



Reconsiderations

A YANKEE REBELLION? THE REGULATORS, NEW ENGLAND, AND THE NEW NATION

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IT is tempting to portray Shays's Rebellion, which rocked Massachusetts from the summer of 1786 through the spring of 1787, as a peculiarly Yankee affair. Across the new nation, times were troubled, with trade depressed, money scarce, and taxes high, yet only in Massachusetts, which had remained remarkably free from internal violence throughout the colonial era, did a popular revolt erupt against the government and threaten the foundations of a regime whose constitution of 1780 had been widely hailed as a model of enlightened republicanism. In the end, the insurrection was easily suppressed, with a modest toll of casualties and deaths. It served briefly to spur moves for a stronger national government and then fell into neglect, recalled from time to time as an emblem of the disorder endemic in America's "Critical Period" and justification for the Federalist "miracle at Philadelphia" in the summer of 1787. But Massachusetts remembers, as is evident in the continuing impulse to mark anniversaries of the insurgency.¹ In western Massachusetts,

¹The bicentennial of Shays's Rebellion was commemorated in fall 1986 with major conferences sponsored by the Colonial Society of Massachusetts in Boston and by Amherst College in partnership with Historic Deerfield. Papers from the two conferences were gathered together in volume 65 of *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* and separately issued as *In Debt to Shays: The Bicentennial of an Agrarian Rebellion*, ed. Robert A. Gross (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993). The 220th anniversary was observed by Springfield Technical Community College, which held a conference, "Reconsidering the Debt: Scholars Re-Visit Shays's Rebellion," on 27–28 January 2007. This essay served as the keynote address for that gathering. I am grateful to Dean Arlene Rodríguez, School of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, and John F. Gately, Chairman, Department of English, at STCC, for the invitation. Thanks also to Richard D. Brown, Ronald P. Formisano, and Woody Holton for their comments and to Holton and Terry Bouton for allowing me to see their book manuscripts before publication, to graduate students Anthony Antonucci and

the stronghold of the grassroots protest, Daniel Shays has long been something of a folk hero and an inspiration to a region perennially grumbling about its mistreatment by ill-informed and unresponsive officials in Boston. Traces of the movement to which Shays unwillingly gave his name are scattered across the area beyond Route 495, visible on signposts for the highway that runs through his old town of Pelham and on historical markers there and in Petersham and Sheffield. No history of the Berkshires, the Connecticut River Valley, or the commonwealth is complete without a nod to Shays's Rebellion.²

Culturally as well as politically, the storied uprising looks "New Englandly," to quote the Amherst poet whose forebears played a prominent part in the contest.³ The homespun characters who momentarily appeared on Shays's historical stage form a marvelous gallery of Yankee types. Their social protest is laced with Puritan piety and down-home wit. Consider the incendiary Captain Nathan Smith from the Middlesex County town of Shirley, who became infamous for his role in stopping the courts at Concord on 12 September 1786. Supposedly carried away by "intoxication" and "enthusiasm," Smith stunned a crowd of spectators on Concord common when he warned that they risked divine wrath, to be executed by himself, if they failed to join the insurrection: "As Christ laid down his life to save the world, so will I lay down my life to suppress the government from all tyrannical oppression, and you who are willing to join us in this hear affair may fall into our ranks. Those who do not after two hours, shall stand the monuments of God's sparing mercy." With equal fervor Aaron Broad of Holden vowed to sacrifice himself for the cause: "I am determined to fight and spill my blood and leave my bones at the Court House till the Resurrection."⁴

Justin Spitzer for research assistance, and to Ann Gross for her constant contributions as editor and inspiration.

²My "The Uninvited Guest: Daniel Shays and the Constitution," in *In Debt to Shays*, pp. 4–5; Richard Peet, "A Sign Taken for History: Daniel Shays' Memorial in Petersham, Massachusetts," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86 (March 1996): 21–43.

³"The Robin's my Criterion for Tune," Poem 285, in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1960); Leonard L. Richards, *Shays's Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 92.

⁴"Some Particulars of the Proceedings of the Mob, at Concord," *Massachusetts Centinel*, 16 September 1786; my "The Confidence Man and the Preacher: The Cultural Politics of Shays's Rebellion," in *In Debt to Shays*, pp. 298–99; and John L. Brooke, "A Deacon's Orthodoxy: Religion, Class, and the Moral Economy of Shays's Rebellion,"

So eager for martyrdom were such latter-day Goffes and Whalleys that they inspired posthumous legends of their own.⁵ Not long after 25 January 1787, when the blast of cannon from government troops drove Shays's forces from Springfield's armory hill, Dr. Joseph Lee of Concord, some ninety miles to the east, got wind of strange apparitions on the field of battle. A week after the violence, which left four dead and twenty wounded, rumors were circulating that "the blood was [still] fresh and without clots that Run from the wounds of those men that was slain by Col. Shepard at Springfield." In the night, it was reported, the fallen apparently rose from the dead and marched in the snow to the sound of fifes and drums; when guards fired upon them, the spectral troops disappeared without a trace. Like "dark days," earthquakes, and the other unnatural occurrences Lee recorded in his almanac-diary, the dramatic events in Springfield were absorbed into the folk world of "wonders" and "portents" that had long fascinated Puritans and their descendants.⁶

Other figures stand out as wily Yankees, as hard to pin down as Connecticut traders peddling wooden nutmegs. Daniel Shays himself is cloaked in mystery and contradiction, one moment denying leadership of the insurgency, the next vowing to march on Boston and burn "the nest of devils" down. Such calculated ambiguity could prove useful, on and off the field of battle. In one memorable skirmish, it is said, a small band of insurgents in Berkshire County, armed with "a few old-fashioned muskets, little ammunition, and no cannon," stood

in *In Debt to Shays*, p. 205. Captain Nathan Smith of Shirley was not remembered fondly, even in his hometown. Although he had served with honor in the Revolution, he was better known for his fights with neighbors, during one of which he lost an eye. He supposedly wore the injury with pride, considering his talent for pugilism "the highest proof of manliness." Smith left a reputation as "quarrelsome, coarse in speech, and given to drink." Interestingly, his brother Sylvanus served as a captain in the Continental Army throughout the war and joined the Society of Cincinnati at its formation in 1783. See Reverend Grindall Reynolds, "Concord," in Samuel Adams Drake, *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts . . .*, vol. 1 (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1880), p. 302, and Seth Chandler, *History of the Town of Shirley, Massachusetts, From Its Settlement to A.D. 1882* (Shirley: Printed for the Author, 1883), pp. 620–23.

⁵For the legend of Goffe and Whalley, see Douglas C. Wilson, "Web of Secrecy: Goffe, Whalley, and the Legend of Hadley," *New England Quarterly* 60 (December 1987): 515–48.

⁶David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 102; Joseph Lee, diary, entry for February 1787, New-England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Mass.; David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. 70–116. I am grateful to Woody Holton for passing along the entry in the Lee diary.

on one side of a brook in East Lee; on the other government troops advanced in uniform “with polished rifles and menacing cannon.” Undaunted, one quick-thinking rebel reached into his store of Yankee wit. “Bring out Mother Perry’s yarn-beam,” he proposed. “We’ll make it look like a cannon to scare the sheep across the way.” The weaving machinery was promptly mounted on ox-cart wheels and fitted out with a ramrod and other military trappings. At the order to “Fire!” the rag-tag rebels took up a blazing rope and prepared to apply it as a fuse. The ruse worked. “Before the flames could damage Mother Perry’s property,” the story goes, “General Patterson’s troops were in flight. In a twinkling, the hill they had occupied was bare.” Shays’s men on Springfield’s Ordnance-Hill were not the only ones to break ranks and flee from a cannonade. As the vignette suggests, the conduct of the conflict in Massachusetts was a reflection of New England’s vernacular culture.⁷



But that was not how contemporaries viewed the “commotions” in Massachusetts. On the eve of the Revolution, New Englanders were notorious among British colonists for their “levelling Spirit” and “mercenary” ways, and they carried that reputation into the new nation.⁸ Nonetheless, when popular discontent swelled into a wave of court closings in the fall of 1786 and crested in the rendezvous at Springfield arsenal the following January, nobody, inside or outside the state, deemed the disturbances unique to Massachusetts or distinctive of its egalitarian culture. The heavy burden of taxes and debts in the mid-1780s—the fiscal legacy of the Revolutionary War—drained the purses and the patience of people everywhere, provoking opposition

⁷General Rufus Putnam to Governor James Bowdoin, 8 January 1787, in C. O. Parmenter, *History of Pelham, Mass. From 1738 to 1898, Including the Early History of Prescott* (Amherst, Mass., 1898), pp. 384–90, 397; “Miscellany,” *Massachusetts Centinel*, 17 January 1787; B. A. Botkin, ed., *A Treasury of New England Folklore: The Stories, Legends, Tall Tales, Traditions, Ballads, and Songs of the Yankee People*, rev. ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1965), p. 277.

⁸John Adams, diary entry, 22 August 1774, in *Diary, 1771–1781*, vol. 2 of *The Adams Papers: Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 106; David McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), pp. 40–41, 62, 120; Merrill Jensen, “The Sovereign States: Their Antagonisms and Rivalries and Some Consequences,” in *Sovereign States in an Age of Uncertainty*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), pp. 226–50.

to law and authority all over the backcountry. From South Carolina to the District of Maine, farmers banded together to fight the official machinery for the collection of taxes and debts. They forcibly resisted foreclosure of property, broke up sheriffs' sales of delinquent estates, and rescued neighbors from debtors' prison. If authorities persisted in their duties, they courted harassment. In Washington County, Pennsylvania, an angry crowd seized hold of a luckless tax collector and "cut off one half of his hair [and] cued the other half on one side of his Head"—fitting revenge on the wolf who normally fleeced the sheep.⁹

Through collective action, militants aspired to direct public policy. On 20 September 1786 some two hundred farmers, armed with muskets, swords, and clubs, descended on the Exeter, New Hampshire, meetinghouse, where the state legislature was holding session, and declared that nobody would leave until the assembly had voted an emission of paper money. The threat proved unavailing; a defiant Governor John Patterson called out the militia, which speedily dispersed the "banditti," thirty-nine of whom were arrested and made to run a gauntlet of their captors to the tune of "the rogue's march." That incident was a momentary government victory in an agrarian conflict that continued to escalate across the border in Massachusetts and all the way down to Virginia, where in the spring of 1787, as Shays's army was melting away up north, farmers in Greenbrier County were gearing up for a fight. Incensed at the "Great oppressions" they suffered, angry yeomen joined together in an "association" to resist taxes, and they pledged to "stand by each other, in preventing the Sheriff from taking their property for debt or taxes." The leader of the debtors' group was a struggling tavern-keeper of obscure origins known as Adonijah Mathews. From "the Length & sound of his christian name," one wit suggested, he "must have come from New-England." Whatever the case, the observer rightly sensed an underlying connection: in their shared outrage at conservative financial policy and in their forceful methods of protest, the Virginian Mathews and the Yankee Shays were kin.¹⁰

⁹Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), pp. 10–12.

¹⁰Holton, *Unruly Americans*, pp. 145–61; Alan Taylor, "Regulators and White Indians: The Agrarian Resistance in Post-Revolutionary New England," in *In Debt to Shays*, pp. 147–49. For a view of the Massachusetts insurgency as an expression of the populist upsurge in the Revolutionary era, see Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), pp. 19–42.

No wonder, then, that gentlemen in every state anxiously followed the gathering crisis in Massachusetts, as if they were tracking the progress of an epidemic. Newspapers from Portland to Charleston carried feverish reports of the turmoil. Were these omens of a wider upheaval? George Washington, back at Mount Vernon, worried that “there are combustibles in every State which a spark might set fire to.” Virginia Congressional delegate Edward Carrington speculated on “how far the contagion of the Eastern disorders will spread.” The great fear was of a spreading *insurgency*, the word most often used to describe the domestic conflict, connoting an uprising against constituted authority. Nobody yet spoke of “Shays’s Rebellion,” a term that did not appear in print until 1803.¹¹

On the surface, the cause of the crisis was clear: huge taxes had given rise to “contentions and civil discord in almost every state in the union,” as Connecticut lawyer David Daggett explained. But, many detractors declared, such complaints were merely a cover for base and dishonorable ends. By rioting against authority and closing the courts, protesters were scheming to escape legitimate debts in an outrageous betrayal of both private contract and public trust. The

¹¹Holton, *Unruly Americans*, pp. 148, 220; *Independent Chronicle*, 14 September 1786. Searching “America’s Historical Newspapers” (<http://infoweb.newsbank.com>) for the terms “Shays’ Rebellion,” “Shay’s Rebellion,” and “Shays Rebellion” over the period 1 August 1786 to 1 May 1787 yielded not a single article. By contrast, the word “insurgents” turns up in 1,405 separate pieces (search conducted on 30 July 2008). The earliest reference to “Shays’s Rebellion” that I have found in print appears in the Federalist periodical *The Port Folio*, edited by the arch-conservative satirist Joseph Dennie. In a mock-review of a fictive book on “the history of democracy,” attributed to a Southerner with the unsavory name of “Slaveslap Kiddnap, Esq.,” the reviewer presents an account of “a most worthy democrat, of great renown in the city of Boston.” Supposedly taken from the volume under review, the narrative celebrates the achievements of a common man utterly bereft of “learning and science.” Despite his ignorance, the democrat had gone far in politics, having contributed some 3,340 essays to the populist *Independent Chronicle* of Boston from 1784 to 1801 and delivered 291 “set speeches” in Fanueil Hall. He was particularly proud of his efforts in 1786–87: “By my writings in the *Chronicle*, I did much to excite that noble exertion of democratic energies, which the Federalists denominate *Shay’s rebellion*” (*Port Folio*, 17 March 1804, pp. 81–83). The label took off during the political struggles between Federalists and Republicans unleashed by Jefferson’s embargo and the long run-up to the War of 1812. See, e.g., John Adams’s declaration that he composed his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America* (New York: H. Gaine, 1787) “with a view to suppress Shay’s Rebellion” (Raleigh, N.C., *Star*, 18 May 1809), and the Federalist attack on Elbridge Gerry, successful Republican candidate for governor of Massachusetts in 1810, for his ferocious opposition in 1787 to the grant of pardons to participants in “the unfortunate insurrection, commonly called Shays’ Rebellion” (*Hampshire Federalist*, 22 March 1810, reprinted from the *Greenfield Gazette*).

demands for relief threatened the very bases of social order. After witnessing Nathan Smith's antics on Concord common, a "gentleman of the greatest veracity" suspected that the goal of the "rascals," "the most despicable . . . that ever disgraced any country," was "the total subversion of the Constitution and the equal distribution of all property"—an opinion that spread far and wide in the press.¹²

That sentiment hardened into fixed conviction following the defeat of the rural rebellion. Far from being assured by the easy triumph of General Benjamin Lincoln's army and by the ready return of Shays's men to public allegiance, many commentators saw only danger ahead. In their bleak view, Massachusetts had dodged a vicious civil war only because Daniel Shays, the so-called Generalissimo of the rebellion, had proved to be "a worthless Captain." "Who can determine what might have been the issue of [the] late convulsions, if the malcontents had been headed by a Caesar or by a Cromwell?" That specter was raised by Alexander Hamilton and others at the Philadelphia convention, and it was exploited by Federalists as a compelling argument for the Constitution. Endowed with the powers to tax and to raise a standing army, the new federal government would command the means to protect the nation not only from foreign invasion but also from "the violence of seditious citizens."¹³

Disillusioned by turbulence in the states, conservatives scoffed at the notion that the safety of the republic rested on the virtue of its citizens. With an unabashed elitism, they mocked the credulity of common men and the popular capacity for self-government. Disguising his authorship under the pseudonym "Daniel Shays," Federalist physician Benjamin Rush pretended to offer advice to his opponents: "You must *snarle* at the Convention in every company, and write letters to the frontier counties, where the people is most easily deceived, and alarm them with a number of hard words, such as *aristocracy*, *monarchy*, *oligarchy*, and the like, none of which they will understand." By such cynical moves, would-be despots always climbed their way into power on the backs of the people. That was the enduring lesson of history as taught in the eighteenth century. Playing to the selfish passions of the crowd, demagogues whipped up resentment of rulers and resistance to the laws. In an inexorable sequence, liberty

¹²Holton, *Unruly Americans*, p. 147.

¹³*The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* (hereafter *DHR*), ed. Merrill Jensen et al., vols. 1–10, 13–22 (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976–2007), 14:415 (Hamilton).

soon turned into “licentiousness,” anarchy ensued, and tyranny gained sway.¹⁴

In the conservatives’ diagnosis, the dilemma was irremediable, so long as men remained as they were made by their Creator: “gross, blind, and inconsistent—naturally averse to government—born ‘like the wild ass’s colt.’” For one crusty correspondent of the *Albany Gazette*, the insurrection in Massachusetts epitomized the ever-present danger. “It is *Shaysism* . . . and not Shays, that is the object of my apprehensions,” he observed. The restless spirit of sedition could take any guise, he warned, “whether acting in the character of a soldier or sitting in magisterial importance” in the governor’s seat. “Where there is mock semblance of government, without its energy—there is Shays— Where the shrewd eye of villainy peeps through the seemly mask of justice—there is Shays— Where a base regard to private interest acts in obstinate opposition to the general welfare—there is Shays— He lives in the depreciated currency of one state—he triumphs in the tender-act of another.” Like the devil himself, the “rage of excessive democracy” known as “Shaysism” was confined to no single dominion.¹⁵

Against this barrage of general criticism and *ad hominem* insults the champions of the Massachusetts protest movement stood their ground. The first line of defense was to concentrate fire on the egregious abuses of state government. Tax resistance afflicted Massachusetts because lawmakers had badly misjudged the financial resources of the people. “Massachusetts attempted to correct the nature of things,” observed Virginia Antifederalist William Grayson, “by extracting more from the people than they were able to part with. What did it produce? A revolution, which shook that State to its centre.” New Englanders were, after all, no different from other people. Treat them well with “reasonable” laws and moderate taxes, and they will readily support civil government. “But if the laws are oppressive and arbitrary” and “the public demands above the ability of the people to pay,” cautioned Benjamin Gale of Killingsworth, Connecticut, “they will eternally kick.” Such resistance was actually a sign of health in the body politic, as Thomas Jefferson famously remarked. From his diplomatic perch in Paris the Virginian took in the news of the Massachusetts disorders with aplomb. “The people can not be all, & always, well-informed,” he acknowledged, but would we want them

¹⁴*DHR*, 2:136–37 (Rush).

¹⁵*DHR*, 3:482 (Oliver Ellsworth); 9:1075 (Henry Lee), 13:141–44 (*Albany Gazette*).

to suffer injustice without complaint? Far better that they rise up and protest, even out of “misconceptions,” than give way to “a lethargy” that is “the forerunner of death to the public liberty.” On this presumption Jefferson took heart from the vigorous spirit of the protest movement. “What country can preserve it’s [*sic*] liberties if the rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon & pacify them. What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants.”¹⁶

The Massachusetts dissidents signified their agreement with this populist philosophy by calling their uprising a *Regulation*. That term linked them to a long tradition of thought in the Anglo-American world dating back to the English Civil War, when republican forces sought to regulate “the great abuses” of government under Charles I. In this perspective, regulators were the enemies of anarchy, *not* its agents. When rulers grew corrupt, exploited power for selfish purposes, and lorded it over the people, regulators were needed to bring order to the state. In colonial North Carolina, backcountry farmers rose up to protest exorbitant taxes and extortionate officials in a movement that escalated from peaceful petitions to assaults on court officials to armed conflict with royal government forces at the Battle of Alamance on 16 May 1771.¹⁷ Similar injustices in Massachusetts fifteen years later evidently suggested the same name, to the annoyance of those who saw the protesters as insurgents.

Were the agrarian dissidents defying authority or restoring it? The elitist writers who dominated the public discourse could barely bring themselves to utter the word *regulator* in print. One commentator, after witnessing a crowd in Great Barrington, scorned the “self-created Lords of the States” as “the riotous Regulators of Government.” Another observer made a stab at even-handedness when he referred to “the Insurgents (or as they stile themselves, Regulators).” For all their sarcasm, the hostile commentators were correct. When the leaders of the resistance began raising a militia to challenge the Massachusetts government, they required all recruits to sign enlistment papers in units of “Regulators . . . for the Suppressing of tyrannical government

¹⁶DHR, 3:427–28 (Gale); 10:1190 (Grayson), 14:464–65 (Jefferson).

¹⁷Marjoleine Kars, *Breaking Loose Together: The Regulator Rebellion in Pre-Revolutionary North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 138.

in the Massachusetts State.” Friends of Government were made to endorse similar documents. On the eve of the skirmish in Springfield, Shays’s men seized several people in Hampshire County and obliged them to pledge not to “take an active part in favour of government against the people who stile themselves regulators.” Unhappily for Shays, he would be remembered as a *rebel*, the term invoked by the Massachusetts government as a legal measure to suppress the uprising and forever after linked to his name. It may be too late to rectify that injury. But we can surely recognize that far from being a “little rebellion” of transient significance in western and central Massachusetts, the Regulation was, in the eyes of its leaders, an important chapter in a universal struggle for liberty. To both supporters and critics alike, the contest transcended New England.¹⁸



If wartime bills deranged the finances of every state and postwar depression sapped the ability to pay them, if the bitter debate over these matters was conducted in ideological terms deriving from the civic humanism of the Italian Renaissance and the radical Whig outlook of the English Civil War and its aftermath, the problem still remains: Why did Massachusetts alone experience a popular revolt? The answer lies in decisions made by the General Court at its winter session of 1786. In March of that year lawmakers pushed citizens’ patience to the breaking point by levying heavy taxes on each and every property holder—the heaviest, in fact, that the people of this former royal colony had ever experienced. No able-bodied man, age sixteen or older, was exempt from the poll tax, part of which had to be paid in hard money. The measure had been adopted in response to a request from the Continental Congress the previous September,

¹⁸*Massachusetts Spy*, 7 December 1786; *Litchfield Monitor*, 10 October 1786; Richards, *Shays’s Rebellion*, p. 63; *Vermont Gazette*, 12 February 1787; Ronald P. Formisano, “Teaching Shays/The Regulation,” *Uncommon Sense*, no. 106 (Winter 1998): 24–35; Marion Starkey, *A Little Rebellion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955). For a brief account of how Shays came to be designated as the mastermind of the insurgency, see my “Daniel Shays and Lafayette’s Sword,” *Organization of American Historians Newsletter*, November 1987, pp. 8–9; for an extended treatment of the historiography, see my “White Hats and Hemlocks: Daniel Shays and the Legacy of the Revolution,” in *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: Published for the United States Capitol Historical Society by the University of Virginia Press, 1996), pp. 286–345.

calling on the states to raise three million dollars, a third of it in gold or silver coin, to satisfy the nation's foreign and domestic creditors. Unfortunately, the requisition arrived just as Massachusetts was pressing to fulfill its own obligations. The additional demand for revenue severely challenged taxpayers who were already struggling to pay their bills in an economy starved for cash.¹⁹

Each state wrestled with the dilemma, and each was free to choose its own course since the federal government under the Articles of Confederation had no way to compel obedience. Connecticut ignored the requisition. New Hampshire furnished its Continental dues by withholding money from state creditors. Rhode Island outraged everybody by issuing paper money and making it legal tender for paying all taxes and debts. Massachusetts chose a harder path. It plunged itself into crisis by trying to meet state and federal obligations simultaneously. The new tax bills came as a shock in the western counties, where many farmers were already far in arrears and desperate for specie. Making matters worse, the General Court chose this very moment to reform its system for tax collection, eliminating loopholes and cracking down on lenient officials. The upshot was a financial fiasco. According to historian Roger Brown, revenues dried up completely. Faced with a massive default, tax collectors began seizing and selling delinquents' property. Complaints soon flooded into Boston from the countryside. In a typical plea, the town of Bernardston lamented that "some of our Persons are seized for taxes, some children are destitute of milk and other necessities of life by the driving of the Collectors." When such petitions brought only minor concessions, the taxpayers' protest escalated into a popular uprising.²⁰

This account of the Massachusetts crisis as a taxpayers' rebellion is revisionist history. It challenges the familiar notion that the Regulation was, at bottom, a desperate movement of debtor-farmers intent on saving their land and homes from the clutches of merchant-creditors. That argument was first made by defenders of the government, who charged that yeomen had brought financial troubles on themselves by over-spending on too many "Gewgaws . . . from Europe and the more pernicious Produce of the West Indies"—that is, rum—and then turning deadbeat when the bills came due. The contention

¹⁹Holton, *Unruly Americans*, pp. 65–82; Richards, *Shays's Rebellion*, pp. 81–83.

²⁰Holton, *Unruly Americans*, pp. 72–81; Richards, *Shays's Rebellion*, pp. 83–85; Roger H. Brown, *Redeeming the Republic: Federalists, Taxation, and the Origins of the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 97–121.

was later resurrected by more sympathetic writers and given its most persuasive formulation by historian David Szatmary. In his telling, the pressures on farmers derived from an international credit crunch that began in London, extended to Boston and its sister ports, and then, through a chain reaction of debt collections, penetrated into the far reaches of the backcountry, where no money was to be had. In the ensuing conflict, two opposing worlds collided: subsistence farmers with communal values faced off against “acquisitive, individualistic” merchants inflexibly demanding payment. Szatmary’s interpretation of the credit crisis, revealing the “tumultuous effects of the transition from traditional society to merchant capitalism,” has gained a wide hearing; it undergirds the brief description of Shays’s Rebellion that appears on the website “Mass Moments,” an “electronic almanac” sponsored by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities to mark significant events in the history of the commonwealth, among which is the 25 January 1787 “attack” by the rural “rebels” on the Springfield arsenal.²¹

Appealing as this drama of debtor-creditor conflict may be, it is at odds with the facts as reconstructed by historians Leonard Richards and John Brooke. Suits for debt mushroomed in the mid-1780s, and hundreds of men spent time in debtors’ prison. But neither the losers nor the winners in courtroom fights automatically became enemies on the battlefield. Of ninety men incarcerated for debt in Hampshire County during 1785–86, Richards has found that only two—Luke Day of West Springfield and Perez Bardwell of Williamsburg, each ranked as a “gentleman” on the jail keeper’s roll—enlisted in the Regulation. Most of the 1,800 rank-and-file insurgents from Hampshire had never been sued, probably because they were young laborers just starting out in life, with no property to protect and hence no loans to maintain. As such, they were remarkably similar to members of the voluntary companies raised to suppress them. Those insurgents who did appear in court were as likely to be plaintiffs as defendants. Daniel Shays, deeply in debt, was dragged into court on various occasions, but several of his creditors served under his command in the insurgency, only to sue him after their shared defeat. What was true for individuals

²¹My “White Hats and Hemlocks,” pp. 299–305, 308–10; *An Address from the General Court, to the People of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Printed by Adams and Nourse, printers to the Honourable General Court, 1786), p. 33; Szatmary, *Shays’ Rebellion*, p. xiv; “Mass Moments,” a website of the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities, at the URL <http://www.massmoments.org/moment.cfm?mid=30> (accessed 31 July 2008).

was the case for communities as well. In Granville, a small town with many hard-pressed debtors, not a single inhabitant took up arms against the government; in Colrain, another backcountry town, a mere thirteen men were targets of litigation, yet close to three-quarters of the male population over the age of sixteen joined in the fight, including James White, a creditor at the head of the line in the assault on Springfield arsenal.²²

Brooke complicates the picture still more. In his study of Worcester County, we discover that “simple debt was not sufficient to impel people into the Regulation.” Participation depended on who you were and whom you owed. If your creditor was a merchant in Boston or Newport, you were a metropolitan debtor with loyalties to the seaboard elite. If your creditor belonged to the old gentry class in such centers as Worcester or Brookfield, which had been tainted by loyalism, you were a likely recruit for the Regulator army. But if you and your creditors were neighbors in the same or adjoining towns, you were loath to fight. In the end, social relationships mediated the political import of credit or debt—a finding documented by Richards as well. Those bonds could derive from family ties; the Dickinsons made up a quarter of Amherst’s rebels. Or they could arise from longstanding connections to local leaders, as in Pelham, where the well-established Gray clan, *not* the newcomer Daniel Shays, mobilized protesters. Even in his own town, this was not *Shays’s* rebellion. Wartime loyalties were also operative, enabling Amherst’s Reuben Dickinson, a captain in the Continental army, to enlist fifty or so fellow veterans in this new struggle for independence. What all the insurgents shared was disdain for the General Court and hatred for the economic plight its draconian taxes had inflicted, if not on them personally, then on kinfolk and neighbors and on the countryside as a whole. But local context proved crucial in determining political

²²Richards, *Shays’s Rebellion*, pp. 48–62; John L. Brooke, “To the Quiet of the People: Revolutionary Settlements and Civil Unrest in Western Massachusetts, 1774–1789,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 46 (July 1989): 432–33; Brooke, “Deacon’s Orthodoxy,” pp. 217–23; Daniel W. Shelton, “Elementary Feelings: Pelham, Massachusetts, in Rebellion” (Senior honors thesis in American Studies, Amherst College, 1981), pp. 94–128. Concord, Massachusetts, enlisted one company of 64 volunteers under Captain Roger Brown to “suppress the insurgency.” I was able to find the age of two-thirds of these men (43 out of 64). Their median age was twenty-two. Of the 40 men whose marital status could be determined, 85 percent were single. Six out of 10 were from Concord and adjoining towns; only a quarter stayed in Concord until they died. Few came from families long established on the land. See Sgt. Daniel Wood’s list of men in Capt. Roger Brown’s Company, Special Collections, Concord Free Public Library.

choices. Yankee life, in its myriad variations of local attachments and trans-local affiliations, gave a distinctive cast to Shays's Rebellion.²³

While conditions in the countryside shaped the varying responses to public policy, the initiative rested, in the first instance, with the General Court in Boston, where commercial interests on the seaboard had long held sway and, with the adoption of the Constitution of 1780, had expanded their power. Their drive for conservative finance was longstanding. Since the early eighteenth century, "great merchants" had relentlessly opposed paper money; instead, they favored a system whereby the wealthy lent the government money in exchange for interest-bearing bonds payable in coin, to be financed by taxes on the population at large. In the 1780s, with the "consolidation" of the commonwealth's wartime debts, that vision of "public credit" was ascendant. Similar priorities guided monetary policy in other states and in the Confederation as a whole, whose Superintendent of Finance, Robert Morris, preached "a Gospel of Moneyed Men" with the aim of attaching "the mercantile Part of Society" to the government.²⁴

Conflicts over the conservative agenda roiled politics throughout the decade. In Rhode Island, the merchant class overplayed its hand when it rushed a tax through the legislature to cover the state's share of the controversial Congressional requisition; in response, furious voters ousted the governor and the majority of lawmakers in April 1786 and installed agrarian representatives in favor of paper money. Next door in Massachusetts, second-term governor James Bowdoin proved equally reckless by gambling on a tax-and-funding program virtually guaranteed to bring disaster.²⁵ Why did the governor and his supporters so misread the public mood, and why, in the face of angry protests, did they make so few concessions so late and hang onto office for so long? Was there something special about "Taxachusetts" that tolerated so short-sighted an elite?

The answer, according to Leonard Richards, is simple: many legislators were lining their own pockets. In an exposé that would surely

²³Richards, *Shays's Rebellion*, pp. 91–101; John L. Brooke, *The Heart of the Commonwealth: Society and Political Culture in Worcester County, Massachusetts, 1713–1861* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 190–216 (quotation, p. 210).

²⁴Joseph A. Ernst, "Shays's Rebellion in Long Perspective: The Merchants and the 'Money Question,'" in *In Debt to Shays*, pp. 57–80; Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 70–71.

²⁵Holton, *Unruly Americans*, pp. 77–81.

have delighted Charles Beard, Richards has rummaged through old federal loan books and discovered that the lion's share of the state debt—80 percent of its total value—had been grabbed up by speculators in the Boston area. These financiers were politically wired; thirty-five of them either were members of the General Court themselves or had close relatives sitting there when the crucial decisions on taxes and debts were being made. And when it proved necessary to enforce the laws with a government army dispatched from Boston, many of the same men ponied up the funds to pay the cost. Even so, this coterie of “moneyed men,” however well placed, could not dictate state policy absolutely; they had to win over a majority of the state legislature in 1786. It surely helped that many small towns in the backcountry, desperate to retrench and disgusted with an insensitive state house, declined to send representatives to Boston at this critical moment. But financial policy was a matter of principle as well as of interests. In the view of historian Richard Buel, Massachusetts lawmakers threw caution to the wind and determined to solve the seemingly intractable problem of the debt once and for all. Upholding public faith was essential to forging a stable government and a matter of simple justice. Not for the first time or the last, Massachusetts would project itself as a model for the nation—and fall victim to its own self-regard.²⁶



It is tempting, then, to pin the blame for Shays's Rebellion on an aggressive elite, impelled by a mix of idealism and greed to step far out ahead of public opinion in order to eliminate a persistent threat to the well-being of the state, only to find itself unexpectedly confronting a militant insurgency. Given the recent history of national policy-making in Washington, we should not dismiss that scenario too lightly. Still, the conventional image of Massachusetts' leadership in the mid-1780s is little more than a caricature, bereft of historical perspective. Consider the composition of the metropolitan elite. This was no traditional governing class, long entrenched in state house

²⁶Richards, *Shays's Rebellion*, pp. 74–78; Richard Buel Jr., “The Public Creditor Interest in Massachusetts Politics, 1780–86,” in *In Debt to Shays*, pp. 47–56; J. R. Pole, “Shays's Rebellion: A Political Interpretation,” in *The Reinterpretation of the American Revolution, 1763–1789*, ed. Jack P. Greene (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 416–34.

and counting house. The Revolution had dramatically altered the upper orders. The top offices in the province were emptied by the break with Britain; 70 per cent of the principal placeholders had been cast out and supplanted by ambitious, younger men from the second rank of the social order. The currents of change swept through the chambers of commerce with equal force. Nearly half of Boston's merchant community, by the best estimate, retreated into bitter exile as loyalists abroad or quietly slipped into neutral eclipse at home. Great merchant princes were succeeded by smugglers, privateers, and military contractors grown rich on the war. By one estimate, only one out of every seven merchants operating in 1783 had been in business before 1775. "When you come" to Boston, James Bowdoin, heir to a great commercial house, advised an associate that year, "you will scarcely see any other than new faces. . . . [T]he change which in that respect has happened within the few years since the revolution is as remarkable as the revolution itself." With such volatility on the 'change and such fluctuations in fortunes, the post-war merchants of Boston formed a diffuse assemblage of venturers, not a close-knit company of thieves. They were men accustomed to taking great risks but without much preparation for guiding the ship of state.²⁷

Inexperience breeds insecurity. Anxious about their status, the newcomers-to-power avidly pursued the emblems of legitimacy. The patriot politician James Warren took pride in his republican virtue, but he could not overcome his jealousy of the *nouveaux riches* fattening on the war. "As I am still drudging at the Navy Board for a morsel of bread," he grumbled to John Adams, "fellows who would have cleaned my boots five years ago, have amassed fortunes and are riding in chariots." Warren and his wife Mercy Otis assuaged their resentment by taking over the home of their old enemy Thomas

²⁷James Kirby Martin, *Men in Rebellion: Higher Governmental Leaders and the Coming of the American Revolution* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1973), pp. 44, 48-49, 109, 155, 184-85; John W. Tyler, *Smugglers and Patriots: Boston Merchants and the Advent of the American Revolution* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), pp. 17-23; Van Beck Hall, *Politics without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972), p. 27; Forrest McDonald and Ellen Shapiro McDonald, *Requiem: Variations on Eighteenth-Century Themes* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1988), pp. 77-78; Robert A. East, *Business Enterprise in the American Revolutionary Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1938), p. 214. The material in this paragraph is taken from my "From Citizens to Subjects: The Formalization of Authority in Post-Revolutionary Massachusetts," in *People and Power: Rights, Citizenship, and Violence*, Milan Group in Early United States History Quaderno 3, ed. Loretta Valtz Mannucci (Milano, Italy: Istituto di Studi Storici, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992), pp. 27-38.

Hutchinson, who had been obliged to abandon his “beautiful Seat” in Milton with the outbreak of hostilities. “It has not always happened in like manner,” the Warrens were assured by their fellow republican Virginian Arthur Lee, “that the forfeited Seats of the wicked, have been filled with men of virtue. But in this corrupt world, it is sufficient that we have some examples of it for our consolation.”²⁸

No such comfort was available from the escapades of Royall Tyler. The rakish young lawyer, courting the daughter of John and Abigail Adams, acquired an expensive estate in Braintree in hopes of impressing his future in-laws. There he made a stab at gentleman-farming, even building a windmill, but the venture ended badly. By 1786, Tyler’s suit had been spurned, his law practice was faltering, and he was £200 in debt. Undaunted, he moved on to attempt other conquests, this time more successfully, seducing the wife of Revolutionary war hero Joseph Pearce Palmer and fathering her daughter. With his finances and reputation on the verge of ruin, Tyler undoubtedly aspired to restore his social standing when he signed on as aide-de-camp to General Lincoln in the military campaign against the Regulation. Suppressing insurgents became his latest speculation. Such excesses were all too common in the unsettled times, when all values, moral as well as material, were fluctuating. When Governor Bowdoin castigated the citizenry for overspending on luxuries and urged them to retrench, he was projecting Boston’s ills onto the backcountry. The urbane statesman and his hardscrabble constituents were locked into mutual incomprehension.²⁹

There is no question that Bowdoin’s inner circle was genuinely afraid of popular discontent. Although the wealthy governor was not backward in pursuing his own interests—in 1779 he had sought a huge tax abatement from the town of Boston, amounting to some five-sixths of his £942 bill for the year, in order to cover recent financial losses—he saw no alternative for the hard-pressed debtors of Massachusetts but to retrench their expenses and pay their dues on time. The honor of the commonwealth was at stake. Were the

²⁸C. Harvey Gardiner, ed., *A Study in Dissent: The Warren-Gerry Correspondence, 1776–1792* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), p. 137; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974), pp. 373–74; my “The Confidence Man and the Preacher,” pp. 301–2.

²⁹Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), pp. 29–30; Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *James Bowdoin and the Patriot Philosophers* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2004), p. 211.

state to default on payments to bondholders or take facile measures to reduce its obligations, as Rhode Island had done in issuing paper money, it would betray its pledges to those at home and abroad whose loans had been indispensable to the successful war for independence. "Can we be willing," the General Court asked its constituents in a formal "Address . . . to the People," "that the History of the American Revolution shall be blackened" by such irresponsible conduct?³⁰

Unable to pacify the countryside with patient reasoning, Bowdoin and his friends charged organizers of the protests with sinister motives, in a replay of the arguments that had once been leveled against the patriot opposition to royal governor Thomas Hutchinson. "Artful and designing" men were spreading "many notorious horrid falsehoods," Chief Justice William Cushing told the grand jurors of Middlesex County in late November 1786, in a self-seeking campaign "to impose upon the ignorant and throw the people into a flame." Unless government acted firmly, the disorders of court closings and tax resistance would ignite a wild fire of insurrection. Anarchy and confusion would ensue, and in a sequence familiar to eighteenth-century students of history, desperate citizens would inevitably seek out a dictator to restore order. The leaders of the insurgency were rural Caesars in waiting, conspiring "to bring the whole government and all good people of this state, if not continent, under absolute command and subjugation to one or two ignorant, unprincipled, bankrupt, desperate individuals." In the face of this new threat to liberty, Massachusetts leaders once again stepped into the breach and waged a battle to save the Revolution for posterity. True to the spirit of John Winthrop, the state would remain a republic upon a hill.³¹

It is often charged that the Bowdoin administration took its own liberties with the law by raising a private army to suppress the uprising and financing it with loans from wealthy Boston-area merchants. That major creditors provided the money for the voluntary forces led by General Benjamin Lincoln is undeniable, as Richards has documented. More than half of the 153 men who subscribed to the military fund were bondholders, and so, they both defended the republic and

³⁰Manuel and Manuel, *James Bowdoin and the Patriot Philosophers*, pp. 56–57, 204–33 (quotation, p. 215); *An Address from the General Court, to the People of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Printed by Adams and Nourse, printers to the Honourable General Court, 1786), quotation, p. 146.

³¹"Charge of the Chief Justice [William Cushing] to the Grand-Jury of the County of Middlesex," *Hampshire Gazette*, 29 November 1786; William Pencak, "The Fine Theoretic Government of Massachusetts Is Prostrated to the Earth: The Response to Shays's Rebellion Reconsidered," in *In Debt to Shays*, pp. 121–44.

protected their investments in the same act. Bowdoin himself lent £250 to the effort. Yet, resorting to an emergency force in the crisis was a lawful exercise of the authority vested in him by Article VII of the state constitution. That provision empowered the governor “for the special defence and safety of the commonwealth, to assemble in martial array, and put in warlike posture, the inhabitants thereof” to overcome attempts “in a hostile manner” to effect “the destruction, invasion, detriment, or annoyance of this commonwealth,” whether “in time of war or invasion, and also in time of rebellion, declared by the legislature to exist.” Nor was there anything untoward about borrowing money to raise an army; George III had done it, as had his royal enemies in France and Spain, and so had the Continental Congress. So punctilious were state officials to observe the law that they sought and gained explicit authority from the legislature for every measure taken to defeat the uprising, from passage of a Riot Act in late October 1786, to suspension of habeas corpus the following month, to formal proclamation of a “horrid and unnatural rebellion” on 4 February 1787 following the military encounters at Springfield and Petersham. Republican means were conscientiously applied to republican ends, insisted George Richards Minot, clerk to the Massachusetts House of Representatives and first historian of the “insurrections.” Whether these measures and the larger public policies they served were wisely adopted is another matter.³²

If novices were making policy in the state house, they were at work in the countryside as well. In Hampshire County, the heartland of the Regulation, old structures of power had shattered during the Revolution. Throughout the colonial period the River Gods of the Connecticut Valley had brokered relations between Boston and its western hinterland. These rural grandees controlled the county courts and militia, distributed patronage, and sided with royal government in the capital. In exchange for their loyalty, the people of the region received material benefits—military contracts, political appointments, and so forth—but were otherwise free to ignore affairs of state and concentrate on life in their towns. This arrangement collapsed in the

³²Richards, *Shays's Rebellion*, pp. 78–79; Manuel and Manuel, *James Bowdoin and the Patriot Philosophers*, p. 212; Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, in *The Popular Sources of Political Authority: Documents on the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780*, ed. Oscar Handlin and Mary Flug Handlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966); Justin Spitzer, “Defending the Republic: William Shepard and Benjamin Lincoln in Shays's Rebellion” (research paper, University of Connecticut, 2006).

political firestorm of 1775–76, as outraged western farmers rose up against royal officials and their henchmen. The River Gods were discredited for their loyalism, and no minor deities emerged to take their place as ambassadors to the wider world. In this vacuum, John Brooke argues, farmers nurtured their grievances, lashed out at distant office holders, and, in the crisis of 1786, turned to respected men in their communities—war heroes like Reuben Dickinson, deacons like Ebenezer Gray—to help them right society and government once more. Against the hierarchical world view of the cosmopolitan elites in Boston, the yeomen of Hampshire County invoked a corporate moral economy rooted in the egalitarianism of isolated farming towns.³³

By this reckoning, the Massachusetts crisis of 1786 is reduced to a provincial affair, with blinkered elites in Boston at odds with parochial farmers in the hinterland. But that is not the end of the story. For the countryside was itself in upheaval, its internal harmony disrupted by powerful forces of social, economic, and religious change. Richards has suggested that the Regulation was strongest in those Hampshire County towns with “unified cultures.” The characterization holds for such hotbeds of resistance as Amherst, where Congregationalism claimed the allegiance—and taxes—of all townspeople, albeit in more than one parish. But religious homogeneity was disappearing in the backcountry. Of the sixteen communities Richards dubs the “banner towns” of the Regulation, eleven had dissenters in their midst.³⁴ The Great Awakening, which arguably began in the Connecticut River Valley among Jonathan Edwards’s congregation,

³³Gregory H. Nobles, *Divisions throughout the Whole: Politics and Society in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, 1740–1775* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Ronald K. Snell, “Ambitious of Honor and Places: The Magistracy of Hampshire County, Massachusetts, 1692–1760,” in *Power and Status: Officeholding in Colonial America*, ed. Bruce C. Daniels (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), pp. 17–35; Robert Blair St. George, “Artifacts of Regional Consciousness in the Connecticut River Valley, 1700–1780,” in *The Great River: Art and Society of the Connecticut River Valley, 1635–1820*, ed. Gerald W. R. Ward and William N. Hosley Jr. (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum, 1985), pp. 29–39; Brooke, “To the Quiet of the People” and “A Deacon’s Orthodoxy”; and Kevin Michael Sweeney, “River Gods and Related Minor Deities: The Williams Family and the Connecticut River Valley, 1637–1790” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1986).

³⁴Richards, *Shays’s Rebellion*, p. 57. Brooke, “A Deacon’s Orthodoxy,” pp. 233–34, has identified those towns with dissenters: Ashfield, Belchertown, Colrain, Monson, New Salem, Pelham, Shutesbury, Shelburne, South Brimfield, Wendell, and West Springfield. Five Regulator towns were religiously homogeneous: Amherst, Greenwich, Palmer, Ware, and Whately.

had surged through the region, setting loose evangelical currents that continued to reverberate in the era of the Revolution. Divisions between Old and New Lights distracted Congregationalists, who fought over everything from ministerial salaries and parish rates to theology and church admissions.

So brutal were these conflicts that many towns had trouble hiring and keeping a minister. Pelham, a Scots-Irish community that was Presbyterian in faith, was particularly notorious. It had dismissed its first pastor after nine years, driven the second to an early grave, and gotten rid of a third after a protracted salary dispute during the Revolutionary War. For nearly half of its existence down to 1786, the Pelham church had suffered a vacancy in its pulpit, obliging it to rely on temporary preachers, including the imposter Stephen Burroughs, who later repaid that trust with a mean-spirited but hilarious satire of the townspeople's credulity and ignorance. Infighting within the established churches opened up space for dissenting sects, which proliferated in Hampshire County. Baptists popped up in Pelham and Colrain, Shakers in Belchertown and Shelburne, and the two sects competed with Congregationalists in Ashfield and West Springfield. The religious dissenters undercut the Regulators' claim to speak for "the body of the people." Corporate communities, united in both economics and faith, were few and far between in western Massachusetts.³⁵

The fracturing of religious unity may help explain why so few communities, in the end, actively participated in the Regulation. As Richards notes, 45 towns constituted the core of the resistance, contributing nearly 80 percent of all rebels. Far more numerous were communities where not a single man took up arms against the government. Altogether, out of the 187 towns in the five counties where courts were closed, more than half (57 percent) stood apart from the uprising, with only a handful of inhabitants, if any, participating. Neutrality was a popular option. But many towns were as likely to contribute militia companies in defense of the government as to condone rebels. In 1786–87 the citizens of Massachusetts did not fall readily into two opposing camps, as the rhetoric of an east-west, merchant-farmer conflict sometimes suggest. From the coast to the interior, many communities were divided within, often sympathetic to the economic or political grievances of the backcountry but adamantly

³⁵Nobles, *Divisions throughout the Whole*, pp. 36–106; Stephen A. Marini, "The Religious World of Daniel Shays," in *In Debt to Shays*; my "The Confidence Man and the Preacher."

opposed to the attempt to shut down the courts or use military threats in order to bend the government to populist demands.³⁶



It is with this large bloc of people in the middle, poised between two competing forces and little studied by historians, that this excursion into the Yankee world of 1786–87 comes to an end. Why would Baptists, bitterly struggling for toleration in a Congregationalist world, sign on with their orthodox neighbors in the battle against Boston? For the Baptists were already deeply engaged in a fight against taxes—the parish taxes required for support of the established church—and if there were any hope for relief, it lay with the cosmopolitan legislators in the commercialized towns on the coast, whose inhabitants had already made their peace with religious diversity. But the Baptist position involved more than pragmatic considerations. The dissenters harbored conscientious objections to the corporate ideology of the Regulation, with its insistence that “the people” embodied a single will that could be imposed on all. Embracing the liberal ideal of voluntary, individual choice, they rallied behind a government that, for all its faults, had been chosen in an election and derived its sovereignty from popular consent.³⁷

Similar sentiments prompted the Congregational minister of Springfield’s First Parish Church, the Reverend Bezaleel Howard, to condemn both Regulators and Friends of Government. Witnessing the escalation of events from Springfield center, Howard depicted a country in the grip of an uncontrollable frenzy. The furor began with the calling of county conventions by advocates of tax relief, where “the disaffected” freely expressed their “seditious sentiments,” full of reckless charges against the governor and wild ideas for constitutional reform. “Grossly Intoxacated [*sic*] with Conventions,” many people were carried away by “the fals[e] Eloquence of those about them. Like the dogs in a village, if one bark, all bark.” Not that defenders of government were any help. Their intemperate attacks on protesters as “the Ragmuffins of the Earth” stoked the resistance still more. The

³⁶Richards, *Shays’s Rebellion*, p. 55; Brooke, “A Deacon’s Orthodoxy,” app. A, pp. 230–38.

³⁷Brooke, “A Deacon’s Orthodoxy”; Marini, “Religious World of Daniel Shays”; Stephen E. Patterson, “The Roots of Massachusetts Federalism: Conservative Politics and Political Culture before 1787,” in *Sovereign States in an Age of Uncertainty*, pp. 31–61.

parson watched despondently as insurgents resorted to force, brandishing “Guns and Bayonets and Hostile appearances” to get their way. Though they “professed their Desire of Good laws,” their real intentions were different: “to overset the present Government . . . and resist the Execution of the Laws.” Ultimately, the time for conventions was over, and “Great was the anxiety [over] what would be the Issue of this military force.” First, the march on the arsenal, then the rout at Petersham: Shays behaved “like a fool, a knave, or a Coward,” and his “Extraordinary Conduct and unaccountable Behaviour produced the utmost Disorder.”³⁸

The debacle was, from first to last, Howard decided, completely unnecessary. As a Harvard-trained minister, he belonged to the elite of Massachusetts Bay, charged with upholding the political and religious order. Yet, he sympathized with popular grievances against heavy taxes, unequal justice, and expensive government. Reform was needed, and the way to achieve it lay at hand. The state constitution mandated annual elections for the legislature and governor, and New England’s political culture allowed for instructing representatives to the General Court. With a little mobilization, the people could have won relief from oppressive laws. Instead, the insurgents had ignored the customary and ordained routes to change, raised a rebellion, and provoked massive repression from the Bowdoin administration. In the hysteria that followed the clash of arms, the government launched a witch hunt against its enemies, rounding up suspects, threatening to jail critics, trying and convicting defendants on “very little Testimony,” and disqualifying all pardoned insurgents from the suffrage for five years. “The Gun and the Bayonet,” Howard decried, “are now the only standard of authority.” He was not alone in his recriminations. At the spring elections of 1787, the great majority of Massachusetts voters rose up, cast Bowdoin and friends out of office, and installed a legislature that voted massive relief to the people of the commonwealth. Not a penny in state taxes was collected that year. By the same methods that Rhode Islanders had employed the year before, Massachusetts’ citizens brought forth their own “electoral revolution.”³⁹

³⁸Richard D. Brown, “Shays’s Rebellion and Its Aftermath: A View from Springfield, Massachusetts, 1787,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 40 (October 1983): 601–15 (quotations, pp. 601, 602, 604, 610).

³⁹Brown, “Shays’s Rebellion and Its Aftermath,” pp. 609, 611; Holton, *Unruly Americans*, p. 77.

Even radical sectarians called down a plague on both houses in the conflict. One Christopher Babbitt of Lanesborough publicly warned that divine judgment awaited “tyrannical” rulers. Addressing his remarks to Bowdoin’s successor, he posed the central question in the evangelical scheme: “How is it with you, Governor Hancock? Was you never born again?” Are you and Samuel Adams, as it is rumored, neglectful of scripture and “deceived” by the devil? Babbitt made plain his doubts: don’t think that rulers can escape “God’s penetrating eye, that looks through the secrets of the children of men.” In fact, anyone striving for power was courting holy wrath. “As for Shays,” the self-appointed prophet declared, “I condemn them for taking up the gun. Was any of you born again? ‘except you be born again, you cannot see God in peace.’”⁴⁰

Shays’s Rebellion thus appears an entirely avoidable crisis, brought about by misguided radicals and inflexible reactionaries at the expense of a moderate majority that favored tax relief and other reforms but was committed to republican self-government under the constitution. But that is not all we have to learn from this Yankee rebellion. The episode put on display the wrenching transformations that Massachusetts would undergo in its revolutionary passage from royal colony to modern republic: the growth and spread of population, the churning up of the social order, the weakening of old hierarchies, the rise of new and fragile elites, the advance of commercial markets, the hold of traditional religion, the pull of new, more dynamic faiths, the spread of diversity and choice. In that maelstrom of change, the people of Massachusetts made their way—or perhaps, we should say, stumbled across the threshold—into a world all Americans would eventually inhabit. As a vanguard state, whether forcing the redemption of the state debt or preparing the path to the future, was not Massachusetts carrying on a Yankee rebellion?

⁴⁰Marini, “Religious World of Daniel Shays,” pp. 272–73.

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