

# Mutinies & Conspiracies & Rebellions...

Oh my!



**An APUSH Critical Period Reader**

# The Pennsylvania & New Jersey Line Mutinies

Early [in the winter of 1781], which most of Washington's forces spent at New Windsor, on the Hudson River just north of West Point, the New Jersey Line was assigned to quarters at Pompton. The Pennsylvania Line, consisting of 10 infantry regiments and one of artillery, repaired and occupied the log huts built by Hand's and the 1st Connecticut Brigades at Jockey Hollow in 1779–80.

Morale was extremely low at this time among all the Continental troops stationed in New Jersey. Not only did the Pennsylvanians lack clothing and blankets, but they were without a drop of rum to fortify themselves against the piercing cold. Moreover, they had not seen even a paper dollar in pay for over 12 months. Many of the soldiers also claimed that their original enlistments "for three years or during the war" entitled them to discharge at the end of 3 years, or sooner in case the war terminated earlier, and that the officers, by interpreting their enlistments to run as long as the war should last, were unjustly holding them beyond the time agreed upon. Still another cause of irritation was that latecomers in the Continental Army, especially those from New England, had been given generous bounties for enlisting, whereas both the New Jersey and Pennsylvania veterans had already served 3 full years for a mere shadow of compensation.

Maj. Gen. Anthony Wayne, then commanding the Pennsylvanians, had known for a long time that trouble was coming if these grievances were not soon remedied, and had repeatedly urged the authorities of his State to do something about them. His entreaties fell on deaf ears. Tired of pleading, the men at last resorted to mutiny. On the evening of New Year's Day 1781, almost the whole Pennsylvania Line turned out by prearrangement, seized the artillery and ammunition, and prepared to leave the camp. Capt. Adam Bettin was killed, and two other officers wounded, in vain attempts to restore order. Wayne himself, popular though he was with both rank and file, could not persuade the mutineers to lay down their arms. At 11 o'clock that night they marched off toward Philadelphia with the announced intention of carrying their case direct to Congress.

The serious character of this revolt, especially the grave danger that it might spread rapidly to other parts of the Continental Army, was fully appreciated by Washington and his principal officers, including Wayne, who followed and caught up with the mutineers, then voluntarily accompanied them to Princeton. Meanwhile, the men preserved their own order, declared they would turn and fight the British should an invasion of New Jersey be attempted in this crisis, and they handed over to Wayne two emissaries dispatched by Sir Henry Clinton to lure them into his lines with lavish promises. This display of loyalty, the firm stand taken by the mutineers, and at the same time the justness of their complaints, all had effect on representatives of Congress and the Pennsylvania State authorities who came to Princeton to negotiate the whole question. An agreement concluded on January 7 stipulated that enlistments for 3 years or the duration of the war would be considered as expiring at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year; that shoes, linen overalls, and shirts would be issued shortly to the men discharged; and that prompt action would be taken in the matter of back pay. Commissioners appointed by Congress went to work at once to settle the details. More than half the mutineers were

released from the army, and the rest furloughed for several months, as a result of the final settlement. Their main grievances removed, many of the men later reenlisted for new bounties. The loss was thus not as great in actuality as had been feared at first.

Hardly had the Pennsylvania Mutiny subsided when, on January 20, the New Jersey troops at Pompton also rose in revolt. Although this second insurrection was a comparatively mild affair, Washington took no chances with it. Five hundred men under command of Maj. Gen. Robert Howe were sent to restore order, and early in the morning of January 27, these forces surrounded the camp at Pompton and forced the mutineers to parade without arms. Three ringleaders were condemned to be shot by 12 of their partners in the uprising, but when two had been executed, the third was pardoned. On February 7 following, Washington ordered the chastened New Jersey Brigade to Morristown, there to take up quarters "in the Huts, lately occupied by the Pennsylvanians." The troops remained so posted until July 8, 1781, when the Brigade marched for Kingsbridge on the Hudson.

**Source:** National Park Service

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## The Newburgh Conspiracy

In the spring of 1783, Washington's army was camped outside of New York City, then still occupied by the British, as peace talks continued in Paris. Congress was reluctant to disband the army, fearful of Britain's true intentions, yet Congress was unwilling and unable to pay the enlisted men and their officers, restrained by the weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation which denied Congress the power to levy taxes. Many soldiers had not been paid in months. Officers who had had been promised a lifetime pension of half pay now feared that a bankrupt Congress would repudiate that obligation and disband the army without granting their pensions.

In November, 1782, the officers submitted to Congress a petition written by Henry Knox listing their grievances and warning of dire consequences if their demands were not met. However, the petition became embroiled in Congressional politics. Those who favored strengthening of the Articles ("nationalists") by granting Congress the power of taxation, encouraged talk of a possible soldiers' revolt as a handy threat to use against those states-rights' advocates who opposed granting Congress any increase in powers. Nevertheless, Congress failed to act on the soldiers' demands. A conspiracy of officers lead by Horatio Gates now began to contemplate more direct action including a military takeover of Congress and the removal of Washington from command.

In a timely letter from a Congressman, Washington, however, was warned of the conspiracy, and he subsequently conducted his own quiet investigation. At an illicit meeting of the rebellious officers in Newburg, New York, on March 15, 1783, Washington preempted any action by the conspirators by unexpectedly walking in and asking General Gates, leader of the rebellious cabal, if he could speak to the officers. Washington

reassured the men of the respect that the Congress felt towards their service and anticipated future funding of Congress's obligations. He also appealed to their patriotism and honor. The climatic moment came at the end of the speech when Washington pulled from his pocket his eyeglasses in order to read a letter from a Congressman reassuring the officers of redress. Except for a few intimates, most of the men had never seen Washington wear his eyeglasses. Seeing their surprise, Washington commented: "Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country."

This act of common humanity and his admission of weakness and sacrifice moved the men more than any speech or letter could have. Those devoted to Washington reaffirmed their loyalty and patriotism, and the conspiracy collapsed. Congress did finally grant the officers five years of pay upon separation from the army and enlisted men four months pay. Washington's refusal to take any action that might have advanced his own ambition is characteristic of the republican virtues demonstrated by many of the founding fathers, disinterestedness, sacrifice and honor, and the beginning of his identification with that legendary Roman Cincinnatus. Indeed, Washington deserves credit for preserving civilian rule in the new nation by this incident as well as later resigning his military commission as commanding general.

**Source:** Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

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## Shays' Rebellion

Historians once characterized the 1780s as the "critical period" in American history, when the new nation, saddled with an inadequate system of government, suffered crippling economic, political, and foreign policy problems that threatened its independence. Although it is possible to exaggerate the country's difficulties during the first years of independence, there can be no doubt that the country did face severe challenges.

One problem was the threat of government bankruptcy. The nation owed \$160 million in war debts and the Congress had no power to tax and the states rarely sent in more than half of Congress's requisitions. The national currency was worthless. To help pay the government's debt, several members of Congress proposed the imposition of a five percent duty on imports. But because the Articles of Confederation required unanimous approval of legislation, a single state, Rhode Island, was able to block the measure.

The country also faced grave foreign policy problems. Spain closed the Mississippi River to American commerce in 1784 and secretly conspired with Westerners (including the famous frontiersman Daniel Boone) to acquire the area that would eventually become Kentucky and Tennessee. Britain retained military posts in the Northwest, in violation of the peace treaty ending the Revolution, and tried to persuade Vermont to become a Canadian province.

The economy also posed serious problems. The Revolution had a disruptive impact especially on the South's economy. Planters lost about 60,000 slaves (including about 25,000 slaves in South Carolina and 5,000 in Georgia). New British trade regulations--the Orders in Council of 1783--prohibited the sale of many American agricultural products in the British West Indies, one of the country's leading markets, and required commodities to be shipped on British vessels. Massachusetts shipbuilders, who had constructed about 125 ships a year before the war, built only 25 ships a year after the war. Merchants, who had purchased large quantities of British goods after the war, found it difficult to sell these commodities to hard-pressed Americans. States protected local interests by imposing tariffs on interstate commerce.

Yet for all these problems, it seems clear in retrospect that the 1780s marked a crucial period in the development of the American economy. Output by farmers increased sharply during the 1780s--a remarkable development given the absence of any new farm machinery. Farmers also significantly shifted their investment away from cattle and farm implements to more liquid forms of wealth, such as bonds and mortgages. Meanwhile, a growing number of farm households began to produce goods previously imported from Britain. At the same time, merchants, freed of British trade restrictions, had opened commerce with Asia. But to many Americans, the signs of economic recovery remained faint.

Economic conditions were particularly troubled in Massachusetts. The British Orders in Council of 1783 dealt a severe blow to the state's agricultural, shipping, and shipbuilding trades. Making matters worse, the state legislature had voted to pay off the state's revolutionary war debt in three years. Between 1783 and 1786, taxes on land rose more than 60 percent between.

Desperate farmers in western Massachusetts demanded cuts in property taxes and adoption of stay laws to postpone farm foreclosures. The lower house of the Massachusetts legislature passed relief measures in 1786, but eastern creditors persuaded the upper house to reject the package.

Local courts started to seize the property, farm implements, and even the furniture and clothing of farmers like Daniel Shays (1747-1825), a Revolutionary war veteran. In late August 1786, a thousand farmers in Northampton County shut down the county court. Frightened state leaders in Boston appealed for public support. Easterners raised 5000 pounds sterling to send an army led by the former Continental general Benjamin Lincoln to suppress the rebellion.

In January 1787, Shays and his followers attacked the federal arsenal at Springfield, but were driven off. In early February the army routed the rebels. These setbacks, along with tax relief from the assembly and amnesty for the rebellion's leaders, ended the uprising. Shays' Rebellion, however, held broader significance. It convinced national leaders that only a strong central government could save the republic from chaos.

**Source:** Digital History