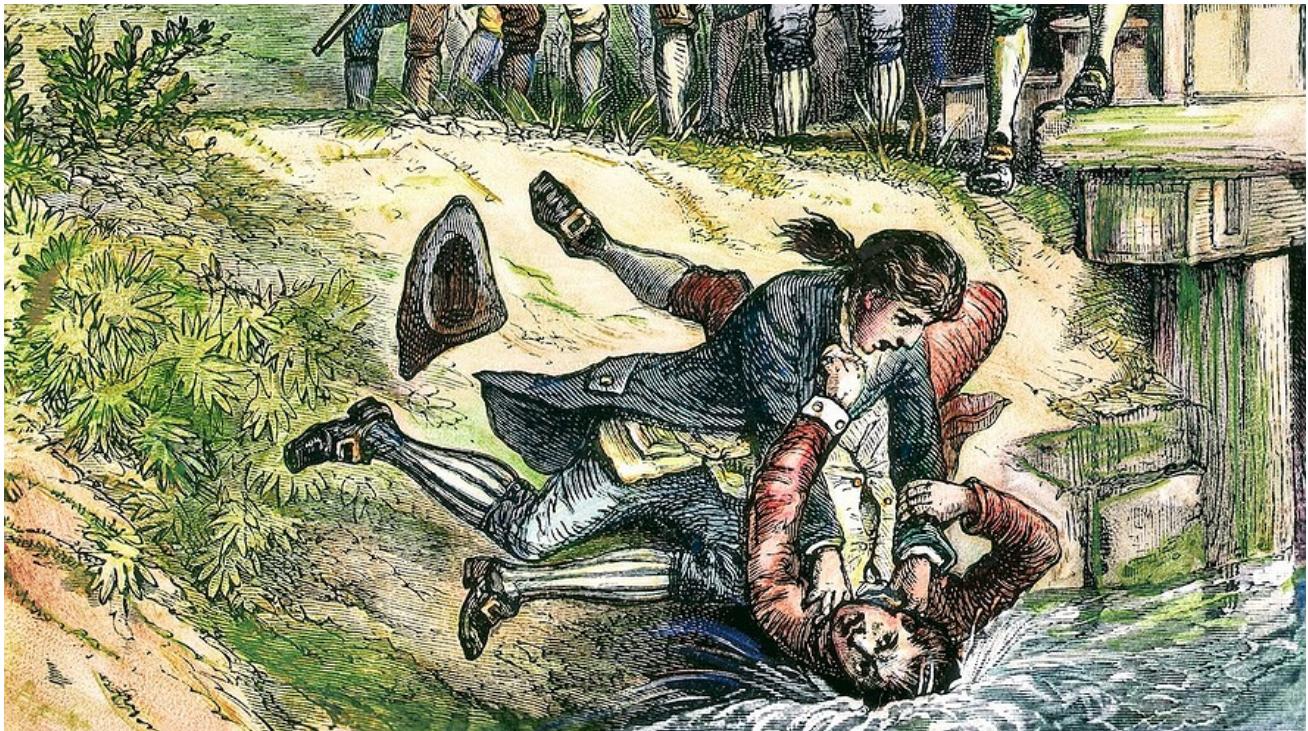


# Shays' Rebellion: Crisis in the Infant U.S. Republic

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A debtor fights with a tax collector in the 1780s in the young United States. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons

When the fighting in the American Revolution came to an end in 1781, the U.S. faced a money crisis. Exports to Britain were restricted. On the high seas, the British navy had destroyed most American ships, crippling the flow of trade. On land, where both armies regularly stole from local farms in order to find food, farmers suffered tremendously. On top of that, the United States owed a lot of money from waging the war. From 1781 until 1789, the U.S. was governed by a union of states under an agreement called the Articles of Confederation. The states were forced to pay money to this weak government. In turn, the states began to tax people. The people they taxed included farmers, many of whom had fought in the Revolution.

Farmers in central and western Massachusetts faced especially hard times. Many people didn't have jobs and had trouble making money.

Their troubles eventually boiled into frustration with the government, who they felt had treated them unfairly. Their frustration led to the Shays' Rebellion, the first major armed rebellion of American citizens against their own government. This rebellion showed the

flaws in the government. It called for a stronger central government. This resulted in the drafting of the nation's Constitution to establish the branches of central government and protect the rights of citizens.

## **People with unpaid debts went to prison**

To start the farms, people had to take on debt. In the 1780s, many state governments passed laws that were favorable to such debtors. For example, sometimes these governments did not force debtors to pay back the money they owed. This is also known as debt forgiveness.

However, the Massachusetts government didn't have laws that were friendly to debtors. Instead, local sheriffs seized many farms that had unpaid debts. Some farmers who couldn't pay their debts were put in prison.

These conditions led to the first major armed rebellion in the post-Revolutionary United States.

## **Massachusetts musters an army**

Just like with the American Revolution, these Americans resisted high taxes and unresponsive government that was far away. This time people weren't resisting the British government across the Atlantic. Massachusetts' settlers were angry with the new republican government in Boston.

The farmers in western Massachusetts organized their resistance in ways similar to the American Revolution. They called special meetings of the people to protest conditions and agree on a coordinated protest. This led the rebels to close courts by force in the fall of 1786. They freed imprisoned debtors from jail.

Soon events erupted into a full-scale revolt. The resistors came under the leadership of Daniel Shays, a former captain in the Continental Army. His followers were called Shaysites. Some thought of the Shaysites as heroes in the direct tradition of the American Revolution. Many others saw them as dangerous rebels whose actions might topple the young republican government. The Shaysites were the most extreme example of what could happen in the tough times brought on by the economic crisis.

James Bowdoin, the governor of Massachusetts, saw the Shaysites as dangerous. Bowdoin organized a strong military force to confront the rebels. He received lots of money from eastern businessmen, who wanted to see the resistance fail. This armed force crushed the movement in the winter of 1786–1787, and the Shaysites quickly fell apart when faced with this strong state army.

## **The unrest did not stop when the rebellion ended**

While the rebellion disintegrated quickly, the social unrest didn't just go away. Debtors across the new United States were still frustrated. Smaller uprisings similar to Shays' Rebellion occurred in Maine, Connecticut, New York and Pennsylvania, among other places.

After Governor Bowdoin crushed the rebellion, the voters turned against him in the next election. There was a high level of frustration and popular resistance to the established elite power, and people voted in pro-debtor governments in many states.

Shays' Rebellion showed there was great conflict beneath the surface of life after the American Revolution. The revolt signaled a need to improve the government. This resulted in the drafting of the Constitution and electing the nation's first president, George Washington.