

MS CONSTITUTION 101

Module 3: Road to the Convention

3.2: What I Saw: Shays' Rebellion Starts in Massachusetts



ON THIS DAY, AUGUST 29th, 1786, SHAYS' REBELLION STARTS IN MASSACHUSETTS



Image depicts artist's rendition of Shays' Rebellion

On August, 29th, 1786, farmers and everyday citizens joined an uprising in Massachusetts. Daniel Shays, a former Continental Army captain, led a group of upset western Massachusetts residents who were upset about the way the state government was handling wartime debt and high taxes. In some cases, Army veterans who had never received pay for their service saw their property seized.

Several days later, Massachusetts Governor James Bowdoin [issued a proclamation](#) explaining what happened when Shays' group arrived at the Court of Common Pleas in Northampton.

Remember to follow these steps to get answers to something you don't understand.

Step 1: Use context clues.

Step 2: Look up the word or phrase in the dictionary

Step 3: Ask a peer for help

Step 4: Ask the teacher

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"A large concourse of people, from several parts of that county, assembled at the Court-House...many of whom were armed with guns, swords, and other deadly weapons, and with drums beating and fifes playing, in contempt and open defiance of the authority of this Government, did, by their threats of violence and keeping possession of the Court-House until twelve o'clock on the night of the same day," said Bowdoin.

Bowdoin called on "all Judges, Justices, Sheriffs, Constables, and other officers, civil and military, within this Commonwealth, to prevent and suppress all such violent and riotous proceedings." He also appealed to the residents of the Commonwealth to "aid and assist with their utmost efforts the aforesaid officers, and to unite in preventing and suppressing all such treasonable proceedings."

The protesters later seized several other local courts after the state government refused to consider debt-relief provisions. The weak national government created by the Articles of Confederation had no power to put down an internal rebellion. Instead, it had to rely on a state militia. With no money, the central government couldn't act to protect a "perpetual union" guaranteed by the Articles.

When learning of the rebellion, George Washington [remarked](#) that it threatened:

"...the tranquility of the Union."

"If three years ago any person had told me that at this day, I should see such a formidable rebellion against the laws & constitutions of our own making as now appears I should have thought him a bedlamite—a fit subject for a mad house," he wrote to Henry Knox.

Shays' Rebellion was one of several events that led the founders to call for a Constitutional Convention the following year in Philadelphia.

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Now it's time for you to describe the events of August 29th, 1786, from your point of view. You can choose how you want to share your story. For example, you can write a letter, journal entry, podcast script, or draw a picture or comic strip.

Choose your point of view as either a member of the Massachusetts state government or a farmer following Daniel Shays. Complete the handout by sharing the events from your point of view. Be sure to include at least two specific quotes or details from the document. What do you want to happen now?

What I Saw: A Personal Account of Shays' Rebellion

