of Sessions to meet at a local tavern, and demanded that the court adjourn until a new choice of Representatives to the General Court was made. The judges felt that they could not comply with such a request, but did not hold session.¹¹ The request, however, was a good indication that the insurgents considered their cause sufficiently popular to be willing to leave the issue to a general election.

A rather amusing incident is supposed to have occurred during this first skirmish in which Shays was active, when Col. William Greenleaf, an anti-Shaysite, was speaking to the crowd in front of the court house.

One of the leaders, not improbably Capt. Wheeler, told him they sought relief from grievances, and among the most intolerable of them was the sheriff himself, and next to his person were his fees, which were excessive and intolerable, especially in criminal executions. "If you consider fees for executions excessive," replied the sheriff,

¹⁰ Hyde, Centennial History of Lee, p. 156; Herrick History of Gardner, p. 101.

¹¹ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 415, 440.

irritated by the attack, "you need not wait long for redress for I will hang you all for nothing, gentlemen, with great pleasure.¹²

A sprig of evergreen in the hatband was the badge of rebellion while a slip of white paper in the same place denoted a government supporter. After the above remark, as the sheriff was leaving, someone placed a piece of pine in his hat without his knowledge and he withdrew wearing the Shays emblem.¹³

The Adam Wheeler mentioned in this story was from Hubbardston and one of Shays' important subordinates. According to one writer; the "man who was next to Shays in position and figured almost as largely was Captain Adam Wheeler . . . a highly esteemed citizen."¹⁴

After Shays' success at Worcester his army retreated early in December and had a difficult time of it due to the extreme severity of the winter weather. At least one of the insurgents, William Hartley, was frozen to death during the withdrawal.¹⁵

Christmas 1786, however, found the rebels again in possession of a court house, this time at Springfield in

¹² Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 60. The story appeared in several other secondary accounts.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 57.

¹⁵ Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 498-99.

Hampshire County. Shays requested "The Honble. Judges of this court [Common Pleas], not to open said court at this term, nor do any kind of business whatever, but all kind of business to remain as tho no such court had been appointed." The judges complied with the request and one observer noted that "no injuries or insults were offered to individuals and the people are dispersing."¹⁶

About the middle^{of} January an incident was supposed to have occurred at Worcester in which a group of insurgents "became alarmingly nauseated after imbibing freely of a favorite stimulant." They believed themselves poisoned and a Doctor Stearns said he detected antimony and arsenic in the dregs of their cups. "Bloody vengeance was threatened" but another physician upon closer examination found the poisons to be nothing but snuff which "had accidentally got[ten] mixed with the brown sugar used in the toddy and raised an insurrection of its own in the stomachs of the toppers."¹⁷

While the picture painted here of the rebels as an indulgent lot may have been partially true the evidence indicated that there was no lack of willingness on the

¹⁶ Shays' request, requoted from Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll., VI, 121; Letter from Eleazer Porter to James Bowdoin, requoted from ibid., p. 122.

¹⁷ Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster, p. 200.

part of the militia to have a drink. The town records of Whately revealed over 100 gallons of rum as one item of supply sent to the government troops¹⁸ and General Shepard wrote to General Lincoln that "the men cannot be kept together especially in this season without a daily allowance of spirituous liquors."¹⁹

The Militia mentioned here, some 1400 men, were at Springfield protecting the federal arsenal which contained a number of muskets, some field pieces, and other military stores including powder and food. Naturally Shays and his followers were anxious to capture these supplies and assembled in three groups near Springfield on the twenty-fourth of January, 1787. Shays had under him about 2000 men, Luke Day had 700, and Eli Parsons had 500, the combined groups outnumbering the militia by nearly 2000 men. Most of those ^{on} of both sides were old Continental soldiers.²⁰

Day and Parsons, in addition to Shays and Adam Wheeler, were generally considered to be of some significance in the Rebellion. According to one writer, Luke

¹⁸ Town Records of Whately, requoted from Crafts, History of Whately, p. 237.

¹⁹ Letter from Gen. Shepard to Gen. Lincoln, Jan. 12, 1787, requoted from Green, History of Springfield, p. 322.

²⁰ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 538-39; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 503; Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 376.

Day of West Springfield was more important than Adam Wheeler, and he compared him very favorably with Shays himself. Said he: "Day was the stronger man, in mind and will, the equal of Shays in military talent and his superior in the gift of speech. The two were the leading spirits, and cooperated with each other."²¹ Eli Parsons of Berkshire was also mentioned as a member of the rebel leader group but little material on him was available.

In anticipation of a clash at Springfield over the Federal stores and because the uprisings had been termed an open Rebellion Governor Bowdoin had issued a call for some 4400 militia in the first week in January. The army, 700 from Suffolk County, 500 from Essex, 800 from Middlesex, and 1200 each from Hampshire and Worcester Counties were enlisted for thirty days under the command of General Benjamin Lincoln. The Governor was able to raise this army chiefly because much of the rebellious spirit had been undermined by the concessions of the State Legislature. To finance this army a considerable sum was advanced by private citizens, some of them in and around Boston. The group rendezvoused at Worcester and later

²¹ Holland, History of Western Mass., I, 245.

marched to aid Shepard in the defense of the Springfield arsenal.²²

On January 25, before reinforcements arrived, however, a skirmish took place between Shays and Shepard. Shays had sent a note to Day asking him to attack on the 25th but Day felt that he needed more time and sent back word that he could not join him until the 26th. The note was intercepted by one of Shepard's men and Shays, assuming everything was ready, marched against the arsenal.²³ The effort was unsuccessful and General Shepard's account of the battle the next day was probably the best and most complete one written.

Sir: -- the unhappy time has come in which we have been obliged to shed blood. Shays, who was at the head of about twelve hundred men, marched yesterday afternoon about four o' clock toward the public buildings, in battle array. He marched his men in an open column by platoons. I sent several times, by one of my aides, and two other gentlemen, Capt. Buffington and Woodbridge, to him to know what he was after or what he wanted. His reply was, he wanted barracks, and barracks he would have, and stores. The answer was, he must purchase them dear, if he had them. He still proceeded on his march, until he approached within two hundred and fifty yards of the arsenal. He then made a halt. I immediately sent Major Lepnan, one of my aides, and Capt. Buffington, to inform him not to march his troops any nearer the arsenal on his peril, as I was stationed here by order of Your Excellency and the secretary

²² Hudson, History of Lexington, p. 279; Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 376; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 502.

²³ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 538-39; Taylor, History of Great Barrington, p. 309; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 504.

of war, for the defense of the public property; in case he did, I should surely fire on him and his men. A Mr. Wheeler, who appeared to be one of Shay's aides met Mr. Lepnan after he had delivered my orders in the most peremptory manner, and made answer, that that was all he wanted. Shays immediately put his troops in motion and marched on rapidly near one hundred yards. I then ordered Major Stephens, who commanded the artillery, to fire upon them; he accordingly did. The two first shot he endeavored to overshoot them, in hope that they would have taken warning, without firing among them, but it had no effect on them. Maj. Stephens then directed his shot through the center of his column. The fourth or fifth shot put the column into the utmost confusion. Shays made an attempt to display his column but in vain. We had one howit. which was loaded with grape shot, which, when fired, gave them great uneasiness. Had I been disposed to destroy them, I might have charged upon their rear and flanks with my infantry and the two field pieces, and could have killed the greater part of his whole army within twenty-five minutes. There was not a single musket fired on either side.

I found three men dead on the spot, and one wounded, who is since dead. One of our artillerymen, by inattention, was badly wounded. Three muskets were taken up with the dead, which were all deeply loaded. I enclose to your excellency a copy of a paper sent to me last evening. I have received no reinforcements yet, and expect to be attacked this day by their whole force combined. I am sir, with great respect, your Excellency's most obedient, Humble servant, William Shepard.²⁴

The men mentioned by Shepard as killed were Esekial Root and Ariel Webster of Greenfield, John Hunter of Shelburne, and Rabien Spicer of Leyden. Jeremiah McMillan of Pelham was mortally wounded.²⁵ A sergeant Chaloner of the militia was standing between two guns and when the one on

²⁴ Official Report from General Shepard to Governor Bowdoin, Jan. 26, 1787, requoted from Herrick, History of Gardner, pp. 95-96.

²⁵ Worcester Magazine, (1786-87), p. 567.

his right went off he thought it was the one on the left and thrust his sponge into the loaded barrel which was just being fired. His arms were blown off and his other injuries included the loss of his eyesight.²⁶ These were the woundings and deaths recorded for the engagement at Springfield, the largest battle of the uprising in terms of numbers involved.

Shepard's rather grim sense of humor came out in an answer to a Shays' request for the bodies of his five dead the evening of the encounter:

The officer who met the flag, and who presented his case to his commander, returned to the messenger as follows: "Present Captain Shepard's compliments to Captain Shays and inform him that at this time he cannot furnish him with five dead rebels, he having no more than four, and one of those not quite dead; but if Captain Shays will please to attack him again, General Shepard will engage to furnish him with as many dead as he shall desire."²⁷

Shepard's description of the "battle" quoted above was an example of the caution displayed on the part of the government troops. Throughout the Rebellion both militia and insurrectionists evinced this unwillingness to shed blood. When the troops and the rebels did meet under arms they oftentimes failed to fire at each other or fired over the rank and they seemed willing to let things pass with a minimum of conflict. At times by special arrangement the two groups paraded on the same town square in full view of each other and never fired a

²⁶ Ibid., p. 596.

²⁷ Requoted from Smith, History of Newton, p. 389.

shot.²⁸ Furthermore, when the insurgents had accomplished their purpose of holding up the sitting of the courts they quietly retired from the town and returned to their homes.²⁹ A Vermonter who heard accounts of the Rebellion from his grandfather told the following:

The Rebellion broke up about seven miles east of my old home, so grandfather told me. It was in March, and the state troops were coming from the east. The insurgents were going to meet them. They met at Petersham; the State troops had gained the top of a hill; the insurgents were going up. The snow was some eighteen inches deep, there had been a thaw and some rain formed a smooth crust. As the insurgents were going up the State troops fired on them, but they fired into the crust. It was understood that the soldiers of the State sympathized with the Shay party and would not fire at the men, and both parties turned and parted and not a man killed.³⁰

While some looting and stealing did go on, the insurrectionists, for the most part, were well behaved. In Worcester, according to one account, "the Men were billeted on the inhabitants. No compulsion was used; when admittance was peremptorily refused, they quietly

²⁸ Letter from Gen. Cobb to Gov. Bowdoin, Oct. 30, 1786, requoted from Quarter Millenial Celebration of Taunton, p. 415; Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 374.

²⁹ Letter from Gen. Cobb to Governor Bowdoin, Oct. 30, 1786, requoted from Quarter Millenial Celebration of Taunton, p. 416; Letter to Capt. Southgate from a kinsman living in Palmer, Sept. 5, 1786, requoted from E. Washburn, Historical Sketches of Leicester Massachusetts (Boston, 1860), p. 244; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 171; Account in Hampshire Gazette, requoted from Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 502.

³⁰ Letter from J. Wilder of Woodstock, Vt., about January 1902, requoted from Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, 2nd Series, XV, 372.

retired, and sought food and shelter elsewhere."³¹

Some writers have attributed this reluctance to do real damage to property or militia to "human cowardice,"³² "weakness of heart,"³³ or "smoke and no fire,"³⁴ but such an interpretation evidenced failure to understand the real purposes of the rebels. Those purposes were not the forceful overthrow of constitutional government, but merely the redress of grievances; grievances which were affecting the great majority of the population. Some writers and even a few contemporary observers believed the rebels were a band of discontented riff-raff, bent on the overthrow of democratic government and the establishment of some sort of communal order favoring them.³⁵ Not only the Shaysites' actions, but also their petitions plainly indicated the opposite. The rebels were interested in their families' welfare and little more.

³¹ Lincoln, History of Worcester, pp. 127-28.

³² Electa F. Jones, Stockbridge Past and Present or Records of an Old Mission Station (Springfield, 1854), p. 196.

³³ Smith, History of Pittsfield, p. 404.

³⁴ Sawtelle, History of Townsend, pp. 221-22.

³⁵ Letter from the Sec. of State to Joseph Hosmer, Sept. 10, 1786, requoted from Shattuck, History of Concord, p. 134; David Ramsay, History of the United States from Their First Settlement as English Colonies in 1607, to the Year 1808; or, the Thirty-third Year of Their Sovereignty and Independence, 3 Vols. (Philadelphia, 1818), III, 48; Taylor, History of Great Barrington, p. 305; Gage, History of Rowley, pp. 293-94.

Daniel Gray, as chairman for a Shays committee, submitted the following reasons for the disquiet among the people:

Gentlemen: We have thought proper to inform you of some of the principal causes of the late risings of the people, and also of their present movement, viz:

1st The present expensive mode of collecting debts, which, by reason of the great scarcity of cash, will, of necessity fill our jails with unhappy debtors, and thereby a respectable body of the people rendered incapable of being serviceable either to themselves or the community.

2nd The monies raised by impost and excise being appropriated to discharge the interest of governmental securities and not the foreign debt when these securities are not subject to taxation.

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Furthermore, be assured that this body, now at arms, ~~despise~~ the idea of being instigated by British emissaries, which is so strenuously propagated by the enemies of our liberties; and also wish the most proper and speedy measures may be taken to discharge both our foreign and domestic debt.³⁶

In simplest terms, the people were unable to provide for their families, pay their taxes, and meet their debts at the same time and the above petition and others like bore this out.³⁷

³⁶Address to the people of Hampshire County printed in the Hampshire Gazette, requoted from Holland, History of Western Mass., I, 255-56.

³⁷ Petition from insurgents signed by Francis Stone, Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 574; Letter from Adam Wheeler to the public, Nov. 7, 1786, ibid., p. 414; Petition of the officers of the Counties of Worcester, Hampshire, Middlesex, and Berkshire now at arms, requoted from Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 381; Letter from Daniel Shays to General Lincoln, Jan. 30, 1787, requoted from Daniels, History of Oxford, p. 148; Holland, History of Western Mass., I, 255-56.

From this point on, armed resistance to the government collapsed rapidly. General Lincoln arrived with reinforcements for Shepard at Springfield the day after the abortive encounter between the militia and the rebels. Shays meanwhile had withdrawn to Chicopee where he met Parsons and on Saturday night retreated to Amherst.³⁸ Day's group joined them there retreating before Lincoln's advance. All of Shay's forces then retired to Pelham on January 28th and Lincoln encamped at Hadley until February 3rd.³⁹

Before attacking Shays' army, however, Lincoln made a last unsuccessful effort to convince Shays' of the futility of his cause and of the dire consequences if he continued to pursue it. From Hadley he sent the following note to Shays:

Whether you are convinced or not of your error in flying to arms, I am fully persuaded that before this hour, you must have the fullest conviction upon your mind that you are not able to execute your original purposes Under these circumstances you cannot hesitate a moment to disband your deluded followers. If you should not, I must approach, and apprehend the most influential characters among you. Should you attempt to fire upon the troops of the government, the consequences must be fatal to many of your men, the least guilty If you should either withhold this information from them, or suffer your people to fire upon our approach, you must be

³⁸ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 552-53; Trumbull, Hist. of Northampton, II, 507.

³⁹ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 526, 552-53; Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster, p. 254; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 508-10.

answerable for all the ills which may exist in consequence thereof.⁴⁰

On their part, Shays and his followers were not yet ready to quit. What they wanted was to suspend operations on both sides until the General Court granted a general pardon, as the following reply indicates:

Sir -- The people assembled in arms from the counties of Middlesex, Worcester, Hampshire, and Berkshire, taking into serious consideration the purport of the flag just received, return for answer, that however unjustifiable the measures may be which the people have adopted, in having recourse to arms, various circumstances have induced them thereto the people are willing to lay down their arms, on the condition of a general pardon, and return to their respective homes Therefore, we pray that hostilities may cease, on your parts until our united prayers may be presented to the General Court and we receive an answer, as a person is gone for that purpose. If this request may be complied with, government shall meet with no interruption from the people; but let each army occupy the post where they now are.⁴¹

Lincoln answered that such a decision was beyond his jurisdiction and prepared to attack the rebel positions. The night of February 3rd, he marched after Shays who had retired to Petersham. His men were caught in a severe snow storm and suffered a great deal on their all night march (some thirty miles) from the intense cold and the lack of shelter. They arrived in Petersham in the morning and so surprised Shays' forces who had not expected them to move

⁴⁰ Letter from General Lincoln to Captain Shays, Jan. 30, 1787, requested from Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 379.

⁴¹ Letter from Captain Shays to General Lincoln, Jan. 30, 1787, ibid., pp. 379-80.

during the storm, that they were able to put them to rout and capture 150 men. The leaders escaped to Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, and eventually to Canada, but the formal Rebellion was at an end.⁴² Shays himself fled to Canada via Vermont and although eventually pardoned, he did not return to Massachusetts to live, but settled in western New York State where he died in 1825 nearly destitute, supported only by his slim Federal pension.⁴³

The petition of Shays quoted above and one sent to the General Court by Francis Stone contained the key to the reason why some of the insurgents held out so long after the legislature had redressed many grievances in October and November. Stone, of North Brookfield who was mentioned with Seth Murray of Hatfield, Abraham Gale of Princeton, Nathan Smith of Shirley and Peter Butterfield of Townsend, all Revolutionary War veterans, as minor leaders in the uprising,⁴⁴ wrote the following from Pelham, January 30th:

⁴² Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 552-53; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 511-12; Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster, p. 254; Waters, History of Chelmsford, p. 357.

⁴³ Letter from L. L. Doty to Massachusetts Historical Society, Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, VIII, 257; Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 102.

⁴⁴ Barry, History of Massachusetts, III, 254; Temple, History of Palmer, p. 203; Blake, History of Princeton, p. 246; Sawtelle, History of Townsend, p. 217.

We . . . solemnly promise, that we will lay down our arms, and repair to our respective homes, in a peaceable and quiet manner; and so remain, provided your honours will grant to our petitioners, and all those our brethren who have recourse to arms, or otherwise aided or assisted our cause, a general pardon for their past offences all of which we humbly submit to the wisdom, candour, and benevolence of your honours, as we in duty bound shall ever pray.⁴⁵

These two petitions (Shays' and Stone's) were the result of warrants issued by Governor Bowdoin, January 10th. These warrants created special cases out of the leaders, exempting them from amnesty, and many of Shays' rank and file evidently felt that such a distinction was unfair and were willing to try to hold out until a general pardon was offered.⁴⁶

This feeling that it would be safer to attempt to gain a general pardon was well founded. After Bowdoin's call for the arrest of the leaders he offered a reward for their capture.⁴⁷ He followed this with letters to the several governors of the states around Massachusetts asking them to apprehend and return all rebels to the commonwealth for prosecutions. The chief executives of New Hampshire,⁴⁸ New York,⁴⁹ Connecticut,⁵⁰ Vermont,⁵¹

⁴⁵ Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 381.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 375.

⁴⁷ Warrant for the arrest of rebel leaders issued by Bowdoin, nequoted from Parmenter, History of Pelham, p.375.

⁴⁸ Worcester Magazine, p. 568.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 609.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 637.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 634.

and Pennsylvania⁵² all evinced a public willingness to aid Bowdoin in his search.

The last state mentioned had for its President Benjamin Franklin and he made sure that there would be an active effort in Pennsylvania to capture the rebels when he added a further reward to the one Massachusetts had promised.⁵³ His letter to Bowdoin was an interesting and revealing example of the general opinion of the Rebellion held by the governors and other prominent men in areas outside Massachusetts.

I congratulate your Excellency most cordially on the happy success attending the wise and vigorous measures taken for the suppression of that dangerous insurrection; and I pray most heartily for the future tranquility of the State which you so worthily and happily govern. Its Constitution is, I think, one of the best in the Union, perhaps I might say, in the world. And I persuade myself, that the good sense and sound understanding predominant among the great majority of your people will always secure it from the mad attempts to overthrow it; which can only proceed from the wickedness or from the ignorance of a few who while they enjoy it, are insensible of its excellence.⁵⁴

One further skirmish occurred February 26th when about ninety Shaysites entered Berkshire County from New York where they had taken refuge. They created some

⁵² Ibid., p. 637.

⁵³ Proclamation from the President of Pennsylvania, March 10, 1787, requoted from Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, III, 180-81.

⁵⁴ Letter from Benjamin Franklin to Gov. Bowdoin, March 6, 1787, requoted from Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 637.

disturbance in the towns of Stockbridge and Great Barrington and were said to have released the prisoners from the jails as well as captured a few important persons for hostages and taken some food and other loot. The militia from Sheffield, Great Barrington, and the surrounding area was quickly collected under Captains Dwight and Ingersoll and a fight took place near Egremont. The encounter was brief and the rebels were dispersed, but not before three had been killed and more than thirty wounded and the militia had suffered a loss of two dead and several wounded marking the engagement as the most costly of the Rebellion measured in terms of deaths and injuries.⁵⁵

One indication that the Rebellion retained its popularity throughout the whole of its existence was evidenced by the fact that the militia left to police the area were subject to constant public pressure and censure. Toward the end of the active part of the Insurrection and after the dispersal at Petersham, reports from militia officers showed this feeling. General John Peterson at Stockbridge, January 1787, made a raid on a Shays force and captured eighty-four prisoners, but his couriers reported such an ugly feeling toward his troops that he applied to Lincoln for more men and said "the deportment of the faction in

⁵⁵ Taylor, History of Great Barrington, pp. 309-11; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 517.

this country against government has induced a kind of frenzy."⁵⁶ Col. Gideon Burt at Springfield in February advised Lincoln against withdrawing his troops from the area and wrote: "It is very difficult for me to obtain men who I can confide in to bring and carry Intelligence and horse who will patrol roads."⁵⁷ Lincoln himself remarked in Pittsfield after scattering the insurgents that "the people in general had been in arms, or had been abettors of those who were: and that their obstinacy was not exceeded by anything but their ignorance of their own situation."⁵⁸ Furthermore, the government misjudged the situation after Springfield, sending 2000 militia home on the belief that Shays' force would disintegrate. The rebels made recruits faster than desertions and Bowdoin had to call out 2600 more state troops.⁵⁹ It was not until August 13th that their numbers were reduced to two hundred and a month more elapsed before the "complete suppression of the rebellion was announced by the discharge of all the forces."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Report from General John Peterson to General Lincoln requoted from Green, History of Springfield, p. 326.

⁵⁷ Letter from Col. Gideon Burt to General Lincoln, Feb. 1, 1787, requoted from ibid., p. 327.

⁵⁸ Report from General Lincoln, requoted from ibid., 326.

⁵⁹ Crane, "Shays Rebellion," Coll. of the Wor. Soc. of Antiquity, V, 97.

⁶⁰ Smith, History of Pittsfield, p. 406.

Another evidence of public support was found in the results of the disqualifying act of February 16th.⁶¹ This act, dealing with the mass of privates and subordinates in Shays' army, demanded they lay down their arms, swear allegiance to the Commonwealth, and keep the peace for three years. During this time they were not allowed to serve as jurors, town officials, or any other government office nor as schoolteachers, innkeepers, or retail liquor dealers, unless after May 1, 1788, they should "exhibit plenary evidence of their having returned to their allegiance and kept the peace and of their possessing an unequivocal attachment to the government as should appear to the General Court a sufficient ground to discharge them from all or any of these disqualifications."⁶²

The Act proved unworkable due to the extensiveness of the Rebellion. Minot remarked: "Such had been its [the Rebellion's] prevalence in some towns, that when the disqualifying act came into force, it scarcely left sufficient numbers for the necessary offices of the corporation."⁶³ As prominent an anti-Shaysite as General Lincoln observed:

⁶¹ Mass. Acts and Laws, 1787, p. 555-58.

⁶² Ibid.; Minot, Insurrections, p. 137.

⁶³ Minot, Insurrections, pp. 162-63; See also Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 63; Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 384.

"Although I think the proceedings of the Legislature and their conduct will make a rich page in history, yet I cannot but suppose that if the number of disfranchised had been less the public peace would have been equally safe and the general happiness promoted. The act includes so great a description of persons that in its operation many towns will be disfranchised."⁶⁴ For this reason the General Court, March 10, 1787, appointed a commission of three -- Benjamin Lincoln, Samuel Phillips, and Samuel Allyne Otis, General, President of the Senate and Speaker of the House respectively -- to look into individual cases and grant exemptions.⁶⁵

Even this commission, however, could not wipe out private obligations and an amusing incident was reported in connection with a law suit following the Rebellion.

In the personal animosities which attended the Rebellion, a horse belonging to a friend of government, was shot and killed by his neighbor, a Shays sympathizer. From this arose a suit for damages brought by the former against the latter. The Shays man was known to be guilty, but the difficulty was to prove the fact. The case came up for hearing before a Justice of the Peace, and Major William King appeared as counsel to defend the Shays man. It was proved beyond a doubt that the defendant, at the time of the killing, had been seen within half a mile of the pasture in which the horse was kept, with a gun in his

⁶⁴ Letter from General Lincoln (Lincoln Papers unpublished), requoted from Green, History of Springfield, p. 329.

⁶⁵ Minot, Insurrections, pp. 162-63; See also Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 63; Parmenter, History of Pelham, p. 384.

hands, and that he was heard to hurrah lustily for Shays. The evidence was not very conclusive as to his guilt; but the counsel for the plaintiff laid great stress upon it, and made a labored and lengthy argument. Rising to reply, Major King, in his laconic way, addressed the court: 'May it please your Honor; the question is simply this, whether or not hurrahing for Shays will kill a horse at half a mile' and resumed his seat. The defendant was acquitted.⁶⁶

The principle leaders were not allowed amnesty under either the disqualifying act or the special commission. They were to be dealt with separately and the petitions which came in asking for leniency of punishment or complete pardon were a further indication of the popular sympathy for the Rebellion. Specific requests to this effect came in from Holden, Pelham, Hatfield, Hadley, Colraine, North Brookfield, Grafton, Hubbardston, Boxford, Milford, and even Boston, to mention only a few.⁶⁷ A typical example of this type of document was the one sent in by Chelmsford concerning Shattuck, who was, incidentally, well treated in jail.⁶⁸ The petition went as follows:

⁶⁶ Taylor, History of Great Barrington, p. 319.

⁶⁷ Town Records of Holden, Dec. 28, 1786, requested from Worcester Magazine, (1786-87), pp. 507-11; Parmenter, History of Pelham, pp. 386-87, (for Pelham, Hatfield, Hadley, and Colraine); Town Records of North Brookfield, Dec. 26, 1786, requested from Temple, History of North Brookfield, p. 245; Town Records of Grafton, 1787, requested from Pierce, History of Grafton, p. 78; Town Records of Hubbardston, requested from Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 62; Town Records of Boxford, requested from Rand, History of Boxford, p. 253; Town Records of Milford, Jan. 29, 1787, requested from Adin Ballou, History of the Town of Milford (Boston, 1882), p. 91; Town Records of Boston XXXI, 125-26.

⁶⁸ Worcester Magazine, (1786-87), p. 500.

To his Excellency the Governor, and the Honorable the council now sitting in Boston; the petition of the subscribers inhabitants of the town of Chelmsford in the county of Middlesex, humbly sheweth, that whereas Job Shattuck of said county is now under the sentence of death for treasonable conduct against this Commonwealth which conduct we view with abhorance and disapprobation. But we believe that he was in a great measure insensible of the fatal tendency of his conduct, and that through ignorance of the Laws and the Constitution of the Commonwealth and by hearing the complaints of the people; together with the insinuations of rash and inconsiderate men, he was led to conduct in such a manner as he did; which circumstances we think in some measure extenuates his criminality. Considering the above circumstances together with the character which according to information from undoubted authority the said Shattuck has heretofore sustained especially as being a good officer in the service of this commonwealth in the late war with Britain, and also in being very charitable to the poor. Therefore, your petitioners humbly conceive that it would be consistent with the good and safety of the Commonwealth that his life might be spared and that it would have a tendency to restore peace and harmony to the people of this commonwealth, and prevent the disaffection of many people in the neighboring states: Therefore your petitioners humbly and most earnestly pray that his Excellency and your Honors would take the matter into your wise consideration and if it can be consistent with the good and safety of the Commonwealth, that the above-named criminal may be pardoned; and your petitioners as in duty bound will ever pray [seventy-seven signatures] . 69

These pressures had a great deal to do with the general leniency of punishment. The few penalties which were carried out were minor fines or public censure measures and were done as much to save the administration's face as anything else. For example, a member of the Senate from Hampshire County, Moses Harvey, was made to sit on a

69 Town Records of Chelmsford, July 16, 1787, requested from Waters, History of Chelmsford, pp. 359-60.

gallows for several hours with a rope around his neck.⁷⁰ Also, when reprieves were granted to the fourteen leaders convicted of treason (six from Berkshire County, six from Hampshire, and one each from Worcester and Middlesex Counties) the sheriffs were directed to lead the prisoners to the gallows and go through every possible motion of hanging short of dropping the floor, before reading stay of execution orders.⁷¹ This general leniency of punishment and the final act of indemnity and pardon for all were still further indications that sentiment for the rebel aims was strong and sympathy for the insurrectionists themselves was very real in the minds of the majority of the population.

The general pardoning act mentioned here was a product of Hancock's 1787-88 administration.⁷² The landslide which brought him and the act into power best indicated the real extent of the Rebellion since the Shaysites carried the state. Of some 24,000 votes, Hancock, the people's choice, received over three fourths. The exact count was reported as 6,394 for Bowdoin and 18,459 for

⁷⁰ Smith, History of Pittsfield, I, 406.

⁷¹ Sheriff's records, requested from Balke, History of Princeton, I, 257; Lincoln, History of Worcester, p. 131.

⁷² Massachusetts Resolves, 1788, p. 29; Minot, Insurrections, pp. 191-92; Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 520.

Hancock.⁷³ Minot commented that "When the business was over, such alterations were made in the representations of towns; such divisions appeared in the votes for Senators; and the change in the chair was effected by so large a majority, as seemed to indicate a revolution in the public mind."⁷⁴ Three typical town results were those of Oxford, Amesbury, and Braintree, where the votes for Hancock and Bowdoin stood at 64 to 2,⁷⁵ 45 to 4,⁷⁶ and 181 to 40⁷⁷ respectively. Even Boston slid into Hancock's column 775 to 724,⁷⁸ while, interestingly enough, a center as far west as Pittsfield, Berkshire County, went to Bowdoin 47 to 13.⁷⁹ There was considerable evidence which indicated that certain of the insurrectionists themselves

⁷³ Nevins, American States During and After the Revolution, p. 219; See also: Adams, New England in the Republic, p. 165; Letter from John Quincy Adams to John Adams, June 30, 1787, Worthington Chauncy Ford, ed. Writings of John Quincy Adams, 7 Vols. (New York, 1913), I, 30.

⁷⁴ Minot, Insurrections, p. 176.

⁷⁵ Town Records of Oxford requested from G. F. Daniels, History of Oxford, p. 149.

⁷⁶ Town Records of Amesbury, requested from Merrill, History of Amesbury and Merrimac, p. 303.

⁷⁷ Town Records of Braintree, p. 573.

⁷⁸ Town Records of Boston, XXXI, 145.

⁷⁹ Town Records of Pittsfield, requested from Smith, History of Pittsfield, p. 415.

were sent as representatives in the new legislature.⁸⁰

The above election results were the will of the vast majority of the people. Nevins may have been right when he stated that, "If ever a Governor deserved re-election it was Bowdoin,"⁸¹ but the people of Massachusetts did not think so.

In connection with this it should be noted that the suffrage in Massachusetts at this time included nearly every male over twenty-one years of age.⁸² Minot remarked: "so small are the qualifications of voters, that scarce a single man is excluded from his equal share in creating even the first magistrate in the community."⁸³ Another important contemporary of the state, Elbridge Gerry felt the suffrage was too broad -- that there was too much

⁸⁰ Letter from J. Q. Adams to John Adams, June 30, 1787, J. Q. Adams, Writings, I, 30; Letter from John Jay to Thomas Jefferson, April 24, 1787, Jay, Correspondence, III, 244; Letter from James Madison to Edmund Pendleton, April 22, 1787, Letters and Other Writings of James Madison Fourth President of the United States, 4 Vols. (Philadelphia, 1867), I, 316-17; Adams, New England in the Republic, p. 165; A. Bradford, History of Mass., p. 311.

⁸¹ Nevins, American States During and After Revolution, p. 219.

⁸² Francis Newton Thorpe, The Federal and State Constitutions, Colonial Charters and Other Organic Laws of the States, Territories, and Colonies now or Heretofore Forming the United States of America, 7 Vols. (Washington, D. C., 1909), III, 1912, 1921.

⁸³ Minot, Insurrections, p. 23.

democracy.⁸⁴ Gorham of Massachusetts plainly stated that the franchise in the Commonwealth and elsewhere was not restricted to property owners but included most of the merchants, mechanics, and non-freeholders as well.⁸⁵ Others made similar observations.⁸⁶

The new legislature righted most of the wrongs still remaining and discussed others. They reduced the number of terms of holding the Courts of Common Pleas and General Sessions of the Peace,⁸⁷ repealed the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus,⁸⁸ and surveyed and rejected the possibilities of an emission of paper currency.⁸⁹ Most important, they purposely neglected to pass a tax law for 1787 which gave the people a much needed respite.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Jonathan Elliot, Debates, 5 Vols. (Philadelphia, 1881), V, 158.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 388.

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 188, 389; Frank Luther Mott, ed., Benjamin Franklin: Representative Selections, With Introduction Bibliography and Notes, American Writers Series (New York, 1936), p. 452; Albert Bushnell Hart, American History Told by Contemporaries 4 Vols. (New York, 1936), II, 171.

⁸⁷ Minot, Insurrections, p. 165.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 182.

⁸⁹ Letter from J. Q. Adams to John Adams, June 30, 1787, J. Q. Adams, Writings, I, 31.

⁹⁰ No tax law appeared in the Mass. Acts and Laws for 1787.

Hamilton's funding bill and assumption of the state debts along with a gradual revival of trade, a prospering of manufactures and the migration of some to the Ohio valley were further reasons for the 1791 words of Fisher Ames: "There is a scarcity of grievances. Their mouths are stopped with white bread and roast meat."⁹¹

The Shays Rebellion in Massachusetts passed into history but it should be noted that, at the time, it was not the only area of unrest. Disturbances, although not armed insurrections were reported in South Carolina,⁹² Virginia,⁹³ Maryland,⁹⁴ New Hampshire,⁹⁵ Pennsylvania,⁹⁶ and Vermont.⁹⁷ Most of these unrests involved the issue of paper currency designed to relieve the pressures emanating from a lack of sufficient circulating medium.⁹⁸

⁹¹ Ames Records, requoted from Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster, p. 255.

⁹² Letter from Edward Rutledge to John Jay, Nov. 12, 1786, Jay, Correspondence, III, 217.

⁹³ Letter from James Madison to James Monroe, Dec. 21, 1786, Madison, Correspondence, I, 266-67, ff.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Worcester Magazine, pp. 306-07 and 339-40; Smith, History of Newton, p. 388.

⁹⁶ Pennsylvania Packet, Nov. 7, 1786, requoted from Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 449.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 460.

⁹⁸ Worcester Magazine (1786-87), pp. 306-07, 339-40; 449, 460; Smith, History of Newton, p. 388; Jay, Correspondence, III, 217; Madison, Correspondence, I, 266-67.

CHAPTER IV

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SHAYS REBELLION ON THE FORMATION OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES

One of the fairly standard and generally accredited ideas about Shays Rebellion is the acceptance of the fact that the insurrection had a very real and extensive influence on the formation of the Constitution of the United States. Most modern American history textbooks, in the short section devoted to Shays and his followers, contain this idea as a conclusion and there can be no doubt that it is based, to some extent at least, on actual fact. However, no monograph has been written on the subject and some study of this idea is needed.

The influence of the rebellion on the calling of the Philadelphia Convention can best be seen in the letters and papers of some of the important men of the day who were influential in having the convention brought into being and some of whom were important figures at the meetings themselves.

Washington referred to the insurrection several times in letters to various people and expressed considerable concern over what he termed the "present tumults in Massachusetts."¹ In a letter to Bushrod Washington in September

¹ Washington, Writings, XXIX, 34.

of 1786 he showed displeasure with the methods of the rebels. "To point out the defects of the constitution (if any existed) in a decent way, was proper enough; but they have done more: they first vote the Court of Justice, in the present circumstances of the state, oppressive; and next, by violence stop them. . . ."2 In October he wrote to David Humphreys:

Commotions of this sort, like snowballs, gather strength as they roll, if there is no opposition in the way to divide and crumble them. Do write me fully, I beseech you, on these matters; not only with respect to facts, but as to opinions of their tendency and issue. I am mortified beyond expression in the moment of our acknowledged independence we should by our conduct verify the predictions of our trans atlantic foe, and render ourselves ridiculous and contemptible in the eyes of all Europe.³

He felt that the disturbances were "alarming"⁴ and "That G.B. will be an unconcerned Spectator of the present insurrections (if they continued) is not to be expected,"⁵ besides expressing general disapprobation elsewhere.⁶

However, it can hardly be agreed that Beard was correct in saying that "Washington was thoroughly frightened."⁷ Letters such as the following express concern but certainly not abject fear:

² Letter to Bushrod Washington, Sept. 30, 1786, ibid., 23.

³ Letter to David Humphreys, Oct. 22, 1786, ibid., 27.

⁴ Letter to David Stuart, Dec. 6, 1786, ibid., 108.

⁵ Letter to Henry Knox, Dec. 26, 1786, ibid., 124.

⁶ Letters to David Humphreys, Dec. 26, 1786, Henry Knox, Feb. 3, 1787, Pres. Ezra Stiles, Feb. 3, 1787, and Benj. Lincoln, Jr., Feb. 24, 1787, ibid., 125-26, 151, 167.

⁷ Beard, Rise of American Civilization, I, 307.

But for God's sake tell me what is the cause of all these commotions; do they proceed from licentiousness, British-influence disseminated by the tories, or real grievances which admit of redress. If the latter, why were they delayed 'till the public mind had become so much agitated? If the former why are not the powers of Government tried at once?⁸

and:

You talk my good Sir, of employing influence to appease the present tumults in Massachusetts. I know not where that influence is to be found; and if attainable, that it would be a proper remedy for the disorders. Influence is no Government. Let us have one by which our lives, liberties and properties will be secured; or let us know the worst at once. Under these impressions my humble opinion is, that there is a call for decision. Know precisely what the insurgents aim at. If they have real grievances, redress them if possible; or acknowledge the justice of them, and your inability to do it in the present moment. If they have not, employ the force of government against them at once. If this is inadequate, all will be convinced that the superstructure is bad, or wants support. To be more exposed in the eyes of the world, and more contemptible than we already are, is hardly possible.⁹

Later he agreed with General Lincoln that the Massachusetts act disfranchising the rebels was a mistake and too harsh¹⁰ and expressed the same sentiments to Lafayette¹¹ and Madison: "I fear the State of Massachusetts have exceeded the bounds of good policy in its disfranchisements;

⁸ Letter to David Humphreys, Oct. 22, 1786, Washington, Writings, XXIX, 27.

⁹ Letter to Henry Lee, Oct. 31, 1786, ibid., 34.

¹⁰ Letter to Gen. Benj. Lincoln, March 23, 1787, ibid., 181-82.

¹¹ Letter to Marquis de Lafayette, March 25, 1787, ibid., 184.

punishment is certainly due to the disturbers of government, but the operations of this act is too extensive. It embraces too much, and probably may give birth to new instead of destroying the old leven."¹²

It should be noted, however, that Washington's information about the uprising was incomplete and somewhat inaccurate. The bulk of it came from Henry Knox who believed that the insurgents were "desperate and unprincipled men bent on the common ownership of property, annihilation of all public and private debts, and paper money."¹³

Furthermore, he (Washington) had been instrumental in calling the forerunner to the Philadelphia convention at Annapolis in early September, 1786, some time before the tumults were of any consequence, or well known in areas outside Massachusetts.

That he did feel the rebellion had had some influence on the Philadelphia Convention, though, may be seen in his 1788 letter to William Tudor: "The troubles in your State may, as you justly observe, have operated in proving to the comprehension of many minds the necessity of a more

¹² Letter to James Madison, March 31, 1787, ibid., ¹⁹¹184.

¹³ Letter to James Madison, Nov. 5, 1786, ibid., 51-52. Letter to Henry Knox, Feb. 25, 1787, ibid., 169. Letter from Gen. Knox to Washington, Oct. 23, 1786, Gaillard Hunt and J. B. Scott, eds., The Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787, Reported by James Madison (New York, 1920), Appendix I, pp. 585-86.

efficient general government."¹⁴

Franklin, in his usual calm manner, did not feel the troubles were very serious or far reaching. The states, according to him, were in general enjoying peace and plenty and while "There have been some disorders in . . . Massachusetts" they "are quelled for the present. . . ."¹⁵ Two days later he wrote in a similar vein¹⁶ and the preceeding November he had said: "The little Disorders you have heard of in some of the States, rais'd by a few wrong Heads, are subsiding, and will probably soon be extinguish'd."¹⁷ However, he also did not seem to understand fully the extent of the sympathy for Shays in the state and the thoughts he expressed in April in a letter to Jefferson bear this out.¹⁸

Unlike Franklin, James Madison, the chief penman at the convention, took a less favorable view of the Rebellion. He believed that the avowed purposes of the rebels were suspect, i.e. not merely the reform of certain abuses but "an abolition of debts, public and private and a new division of property. . . ."¹⁹ As things developed he was concerned about "a propensity towards monarchy" which the

¹⁴ Letter to Wm. Tudor, Aug. 18, 1788, Washington, Writings, XXX, 55.

¹⁵ Letter to Duke De La Fochefoucauld, April 15, 1787, Franklin, Writings IX, 564.

¹⁶ Letter to Marquis De Chastellux, April 17, 1787, ibid., 568. See also, 569 and 578.

¹⁷ Letter to Ed. Bancroft, Nov. 26, 1786, ibid., 551.

¹⁸ Letter to Thomas Jefferson, April 19, 1787, ibid., 573-74.

¹⁹ Letter to Col. James Madison, Nov. 1, 1786, Madison, Writings, I, 253.

troubles in New England had nurtured,²⁰ was opposed to the idea of partitioning the states in order to create three more vigorous governments,²¹ was pleased that Lincoln's forces had been so successful in defeating the insurgents and was disappointed that "The principal incendiaries have . . . made off."²² However, he did not approve of the disarming and disfranchising movements which were on foot because, if carried into effect, they might only bring on a new crisis.²³

Furthermore, Madison realized that despite the success of the militia there was still "a great deal of leaven in the mass of the people"²⁴ and hoped a solution would be found by the convention then in session in Philadelphia for this, and similar internal disturbances. "The great desideratum," he said, "which had yet to be found for Republican Governments, seems to be some disinterested and dispassionate umpire in disputes between different passions and interests in the state."²⁵

"A spirit of licentiousness. . ." was the phrase used

²⁰ Letter to Edmund Pendleton, Feb. 24, 1787, ibid., 280.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Letter to Edmund Pendleton, Feb. 24, 1787, ibid., 278.

²³ Letter to Gen. Washington, Feb. 21, 1787, ibid., 277.

²⁴ Letter to Col. James Madison, Feb. 25, 1787, ibid., 280.

²⁵ Letter to Gen. Washington, April 16, 1787, ibid., 288.

by Jay to describe the tumults and he felt that it was one more evidence of the inadequacy of the government under the confederation.²⁶ He wrote to Jefferson:

Much, I think, is to be feared from the sentiments which such a state of things [the Shays Rebellion] is calculated to infuse into the minds of the rational and well-contented. In their eyes, the charms of liberty will daily fade; and in seeking for peace and security, they will too naturally turn toward systems in direct opposition to those which oppress and disquiet them. If faction should long bear down government, tyranny may raise its head, or the more sober part of the people may even think of a king.

In short, my dear sir, we are in a very unpleasant situation. Changes are necessary; but what they ought to be, what they will be, and how and when to be produced, are arduous questions. I feel for the cause of liberty and for the honor of my country men who have so nobly asserted it, and who at present so abuse its blessings. If it should not take root in this soil, little pains will be taken to cultivate it in any other.²⁷

What events "the feuds in Massachusetts would ultimately produce were uncertain," Jay felt, but he believed that they might cause much trouble.²⁸ He voiced a current idea when he wrote Jefferson that foreign influence was possibly behind the uprisings²⁹ and seemed relieved when things had been quieted.³⁰

Jefferson, himself, was in Paris and not in a position to exercise as direct an influence as many others; however,

²⁶ Letter to Thomas Jefferson, Oct. 27, 1786, Jay, Correspondence, III, 212-13.

²⁷ Ibid., 212-13.

²⁸ Letter to Jacob Reed, Dec. 12, 1786, ibid., 221-22.

²⁹ Letter to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 9, 1787, ibid., 232.

³⁰ Letter to John Adams, Feb. 21, 1787, ibid., 234.

he was intensely interested in events in this country, particularly the troubles in Massachusetts, and received the newspapers and information from Jay and others.³¹ On the whole, he took a rather calm view of the matter. Interestingly enough he made light of the notion, which so bothered Washington,³² that the tumults were greatly lowering our prestige abroad.³³ He felt that while the people were "not entirely without excuse"³⁴ The acts were unjustifiable but hoped that the government would not be provoked to any severities.³⁵ His now famous thoughts on rebellions were made with reference to these uprisings and show his relative unconcern:

I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, & 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.³⁶

Samuel Osgood of Massachusetts felt that a change of national government was definitely needed and in the offing.

³¹ Letter to Thomas Jefferson, Feb. 9, 1787, ibid., 232.

³² Letter to Henry Lee, Oct. 31, 1786, Washington, Writings, XXIX, 34.

³³ Letter to Edward Carrington, Jan. 16, 1787, Jefferson, Writings, IV, 359.

³⁴ Letter to William Carmichael, Dec. 26, 1786, ibid., 345-46.

³⁵ Letter to James Madison, Jan. 30, 1787, ibid., 361.

³⁶ Letter to James Madison, Jan. 30, 1787, ibid., 362-63.

In his words: "The disturbances in Massachusetts seem most likely to produce some very important event." He, too was concerned about the unfriendly interest and influence of foreign nations, particularly France and England, and worried that they would take advantage of the fine opportunity afforded them by the insurrections.³⁷

John Quincy Adams, a young Harvard student, can hardly be considered an influential figure in the formation of the constitution, but his views are of some interest. He said the rebellion was entirely in the western counties,³⁸ he opposed it as a threat to the property rights of the "honest and industrious," and believed "The opinion that a pure democracy appears to much greater advantage in speculation than when reduced to practice gains ground, and bids fair for popularity."³⁹

The writings of Alexander Hamilton, a very influential figure in the final acceptance of the Constitution, strangely enough are completely void of any direct reference to the rebellion prior to the convention itself. He must certainly have known of it and this lack of early reference to it

³⁷ Letter from Samuel Osgood to John Adams, Nov. 14, 1786, J. Adams, Works, VIII, 419-20.

³⁸ Letter to Abigail Adams, Dec. 30, 1786, J. Q. Adams, Writings, I, 28.

³⁹ Letter to Abigail Adams, Dec. 30, 1786, ibid., 29.

indicates that his thinking was not very much affected by it.⁴⁰

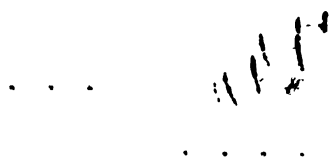
The important thing to note, however, in viewing the writings of all these men prior to the convention, is that they were all concerned about the state of the new country under the Articles of the Confederation and desired changes long before the Shays Rebellion took place. Some expressed dissatisfaction as early as 1781 and, generally speaking, the Insurrection was viewed as merely another evidence that the Articles were inadequate and should be changed.

At the Philadelphia convention the rebellion entered the debated more than once in the four months' session. But in the overall picture it was referred to remarkably few times for being the great cause for the formation of the constitution as some writers seem to believe it was.

Gerry, representative from Massachusetts, spoke about the Rebellion in four connections. First, he felt that "The evils we experience flow from the excess of democracy," which was dangerous, he continued, since the mass of the people were poorly or incorrectly informed and were easily led "into the most baneful measures and opinions by . . . false reports circulated by designing men. . . ."⁴¹ Second

⁴⁰ Alexander Hamilton, The Works of Alexander Hamilton, ed. by Henry Cabot Lodge, 9 Vols. (New York, 1885), I, passim.

⁴¹ Max Farrand, ed., The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787, 4 Vols. (New Haven, 1939), I, 48.



he deplored the low salaries for public officers which were advocated by the Shays party and believed that the new government should have adequate remunerations for its administrators.⁴² In the third place he argued that paper money was an evil and should be regulated by the national government.⁴³ This had been one of the Shays grievances. Lastly he opposed "letting loose the myrmidons [Federal troops] of the U. States on a state without its own consent." He believed the states were the best judge of need and thought that there would have been a great deal more blood shed during the uprisings "if the Genl. authority had inter-meddled."⁴⁴

Pinckney, on the other hand, felt that the rebellion was an excellent example of what would continue to happen if a real, national military force was not soon established. "The United States," according to him, "had been making an experiment without it, and we see the consequence in their rapid approach toward anarchy."⁴⁵

Randolph, in presenting his new plan, wanted to establish a government which would guard against foreign invasion

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 155.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 317.

⁴⁵ Ibid., II, 332.

and dissensions between member states or within single states such as the troubles in Massachusetts. These troubles, he said, had not been foreseen at the time the Articles were drawn up, but since they had now occurred they were one evidence of the inadequacy of the Confederation.⁴⁶

Rufus King used the Rebellion and its results as an argument against the granting of pardons by the lower house, which was under consideration. King said that "In Massachusetts, one assembly would have hung all the insurgents in that State: the next was equally disposed to pardon them all." He suggested that the Senate concur in all pardons to avoid injustices.⁴⁷

Elsworth argued for states rights because he did not believe that the republican form of government was suitable to as extensive an area as the United States. He pointed to the largest states as being the worst governed and gave the insurrections in Massachusetts as one example of the difficulty of effectively governing a sizeable tract.⁴⁸

Madison spoke along lines which his contemporary, Thomas Jefferson, was to follow later, when he feared the great increase of population which the future would bring and the consequent inequalities of property and wealth.

⁴⁶ Ibid., I, 18.

⁴⁷ Ibid., II, 406. 626.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 422-23, I, 406.

Although he did not believe that "agrarian" attempts had yet been made, he did feel that in certain quarters-- Massachusetts for one-- "symptoms of a leveling spirit. . . have sufficiently appeared. . . to give notice of the future danger." A wise, cool, and stabilizing Senate was his answer to the problem of the coming class struggle which indicated that the rebellion was not without influence in the creation of the United States Senate, usually considered to be a conservative force.⁴⁹

Late in life Madison penned a preface to his debate notes which he never rewrote or polished. Despite this and the fact that it is a retrospect view rather than an on-the-spot account, it deserves notice as an expression of the influence of the rebellion by a well-informed and observant contemporary.

As the pub. mind had been ripened for a salutary Reform of the pol. System, in the interval between the proposal & the meeting, of Comrs. at Annapolis, the interval between the last event, and the meeting of Deps. at Phila. had continued to develop more & more the necessity & the extent of a Systematic provision for the preservation and Govt. of the Union; among the ripening incidents was the Insurrection of Shays in Massts. against her Govt; which was with difficulty suppressed, notwithstanding the influence on the insurgents of an apprehended interposition of the Fedl. troops.⁵⁰

After the constitution had been written and sent to the various states for acceptance, Hamilton, Madison and Jay

⁴⁹ Ibid., 422-23.

⁵⁰ Ibid., III, 547.

found it necessary to write a series of newspaper articles, the Federalist Papers, and made use of the Shays Rebellion as ammunition in the contest over ratification. These articles appeared in the New York papers and were primarily directed to the people of New York state. However, they were widely read throughout the states and stand today as the best and most lengthy expression of the pro-constitutional argument.⁵¹

Hamilton, who wrote more of the articles than the others, referred to the Rebellion several times and seemed to have it in mind many other times although not mentioning it by name. The future first Secretary of the Treasury believed that a stronger central government supported by a standing army was a necessary part of the new constitution if uprisings like the ones in Massachusetts or worse were to be avoided. Numbers 7,8,9, and 24-29 were particularly devoted to this topic. He referred to Shays as a "desperate debtor,"⁵² pointed out "the extreme depression to which our national dignity and credit have sunk. . .," the "lax and ill administration of government. . .," and the troubles in North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts as evidences of the

⁵¹ Charles A. Beard, The Enduring Federalist (New York, 1948), p. vi.

⁵² Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Jay, The Federalist On The New Constitution, Written in 1788. A New Edition with the Names and Portraits of the Several Writers (Philadelphia, 1818), p. 29.

great need for adoption of the new document.⁵³ "A firm Union," said Hamilton, "will be of the utmost moment to the peace and liberty of the States, as a barrier against domestic faction and insurrection."⁵⁴ "A turbulent faction," he continued, "may easily suppose itself able to contend with the friends to the government in that state; but it can hardly be so infatuated, as to imagine itself equal to the combined efforts of the union."⁵⁵ In number eighty-five he summed up his ideas on the subject:

The additional securities to republican government, to liberty, and to property, to be derived from the adoption of the plan, consist chiefly in the restraints which the preservation of the union will impose upon local factions and insurrections, and upon the ambition of powerful individuals in single states, who might acquire credit and influence enough, from leaders and favorites to become the despots of the people. . . .⁵⁶

Madison agreed in principle with Hamilton but laid greater emphasis on the existence of the right to interpose which would "generally prevent the necessity of exerting it"⁵⁷ and also viewed the proposed government as an umpire "not heated by local flame" to which dissenting parties might appeal.⁵⁸

Jay evidently was not impressed with the rebellion as a reason for the adoption of the constitution and did not refer to it.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 141.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 472.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 237.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 238.

The ratifying convention in Massachusetts deserved study because some of the Shays men were members⁵⁹ and because it was a rather close vote in a very important state.⁶⁰ Surprisingly enough the Insurrection was referred to rather infrequently in the course of the debates although at least once tempers flared over certain inferences and accusations.⁶¹ References to the Rebellion were made in five connections, the arguments pro and con, over the proposed two year term of office of the lower house being the most important, some believing the uprisings were evidence of the desirability of biennial elections and others feeling just the opposite.⁶² The other four were: (1) the need of "a supreme council of the whole,"⁶³ (2) of further anarchical troubles if the constitution was not adopted,⁶⁴ (3) of the necessity of having a national army,⁶⁵ and (4) of the necessity of not having a national army but relying only on the militia.⁶⁶

⁵⁹ Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, "Minutes of the Debates in the Massachusetts Convention" (Boston), III, 296.

⁶⁰ Jonathan, Elliot, ed., The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution as Recommended by the General Convention at Philadelphia in 1787, 5 Vols. (Philadelphia, 1881), II, 178-81.

⁶¹ Ibid., 15-16.

⁶² Ibid., 10, 15, and 28.

⁶³ Ibid., 144.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 77.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 137.

However, the actual county votes on final adoption were more important in revealing the part played by the Shaysites in the ratification of the new document. If the Constitution represents a comeback by the conservative forces of the country as some historians seem to believe, the liberal sections of the population of Massachusetts as represented by the Shaysites must have opposed ratification, and on the surface at least, the evidence points in that direction. Worcester, Hampshire and Berkshire, the three large western counties where the Shays sentiment was strongest and the courts most frequently interfered with, were strongly opposed to accepting the Constitution. The votes were: in Worcester, 43 nay and 8 yea; in Hampshire, 32 nay and 19 yea; and in Berkshire, 16 nay and 6 yea.⁶⁷ The vote on the Constitution, however, is somewhat misleading. Rebellion sympathy was certainly not confined to these three western counties as witness the spring election of 1787 when Hancock roundly defeated Bowdoin and even carried Boston.⁶⁸ King's remark that "one assembly would have hung all the insurgents . . . the next was equally disposed to pardon them all" points up the extent of the Shays' victory.⁶⁹ So does Minot's observation that "When the business

⁶⁷ Ibid., 178-81; Elliot's totals for Hampshire County do not agree with his voting lists.

⁶⁸ Boston Town Records, XXXI, 145.

⁶⁹ Farrand, Rec. of the Fed. Conv., II, 626.

was over, such alterations were made in the representations of towns, such divisions appeared in the votes for Senators; and the change in the chair was affected by so large a majority as seemed to indicate a revolution in the public mind."⁷⁰ James Warren expressed similar thoughts to John Adams. "It is certain a General discontent and disapprobation prevails in the Country, and has shown itself in the late Elections. Mr. H[ancock] is undoubtedly chose the first Magistrate." He added, "The Senators are generally changed. Even the good and inoffensive Mr. Cranch is left out--I imagine because he was of the Court of Common Pleas. . . . There is an appearance of as general a Change in the House."⁷¹ If the Shays sympathizers could carry a statewide election as they did, they could certainly have defeated the Constitution if they had wanted to. One must conclude that despite the opposition of the strongest Shays counties the document was ratified and many Shaysites voted for it.

The theories that the Shays Rebellion was one of the most important reasons for the calling of the Philadelphia convention, that it had a great deal of influence in making the document a conservative one, that it was the most potent ammunition used by conservative Federalists in support of

⁷⁰ Minot, Insurrections, p. 176.

⁷¹ Letter from James Warren to John Adams, May 18, 1787, Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll., II, 292-93.

adoption, and that the Shays sympathizers in Massachusetts nearly stopped ratification there, need to be viewed with a critical eye. It is true that the rebellion was known about and disapproved of by most of the influential men connected with the formation of the constitution. It is also true that it was referred to on the convention floor, that it was used as an argument in favor of acceptance in the Federalist papers and that many Shaysites in Massachusetts opposed ratification. But a study of the letters and writings of the famous men of the times, of the constitutional debates, of the Federalist Papers and of the Massachusetts ratification convention records indicated an over-emphasis, by some historians, of the influence of Shays Rebellion on the formation of the Constitution of the United States.

CHAPTER V

INTERPRETATIONS OF SHAYS REBELLION

Shays Rebellion, although it has not been given really adequate and scholarly treatment, has nevertheless been interpreted by many historians. The reliability of the majority of these interpretations is suspect when the sources are carefully viewed and evaluated.

To begin with, a strong case has been made for a class struggle interpretation of the uprising. The Shaysites are said to have been the debtor class and the fight a conflict between the aristocratic elements of the population and the poor farmers and laborers. Even the word "communist" was applied.¹ Beard stated this point of view emphatically:

Inflamed by new revolutionary appeals, resurgent agrarians now proposed to scale down the state debt, strike from the Constitution the special privileges enjoyed by property, issue paper money, and generally ease the position of debtors and laboring poor in town and country. Indeed, there were dark hints that the soldiers who had fought for independence would insist that property owners must sacrifice their goods for the cause.²

Another writer believed that "The attempt to collect private debts by recourse to the courts created a war between

¹ William Samuel Pattee, A History of Old Braintree and Quincy (Quincy, 1878), p. 429; Marvin and Others, History of Worcester County, I, 100.

² Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, The Rise of American Civilization, 2 Vols. in one (New York, 1947), I, 307.

debtor and creditor, -- a war of classes. Rich and poor were thus arrayed against each other,"³ and many others felt the same way.⁴

The majority of writers have also felt that the Shays group was recruited from the lazy, discontented debtor minority.⁵ The poor "farmers from the barren hill country,"⁶ western county "debtors,"⁷ and "idle fellows,"⁸ were terms used to describe Shays' "mob." The appearance of this mob "in less troublesome times" said one writer, "would have excited the derision of every beholder. As a

³ Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170.

⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison, The Maritime History of Massachusetts 1783-1860 (New York, 1921), p. 37; Robert A. East, Business Enterprise in the American Revolutionary Era (New York, 1938), p. 264; Green, History of Springfield, p. 308; Chase, History of Ware, p. 95; Beard, Rise of American Civilization, I, 772; Nevins, American States During and After Revolution, p. 214; Edward Wilton Carpenter, The History of the Town of Amherst (Amherst, Mass., 1896), p. 120.

⁵ Alfred Sereno Hudson, The History of Sudbury, Massachusetts 1638-1889 (Boston, 1889), p. 426; Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York, 1921), p. 249.

⁶ Homer Carey Hockett, Political and Social Growth of the American People, 1492-1865 (New York, 1946), p. 254.

⁷ David Saville Muzzey, The American Adventure, 2 Vols. (New York, 1927), I, 122.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, The American People A History (New York, 1926), p. 99.

general thing, they 'looked wretchedly;' their muskets were thoroughly drenched with rain; and the 'rank-scented many' were redolent of rum, which they had pured down in large quantities to keep up their courage."⁹ On the other hand, "The sober and reflecting portion of the people stood by the government"¹⁰ and "The intelligent and patriotic citizens . . . in all parts of the state, were . . . in opposition" to the insurrections.¹¹ "The staid and respectable," said Barry, "were disgusted with . . . [the rebels] movements; for the most illiterate presided at their gatherings, and so weak were their demonstrations that the newspaper wags found ample scope to launch at them their shafts."¹²

The purpose of the rebels, then, was clearly the overthrow of the aristocratic overlords, and in the minds of these writers, was in full accord with a class struggle interpretation. C. F. Adams, in referring to the Braintree town resolves, stated that "In their final shape they breathed the full communistic spirit of the time."¹³ Nevins

⁹ Barry, History of Massachusetts, III, 228.

¹⁰ Washburn, Historical Sketches of Leicester, p. 243.

¹¹ Bradford, History of Massachusetts, p. 298.

¹² Barry, History of Massachusetts, III, 241.

¹³ Charles Francis Adams, Three Episodes of Massachusetts History, 3 Vols. (New York, 1893), II, 896.

and Faulkner agreed that the purpose of the Rebellion was to do away with "special privileges of property"¹⁴ while Wilson stated it was "flat anarchy."¹⁵ "The headlong flight of the insurgents" thought Drake, "ended the greatest peril which constitutional government in America encountered previously to the Southern secession of 1861."¹⁶ The general consensus was that Shays and his followers "noisily advocated the turning of everything topsy-turvy"¹⁷ and that their real purposes were in distinct opposition to the continuation of government in Massachusetts.¹⁸

In line with the class struggle view, many writers felt that the prime motivation for the Rebellion was the desire on the part of unprincipled and demagogic leaders to place themselves in an advantageous position with rabble-rousing techniques. The leaders of the uprising,

¹⁴ Harold Underwood Faulkner, American Political and Social History (New York, 1948), p. 122; Nevins, American States During and After Revolution, p. 536.

¹⁵ Woodrow Wilson, A History of the American People, 5 Vols. (New York, 1902), III, 58.

¹⁶ Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 394.

¹⁷ Nourse, Military Annals of Lancaster, p. 246.

¹⁸ Ray Allen Billington, Bert James Lowenberg, and Samuel Hugh Brocknlier, The United States, American Democracy in World Perspective (New York, 1947), p. 68; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I, 170; Smith, "Shays Rebellion" quoted from Herriok, History of Gardner, p. 85.

principally Daniel Shays but also Parsons, Wheeler, Shattuck, Day, and the rest came in for round censure. "Demagogues" was the word most frequently used to describe them but "desperate, unprincipled characters"¹⁹ "designing leaders"²⁰ "adventurers"²¹ "desperate debtors"²² "malcontents"²³ "criminals"²⁴ "fervent appealers"²⁵ and "cowards"²⁶ were also thought to be accurate descriptions. "Nothing so inflamed the people" said Trumbull, "as the discussion by wily demagogues of their so-called grievances and no opportunity was better fitted to that end than these gatherings [county conventions]".²⁷ Another writer believed that "A few artful and unprincipled men took advantage of their [the peoples'] distress, and persuaded them that they had a right to rid themselves of the restraints

¹⁹ Bradford, History of Massachusetts, p. 272.

²⁰ Smith, History of Pittsfield, I, 402.

²¹ Temple, History of Palmer, p. 199.

²² Hamilton, Madison, Jay, The Federalist, p. 29.

²³ Smith, History of Pittsfield, I, 396.

²⁴ George Lowell Austin, The History of Massachusetts from the Landing of the Pilgrims to the Present Time (Boston, 1876), p. 375.

²⁵ John Spencer Bassett, A Short History of the United States 1492-1938 (New York, 1939), p. 236.

²⁶ Hall, "Reminiscences," Coll. of the Old Colony Hist. Soc., 1878, p. 86.

²⁷ Trumbull, History of Northampton, II, 485.

of law and government which had so oppressed them."²⁸ Of Shays, an early Massachusetts historian had this to say: "Brave though he may have been while in a good cause [the Revolution], he had not the courage which shrinks from dishonorable acts; bankrupt in fortune as well as in virtue, he was ready to embark on the flood of any desperate adventure, in the hope of improving his outward condition."²⁹

Still in keeping with economic determinism were the interpretations of the causes of the Insurrection. Emphasis was laid on several class struggle views as causes rather than on the natural effects of the war as motivation. For instance, considerable stress was placed on the inequalities of the Massachusetts land tax. Schouler felt the "special causes of discontent were traceable to an unequal distribution of wealth and excessive land taxation in Massachusetts the sole seat of the outbreak."³⁰ Beard blamed the "conservative" constitution of 1780. His statement: "according to the Constitution of that state [Massachusetts], drafted by John Adams and put into effect in 1780, the right to vote and hold office had been limited

²⁸ Chase, History of Haverhill, p. 437.

²⁹ Barry, History of Massachusetts, III, 233.

³⁰ James Schouler, History of the United States Under the Constitution, 7 Vols. (New York, 1880), I, 32.

to property owners, and taxpayers; and the richest towns were given special weight in the state senate."³¹ Others blamed the unrest on excesses of luxurious living among the lower classes. They argued that too much potential tax and debt money was going to pay for tea, rum, and other foreign extravagances.³² The existence of many private debts and the "pressures upon the agricultural industry" in general were stressed by still others.³³

Continuing in the same vein, the generally accepted view of the situation on redress was not that the General Court met many of the demands and undermined the rebellious spirit, but rather that the Rebellion was first put down by force and then came the reforms, if any. Morison and Commager stated this quite plainly. "Only after the

³¹ Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, A Basic History of the United States (New York, 1944), p. 122.

³² Hudson, History of Marlborough, p. 193; Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 23; Letter from Gen. Lincoln to Gen. Washington, Dec., 1786, requested from Green, History of Springfield, p. 306; Minot, Insurrections, p. 28; Town Records of Haverhill, requested from Chase, History of Haverhill, p. 439; Letter from the Secretary of State to Joseph Hosmer, Boston, Sept. 10, 1786, requested from Shattuck, History of Concord, p. 133; Editorial from the Independent Chronicle, requested from Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 177; Letter from Noah Webster to Timothy Pickering, Aug. 10, 1786, "Letters of Noah Webster, 1786-1840," Mass. Hist. Soc. Proceedings, XLIII, 131.

³³ Temple, History of Palmer, p. 199; Green, History of Springfield, p. 301; Gage, History of Rowley, p. 295; Ibid., 393; Town Records of Concord requested from Shattuck, History of Concord, pp. 137-38; Minot, Insurrections, p. 28.

uprising had been crushed did the legislature consider the justice of the grievances which had caused it, and take steps to remedy them."³⁴ "Thanks to the firm hand of James Bowdoin to whose dignity, steadfastness, and right mindedness much praise is due," wrote McLaughlin, "the insurrection was at length suppressed."³⁵ Another believed the disturbances "were quieted only by the firmness of the chief magistrate and the hearty cooperation of the friends of government."³⁶ Nevins spoke of Governor Bowdoin's foresight and energy which anticipated every demand "and when Shays' Rebellion came to a head early in 1787, it was instantly crushed by armed force."³⁷ Others wrote in a similar manner.³⁸

The effects of Shays Rebellion went much deeper than the mere fact of some minor disturbances in Massachusetts, according to most writers, and its importance lay in its influence on the formation of the Constitution of the United States by the conservative elements in the country.

³⁴ Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, The Growth of the American Republic, 2 Vols. (New York, 1942), I, 275-76.

³⁵ Andrew Cunningham McLaughlin, The Confederation and the Constitution, 1783-89 (New York, 1905), p. 164.

³⁶ Barry, History of Massachusetts, III, 218.

³⁷ Nevins, American States During and After the Revolution, p. 217.

³⁸ Lodge, Boston, p. 170; Handlin, Commonwealth, p. 50.

Beard believed that Washington and other influential men of the time were "thoroughly frightened"³⁹ by the events in New England. Morison and Commager said that:

Some conservatives turned in despair to monarchy. The President of Congress even sounded Prince Henry of Prussia whether he would accept an American throne. Others learned their lesson from the powerlessness of the Confederation even to protect its own property [the Springfield arsenal], much less to help a state in distress. Out of it all came an emotional surge without which nothing great can be accomplished in America -- towards a new Federal Constitution.⁴⁰

They added:

Shays' Rebellion conjured up a horrid vision of disorder, disintegration, and foreign intervention, that would have made the last state of America infinitely worse than submitting to George III in 1775. Naturally it was the men of property and education whose interests were primarily affected by the menace of dissension, and who assumed leadership in the Constitutional movement.⁴¹

Billington, in his text book, felt:

Shays' Rebellion in 1787 marked the high point in the rising Revolutionary democracy; for the next thirteen years the course of American thought was to the right as alarmed conservatives captured the reins of government and swept the nation back toward a point where their social and economic privileges would be preserved.⁴²

Many others carried the same thought in their writing⁴³

³⁹ Beard, Rise of American Civilization, I, 307.

⁴⁰ Morison and Commager, Growth of the American Republic I, 276.

⁴¹ Ibid., 277.

⁴² Billington and others, The United States, p. 69.

⁴³ Roger Butterfield, The American Past A History of the United States from Concord to Hiroshima, 1775-1945 (New York, 1947), p. 10; Bassett, History of the United States, p. 236; Beard, Basic History of the U. S. p. 122; Wertenbaeker, American People, p. 100; Schouler, History of the U. S. I, 32.

and Channing went on to state that "those who had been 'out with Shays' and their sympathizers formed a large portion of the party which opposed the ratification of the new Federal Constitution," implying that the Rebellion was not only an important factor in bringing about the writing of the Constitution but that the Shaysites did everything in their power to stop its adoption.⁴⁴

Some writers who followed the class struggle interpretation failed to realize that conditions in Massachusetts in 1786 were not identical with those in the same place one hundred years later. Because of this failure they tended to read the problems of their own day back into the Shays troubles. One referred to the rebels as the "Greenback party of the day," and felt that "after reading the discussions of that time one is brought to the conclusion that the advocates of rag money have not materially strengthened their arguments during the last ninety years [1878]."⁴⁵ Others carried out the same theme stressing the similarity between the Shaysites and late nineteenth century advocates of "free trade" and "fiat money."⁴⁶ Another described the uprising thus:

⁴⁴ Edward Channing, A History of the United States, 6 Vols. (New York, 1924), III, 487.

⁴⁵ Herrick, History of Gardner, p. 83.

⁴⁶ Green, Groton During the Revolution, I, No. III, p. 5; Stowe, History of Hubbardston, p. 66; Lodge, Boston, p. 169.

It had, as we have seen, as its basis some serious troubles, and perhaps some real grievances, but like most other popular uprisings, and especially like the extensive and disastrous strike of railroad and some other laborers so fresh in our memories [1878], it was so conducted, as to do immense harm and no good, and became the most unhappy and disgraceful affair which ever troubled Massachusetts, and at one time it threatened the whole State with anarchy.⁴⁷

Such views as these had a logical sequel. The writers who believed the Rebellion was evidence of a class struggle and who went on to develop the idea that some of their own troubles were due to the heirs of the discontented laboring class which stirred up Massachusetts in 1786 were full of disapproval and condemnation. They were overcome with shame at the thought that any such affair had received support in their town. Therefore they were willing if possible to gloss over or neglect the aspects of the Insurrection which seemed to them undesirable. The chief group which followed this "for shame" line of reasoning was the late nineteenth century town, county, and state historians. In speaking of Lenox and the Berkshire Highlands one writer lamented that "here . . . the disgraceful Shays' Rebellion reared its viperous head."⁴⁸ Another thought that "Could the existence of insurrection and rebellion be effaced from memory, it would be wanton outrage to recall from oblivion the tale of misfortune and dishonor" and was saddened by the facts which had to be

⁴⁷ Hyde, The Cent. Cele. and Cent. Hist. of Lee, p. 60.

⁴⁸ R. Dewitt Mallery, Lenox and the Berkshire Highlands, (New York, 1902), p. 266.

faced.⁴⁹ "Several persons" in Leicester, according to its chronologer, "were involved in that unhappy insurrection, whose names have either been forgotten or we suppress them, from charity to their memories."⁵⁰ Many other similar examples might be cited but these few are sufficient to show the approach followed by some Shays writers.⁵¹

If the interpretations presented in Chapters I through IV of this thesis have only partially dispelled convictions that the class struggle view of the Rebellion is the correct one, a brief glance at the real nature of American society should complete the job. The Shaysites and their opposers lived at a time when the people of the country were blessed with a tremendous quantity of cheap or free land. American society in 1786, based on this land, was full of economic opportunity and was not the breeding place of class warfare between a poor, disfranchised laboring group and their wealthy, landholding overlords. Such classes simply did not exist. Benjamin Franklin, an extremely astute observer of many things for

⁴⁹ Gage, History of Rowley, p. 293.

⁵⁰ Washburn, Leicester, requoted from Worcester Magazine (1786-87), p. 188. 118.

⁵¹ Ballou, History of Milford, p. 91; Drake, History of Middlesex County, I. 172; Stowe, History of Hubbardston, pp. 54, 62; Stearns, History of Ashburnham, p. 212; Green, Groton During the Revolution, I, No. III, p. 66; Samuel Roads, The History and Traditions of Marblehead (Marblehead, Mass., 1897), p. 249; Marvin and others, History of Worcester County, I, 105, II, 35; Jones, History of Stockbridge, p. 187; Holland, History of western Mass., I, 230; Austin, History of Mass., p. 375.

many years remarked: "Land being cheap in that country [America]. . . in so much that the Propriety of an hundred acres of fertile soil full of Wood may be obtained near the frontiers in many places for Eight or Ten Guineas."⁵² He continued, "Land being thus plenty in America, and so cheap as that a laboring man, that understands Husbandry, can in a short time save money enough to purchase a piece of new Land sufficient for a Plantation, whereon he may subsist a Family" ⁵³ Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, a French-American observer, discussed an immigrant from Europe and said: "Does he want uncultivated lands? Thousands of acres present themselves, which he may purchase cheap."⁵⁴ His wife and children "who before in vain demanded of him a morsel of bread now fat and frolicsome, gladly help their father to clear those fields whence exuberant crops are to arise to feed and clothe them all."⁵⁵ At another time he talked about "the scarcity of people, the ease with which they may live and have lands of their own" ⁵⁶ "The great mass of our citizens," said Dickinson in 1787, "is composed at this

⁵² Mott, Franklin, p. 452.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 217.

⁵⁴ Louis M. Hacker, The Shaping of the American Tradition (New York, 1947), p. 167.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 162.

⁵⁶ Hector St. John De Crevecoeur, Sketches of Eighteenth Century America (New Haven, 1935), p. 83.

time of free holders"⁵⁷ Gerry added that, "Our situation was different from that of Great Britain; and the great body of lands yet to be parcelled out and settled would very much prolong the difference."⁵⁸ On another occasion, Franklin stated that in America there were "vast forests still void of inhabitants and not likely to be occupied in an age to come." "The truth is," he added "that though there are in that country [America] few people so miserable as the poor of Europe, there are also very few that in Europe would be called rich."⁵⁹

This vast quantity of cheap and available land created extensive economic opportunity in America. De Crevecoeur told of the scarcity of labor caused by the opportunity to acquire land. "As to labor and laborers, what difference [between America and Europe]? When we hire any of these people we rather pray and entreat them. You must give them what they ask: three shillings per day in common wages and five or six shillings in harvest. They must be at your table and feed . . . on the best you have."⁶⁰ "I verily believe," he went on, "that I have grapes enough some years in my south swamp to make a hogshead of wine,

⁵⁷ Elliot, Debates, V, 386.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 245.

⁵⁹ Requested from Carl Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin (New York, 1938), pp. 704-05.

⁶⁰ Crèvecoeur, Sketches, p. 82.

but labour is so dear, and I am so inexpert that I am discouraged from undertaking any new schemes."⁶¹ When discussing farming with a larger landholder than himself he received this remark:

How happily, how peaceably you live here Your farm is not so large as mine and yet brings you all you want. You have time to rest and think. For my part, I am weary. I must be in the fields with the hired men; nothing is done except I am there. I must not find fault with them or else they will quit me and give me a bad name. I am but the first slave on my farm.⁶²

In other places De Crevecoeur referred to "the scarcity and dearth of labourers,"⁶³ "the laborer is too dear,"⁶⁴ our "want of subordinate workmen" and the "high price of labour."⁶⁵ Franklin remarked that labor was "generally . . . dear there, and Hands difficult to be kept together everyone desiring to be a master and the Cheapness of Lands inclining many to leave Trades for Agriculture."⁶⁶ Gabriel Thomas, a Pennsylvaniaⁿ, pointed out that the chief reason "why Wages of Servants of all sorts is much higher here than there [America than Europe], arises from the great Fertility and Produce of the Place; besides, if these large Stipends were refused them, they would quickly

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 134.

⁶² Ibid., p. 84.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 141.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 144.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

⁶⁶ Mott, Franklin, p. 454.

set up for Themselves, for they can have Provision very cheap, and Land for a small matter, or next to nothing . . .⁶⁷ Pinckney, of South Carolina, speaking at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 had this to say:

The people of the United States are perhaps the most singular of any we are acquainted with. Among them are fewer distinctions of fortune, and less of rank, than among the inhabitants of any other nation. Every freeman has a right to the same protection and security; and a very moderate share of property entitles them to the possession of all the honors and privileges the public can bestow. Hence arises a greater equality than is to be found among the people of any other country; and an equality which is more likely to continue. I say, this equality is more likely to continue, because in a new country, possessing immense tracts of uncultivated lands, where every temptation is offered to emigration, and where industry must be rewarded with competency, there will be few poor, and few dependent.⁶⁸

Such contemporary remarks could never have been applied to a class-ridden society.

It should be noted, before closing this chapter, that not all views expressed on the Rebellion followed the extremes mentioned above, and some moderation was in evidence. Ellery B. Crane's article, "Shays Rebellion" should be mentioned with the moderate group. It deserves notice for its unbiased and level-headed appraisal of the incident. Generally speaking, he presented a point of view which was not based on the class struggle. Said he: "It

⁶⁷ Hart, Contemporaries, II, 67.

⁶⁸ Elliot, Debates, V, 233.

was the spontaneous uprising of an over taxed and over burdened people" caused chiefly by the war.⁶⁹ He was reported to have made a rather thorough study of the problem.⁷⁰

Other examples of moderate thinking were evidenced in the following. The general lenience of punishment and the election results of 1787 which turned Governor Bowdoin and his party out were recognized by Beard, Hockett, and Lodge, as an indication that there was a good deal of popular sympathy in the state for the Shaysites,⁷¹ while Channing admitted that the "movement was not confined to any one locality."⁷² With respect to the principle characters, Morison and Commager admitted that Shays' leadership was "somewhat unwilling."⁷³ The historian of Marblehead placed the blame equally on leaders and people.

⁶⁹ Crane, "Shays Rebellion," Coll. of Wor. Soc. of Antiquity, V, 70, passim.

⁷⁰ Conversation with E. B. Crane requested from Daniels, History of Oxford, p. 149.

⁷¹ Beard, Basic History of the United States, p. 122; Hockett, Political and Social Growth of American People, p. 254; Lodge, Boston, 170.

⁷² Channing, A History of the U. S., III, 485.

⁷³ Morison and Commager, Growth of the American Republic, I, 275.

"Mobs of armed men under the lead of demagogues as unprincipled and deluded as their followers, assembled in the towns of Concord, Taunton, and Great Barrington and prevented the courts of justice from assembling."⁷⁴ Fiske added that Shays "seems to have done what he could to restrain his men from violence" although he later called him "a poor creature, wanting alike in courage and good faith."⁷⁵ A few partially realized that the great effect of the war was the real cause of the uprising. Morison and Commager were about the best example of this, although they spoke only in general terms. "Most of the difficulties under which the United States labored during the first five years of peace were the necessary effects of a war that loosened the bonds of society, and cut the connection with a trading empire."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Roads, History of Marblehead, p. 248.

⁷⁵ Fiske, Critical Period, p. 180.

⁷⁶ Morison and Commager, The Growth of the American Republic, I, 272.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The evidence found in writing this thesis lead to certain logical conclusions. First of all the Shays Rebellion was not a sudden uprising of 1786. Unrest began in Massachusetts as early as 1781 and increased in intensity during the succeeding five years, reaching a climax in the summer of 1786.

In August and September of that year demonstrations against the courts took place and at several places the judges were not permitted to transact regular business. These insurrections were designed to prevent the completion of private debt suits which were numerous and a real grievance.

However, this was not the only cause. Grievance lists from many towns and counties included among other things, the lack of a sufficient circulating medium, high and unequally placed taxes, decline of trade and manufacturing, lawyers and their fees, and the sitting of the General Court in Boston as reasons for discontent. These causes were all basically a result of the war, which had placed a heavy debt on the state and on its people

The militia was called out to quiet the uprisings but due to the wide extent of popular support for the

movement, and to the sympathies of the militia men themselves, little in the way of official support was afforded by them.

The General Court met in special session in September and proceeded to grant many concessions among which were a limited suspension of private debt suits, a partial curb on lawyers and their fees, and a relaxation of tax collections. They failed to redress all grievances, however, and irritated the people by passing certain repressive measures, chief of which was a suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. For these reasons, the uprisings continued and finally the Legislature felt obliged to declare a state of open Rebellion in existence.

Governor Bowdoin issued a new call for some four thousand militia-men and was able to raise this army because much of the rebellious spirit had been undermined by the concessions of the General Court. Under the lead of General Benjamin Lincoln the troops quelled the disorders and restored peace and quiet to the state.

Popular sympathy for the rebels remained strong, however, and largely as a result of public pressure punishment of the treasonable offenders was lenient. All were finally pardoned by Governor Hancock who came into office in the spring of 1787 when the Shaysites scored a complete victory in the general elections.

The Rebellion, short lived as it was, was not without influence on the formation of the Constitution of the United States. Many important men of the time felt that it was one more indication of the inadequacy of the Articles of Confederation. At Philadelphia in 1787 they drew up a new constitution and the Shays Rebellion had some influence on the thinking of those who worked on the document there and on its ratification later. In Massachusetts, although the three strongest Shays' counties opposed ratification, the majority of the rebels sent convention members who voted for it.

Secondary writers have generally placed a class struggle interpretation on the Rebellion but the facts of the affair plus the basically democratic and agrarian nature of American society then largely rule out this point of view.

The Shays Rebellion might be summed up then as one caused largely by the natural effects of the war. It was an insurrection in which a large majority of the people were active or sympathizers, in which some of the grievances were redressed early with a consequent undermining of rebellious spirit, in which there was little shedding of blood mainly because the insurrectionists did not seek to overthrow the government, and one in which the class struggle was not a very significant factor.

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