

The Aftermath of Shays' Rebellion

The Case of Jason Parmenter

In the election of June 1787, Governor Bowdoin was [easily] defeated by the state's most popular politician, John Hancock, famous signer of the Declaration of Independence.

With a new administration in place, the question of clemency [legal forgiveness] was now a symbolic issue debated by a divided public. General Lincoln himself, the subduer of Shays' Rebellion, came out in favor of mercy. On the other hand Samuel Adams, the influential Revolutionary patriot and head of the governor's advisory council, called for the execution of convicted traitors to the republic.

The case of Jason Parmenter, awaiting execution in Northampton jail, was especially vexatious [frustrating]. Sentenced to hang for participating in Shays' attack on the Springfield arsenal, Parmenter separately was guilty of fatally shooting a government soldier -- inadvertently in the dark of night, he maintained. Perhaps he could be pardoned for marching on Springfield -- but what about the charge of murder?

The Hancock administration continued to hedge on this potentially explosive problem. At last a formula was devised which would equally dramatize the justice and the mercy of government: Parmenter and his fellow convicts were paraded at the gallows on June 21, 1787, before a large crowd of spectators -- and were reprieved only at the last instant.

The rebels complaints were understandable, but their revolt threatened anarchy, especially when the governor realized he had no armed forces to put down the uprising; and, Congress was too weak to have such resources either.

As we move forward...

Shays' Rebellion brought former General George Washington back into the national spotlight. Revolutionary figures, such as Samuel Adams and Thomas Jefferson seemed to express opposite opinions about Shays' Rebellion.

Jefferson: *"A little rebellion now and then is a good thing. It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government. God forbid that we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion."*

S. Adams: *"Rebellion against a king may be pardoned or lightly punished, but the man who dares to rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death."*

Washington: *"Experience has taught us that men will not adopt, and carry into execution, measures best calculated for their own good, without the intervention of a coercive power"*

In the views of these leaders, how much had the Revolution accomplished? What perils did the new republic face? How should the republic be kept safe?

*****Shays' Rebellion embodied both the ECONOMIC & POLITICAL weaknesses facing the newly independent American States and served as the TURNING POINT for this era known as The Critical Period*****