

**THE HISTORY CHANNEL® PRESENTS:
10 DAYS THAT UNEXPECTEDLY CHANGED AMERICA™**



Shays' Rebellion: America's First Civil War
(JANUARY 25, 1787)

Though the American Revolution boldly established the formation of a new nation, how it would be organized and governed was a work in progress. In the wake of the Revolution, the Articles of Confederation set out guidelines for the federal government. Yet this loose authority and the lack of a single national leader left the nation vulnerable to faction and uprising. Meanwhile, many citizens who had risked their lives defeating the British were struggling under the weight of high taxes and the demand for cash currency as payment for goods and services. These citizens argued that they were being subjected to the same conditions the Revolution was fought to overturn. One of those disenchanted veterans was Daniel Shays, a Massachusetts farmer and former Continental Army captain. Facing the loss of his own farm, Shays organized a rebel army of over 1,000 followers which stormed a Springfield debtors court and arsenal, determined to attack and overthrow the government in Boston.

The drama of the Shays' Rebellion is vividly captured in this one hour documentary. A truly unique History Channel production, ***Shays' Rebellion: America's First Civil War*** is presented in animation format created by Oscar® nominee Bill Plympton with a musical score that evokes the tensions and surprises of this pivotal chapter in post-Revolutionary history. This documentary will be of particular appeal to young people, as its innovative style will draw them into this little known but critical turning point in United States history. Though the rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful, it had profound results that changed America forever. In the wake of the Shays' rebellion, the states moved quickly to hold a Constitutional Convention that eventually led to the drafting of the Constitution and later, the Bill of Rights. In many ways, it was Shays Rebellion that persuaded General George Washington, who had retired after the war, to return to politics and accept the crucial role of the nation's first president. This program

would be an excellent addition to course units on the Revolutionary era, revealing the tenuous nature of the republic during its chaotic and formative early years.

Curriculum Links:

Shays' Rebellion: America's First Civil War would be useful for American History, American Culture, and Social Studies courses. It is appropriate for high school students. It fulfills the following standards as outlined by the National Council for History Education: (1) Values, beliefs, political ideas, and institutions, (2) Conflict and cooperation, and (3) Patterns of social and political interaction.

Key Terms:

Students should identify the following terms. Visit [www.mirriamwebster](http://www.mirriamwebster.com) for definitions.

Arsenal
Confederation
Currency
Dire
Federal
Instigator
Insurrection
Propaganda

Comprehension Questions:

1. *Daniel Shays felt that he had the right to be protected from debt and decline. Why did he believe the government was obligated to provide this protection?*
2. *Do you think it was significant that Daniel Shays was a Revolutionary war veteran? Discuss.*
3. *What were the major complaints of Shays and his followers? What do you think they saw as the goals of the rebellion? Did these goals change over time?*
4. *Do you think most Americans would have agreed with Shays' and his followers at the time of the rebellion? Do you think they would have approved of the way they addressed them?*
5. *Why was Shays' Rebellion considered to be the United States' first civil war?*
6. *Americans soon learned after the war that the Articles of Confederation were too weak. How did Shays' Rebellion reveal these weaknesses?*
7. *What provisions were included in the Articles for a federal government? Did limiting the powers of the federal government negatively impact the nation's development? Explain.*
8. *What could have been included in the Articles to help the emerging nation recover from war?*
9. *What role did Shays' Rebellion play in the creation of the Constitution? If Shays' Rebellion had been a peaceful protest, do you feel it would have had the same impact? Explain.*

10. Do you think Shays and his followers had any chance of leading a successful revolt? Why or why not?
11. What was the Riot Act? Why was it significant?
12. What punishment did Shays and the lead rebels receive for their actions? Do you think their treatment was just? Discuss.

Extended Activities:

1. Imagine you were a farmer on the brink of Shays' Rebellion. Write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper describing your complaints and how you think the state government should help you. (Students can also create political cartoons depicting the issues at the center of the Shays Rebellion.) Share these letters with your larger class or group.
2. At the trials of the rebels, Captain Park Holland encouraged officials to consider several facts before condemning Shays' followers commenting, "Our government was a new, untried ship with many joints that needed oiling, to say the least, with no chart of experience to guide us, nor map of the past by which to lay course." After considering this statement, pretend you are a judge given the task of determining Shays' punishment for his crimes. Write a one page essay in the voice of an 18th century judge describing Shays' punishment and your rationale. The punishment can differ from that actually received by Shays, but you should be sure to defend your decision with a careful and concise argument.
3. In small groups, locate a copy of the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution online or at the library. Then, on a poster-board or paper with two columns, compare and contrast these two documents. Create lists of the powers and responsibilities outlined in each of these two documents. Then, reconvene with the larger class and discuss the relationship between Shays' Rebellion and the creation of the new Constitution.

Primary Source Exploration:

The quotation below is an excerpt from the *Articles of Confederation*, adopted by the Continental Congress on November 15, 1777 as an agreement between the states. This document served as the nation's constitution until 1789 when the present day Constitution was adopted in 1787. After reading this excerpt, ask students to respond to the questions listed below.

Excerpt from the *Articles of Confederation*:

II.

Each state retains its sovereignty, freedom, and independence, and every power, jurisdiction, and right, which is not by this Confederation expressly delegated to the United States, in Congress assembled.

III.

The said States hereby severally enter into a firm league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare, binding themselves to assist each other,

against all force offered to, or attacks made upon them, or any of them, on account of religion, sovereignty, trade, or any other pretense whatever.

1. *How would you describe core ideas of each of these two statements from the Articles of Confederation? What do you think the authors of the Articles meant when they described the states as being in a “firm league of friendship”? Why was a stronger document ultimately important?*
2. *Based on these statements, and what you have learned from this documentary, why do you think the founding fathers found it necessary to form a more formal Constitution?*

Resources:

Books

Berkin, Carol. *A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution*, (Harcourt Children’s Books, 2003).

Hull, Mary E. *Shays’ Rebellion and the Constitution in American History*, (Enslow, 2000).

Szatmary, David P. *Shays’ Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection*, (University of Massachusetts Press, 1980).

Wood, Gordon. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, (Vintage, 1993).

Web sites

A helpful website with primary sources from the University of Massachusetts:

http://www.umass.edu/history/institute_dir/rebel/srebell.html

Additional resources and maps related to early American history:

<http://www.earlyamerica.com/>

A useful outline of the Articles of Confederation, for high school readers:

<http://bensguide.gpo.gov/9-12/documents/articles/index.html>