

A DIFFICULT DECADE



When militiamen left to fight for the future of the Colonies, they risked the welfare of their homes and families.

The **backcountry** refers to a sparsely inhabited rural region.

One would think that the years after the American Revolution (1775–1783) would have been good ones for the people of the new United States. After all, they had just won a war against England, a mighty European country. The new country had plenty of land and natural resources. Now that they also had political independence, the American people could set up their own form of government and run their nation as they pleased.

But in fact, the years following the Revolutionary War were difficult ones. Many Americans, especially poorer citizens, former soldiers, and people of the **backcountry**, were unhappy with their lives and their government. They felt that the Revolution had promised much but delivered little. By 1786, frustration had spilled over into outright rebellion.

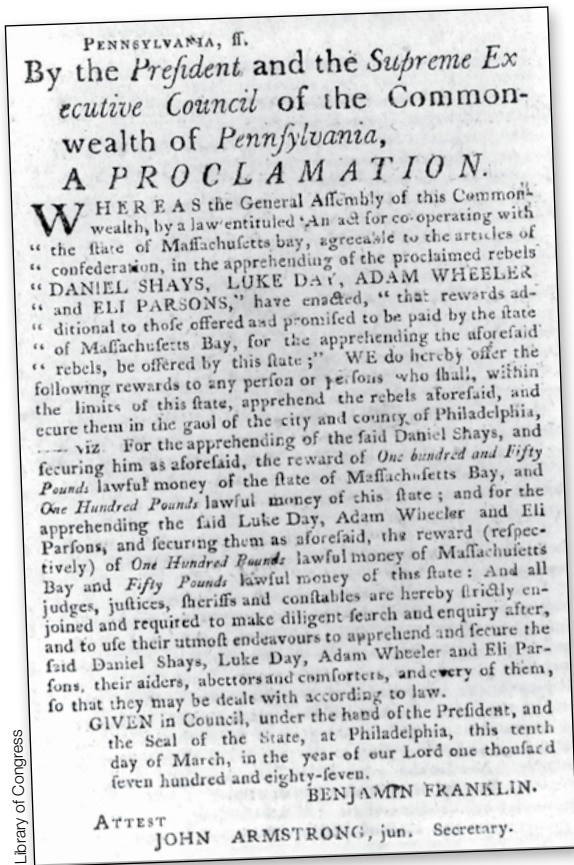
ECONOMIC HARDSHIPS

Much of the anger stemmed from the Revolution itself. Before the war, most soldiers had been making decent livings as farmers or craftsmen. When the fighting was over, however, they came home to fields overgrown with weeds and workshops in ruins. It would take a lot of time and energy

to make them profitable again. Three years after the end of the war, many soldiers still had not returned to their earlier standard of living.

Earnings from active duty during the war were another issue for soldiers. Colonial governments had very little money during the Revolution, so they offered soldiers very low wages, most of which were not even paid in cash. Instead, soldiers received notes, or promises, that they would be paid—someday. The men took the notes, hoping they eventually would receive what they were owed.

Most of the notes still had not been paid by 1786, however. Many states—particularly ones like Massachusetts, where much of the fighting had taken place—simply did not have the funds. As a result, the notes were practically worthless. Disgusted, many soldiers sold them to rich merchants for one-tenth or less of their face value. The ex-military men could not wait for their state governments to pay what they owed: Their farms and homes required improvements, and their families needed to eat. The wealthier merchants could afford to buy the notes at the greatly reduced price and wait until the government had money. Then, they would redeem the notes, at a great profit to themselves.



Library of Congress

A proclamation by the State of Pennsylvania offering a reward for Daniel Shays and three other rebellion ringleaders, signed by Benjamin Franklin.

Having a hard time picturing Daniel Shays?

Shays was an American soldier, revolutionary, and farmer best known for being one of the leaders of Shays' Rebellion, an uprising against oppressive debt and tax policies in Massachusetts. A pivotal event in American history may be named for him, but during the time in which he lived, he was viewed as an outlaw and troublemaker. He was certainly not the kind of person that the Massachusetts leaders of that time wanted to see remembered and studied in future generations. So very little is truly known about Daniel Shays, and we don't have any physical description or actual images of how he looked. Just goes to show you that fame is not just skin deep!

A WEAK FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

As time went on, some soldiers argued that the responsibility of paying the debts should belong to the federal government instead of to the states. Since the war had been a national effort, their argument made sense. There was one major problem with it, though: The relatively new national government was weak.

Although Americans had joined together during the war, most saw themselves primarily as citizens of their state or even their town. And the new political structure of the United States reflected this notion.

Under the **Articles of Confederation**, the individual states held most of the power. The central government could not form an army, for example, and had no power to collect taxes for national use. Thus, it had no method of paying the debt owed to the Revolutionary War soldiers.

Not being paid for their military service frustrated many of the soldiers, but problems with the economy angered more Americans. People who lived at the western edges of states such as Massachusetts barely made a living on small farms. When times were bad, as they were in 1785 and 1786, these folks were hit especially hard—some came close to starvation. Most Americans believed that their states were not doing enough to help them. They charged that the governments were prejudiced against the citizens of their respective states.

A STATE DIVIDED

In some cases, their complaints were correct. The Massachusetts state constitution, for instance, strongly favored the rich merchants of eastern cities like Boston. These were the same men

The **Articles of Confederation** were the system of government used by the United States before the Constitution.



COLONIAL CURRENCY

The colonists used various forms of “money”—including Spanish coins, Native American wampum, cash crops such as tobacco, and colonial notes and coins. The value of these currencies differed depending on the part of the country you were in. Then, in 1764, Great Britain forbade the colonists from issuing any paper money, creating a shortage. The Americans, however, printed money called “continentals” to help finance the Revolutionary War, but the continentals became worthless after the war. These factors, combined with the burden of high taxes, made for difficult economic times in the years after the war. It was not until 1792 and the passage of the Coinage Act that the United States adopted an official unit of currency—the dollar.



Facsimile of the first money coined by the United States.



American artist John Trumbull portrayed the British surrender at Yorktown in 1781, in which British general Charles Cornwallis' sword was presented to General George Washington's second in command, General Benjamin Lincoln. Before the end of the decade, Lincoln would be the commander of the Massachusetts militia that tried to end Shays' Rebellion.

who had bought up the soldiers' undervalued notes. In addition, these merchants had played a big role in forming the Massachusetts state government. They supported laws that raised taxes and made it a priority to pay off the notes.

Before the Revolutionary War, the colonial government of Massachusetts had left the western part of the state more or less alone. This was no longer true after the war. The state government began demanding high taxes, which the people simply did not have the means to pay. It forced rural residents to obey laws that had been passed far from their communities and refused to issue more paper money to help lighten the debt. The changes made the western Massachusetts citizens resentful—and angry.

Massachusetts was not the only place where discontent grew in the years after the Revolution. Other states also experienced problems, mostly for similar reasons. But the lack of pay for soldiers, the unfair state constitution, and the poor economy all combined to make the situation in Massachusetts especially explosive.