

Then & Now "THE SPIRIT OF '86"

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(Paper read to the Princeton Historical Society
by Marion Fisher Murphy in October of 1971)

In my youth, frequently we sang a sad song the lyrics of which went like this:

*There is a tavern in our town
Where my true love sits him down,
And he takes the barmaid on his knee
And never, never thinks of me.*

You've all sung it, I'm sure.

In the year of 1786 there were many taverns in our Town, and the goodwives and maidens of Princeton had more to worry them than an occasional flirtatious barmaid. For their men, when they frequented one or another of the local taverns, were getting themselves into real trouble this time. They were plotting "a little rebellion."

To be sure, the times were hard; there were reasons enough to rebel. The men felt that they were badly used, indeed. Here they were, Revolutionary War veterans. And now that the fighting was done, the Treaty of Paris signed three years ago, they were more than ready to return to their neglected farms and reap the profits of their honest toil. They were finding out, however, that things were not going to be that simple. Merchants are merchants. Whether they live in London, Boston, or Princeton, they like to be paid. Furthermore, it was more and more obvious that the seacoast merchants of Massachusetts were being backed up by the General Court, which sat smugly in Boston -- not out in the center of the Commonwealth where a man could keep his eye on it.

"The sitting of the General Court in the town of Boston," said the Worcester Magazine. "is considered a grievance, as in transacting business of an infant nation embarrassed with debts, it is highly incumbent to study economy and dispatch, for which great purposes the town of Boston, for reasons that must be obvious to the honorable Court, is by no means adapted." ¹

The General Court did consider the matter of the Commonwealth's capital, carrying the matter so far as to appoint a committee to look into the situation. The Court, however, voiced the opinion that though it might consider moving as far west as Concord, it would never go to Worcester. That, in the confusion of later events, was as far as the capital issue went. Massachusetts still has no legally designated seat of government. Boston is merely the place where the statehouse is located.

"All it amounts to," grumbled the men over their mugs of flip, toddy, or grog, "is the enemy's now three thousand miles nearer than before. Now; he lives in Boston rather than in London. Is this all our freedom from England has got us?"

Princeton taverns, where the men were wont to gather in 1786, were widely scattered over the Town, but most could be found along the well-known Bay Path, or County Road, that crossed the Town from east to west — linking Lancaster with Barre and Petersham. The oldest, and apparently one of the most popular taverns, was the one run by Lt. Col. Joseph Sargent in the house now owned by Mrs. Edward Densmore at Russell's Corner. Col. Sargent, who migrated from Bolton to Princeton in 1765, had at that time purchased the tavern built in 1748 by Abijah Moore. Owned by the Cary family today



Another tavern was the Mirick Tavern, which stood a little farther west, at the crossroads of the north-south County Road with the Bay Path.



Altogether, this house of entertainment was run by Caleb Mirick and his son for more than half a century — from before the Revolution to 1820, when the younger Mirick cut down his signpost.² Nearer the Meetinghouse than the others, it served a special purpose. It was frequented, it is said, by the minister of a Sunday, between the two Sabbath services, to sustain him through the long afternoon session. In all humanity, it is to be hoped that the congregation, the male portion of it at least, joined him in this practice. No doubt Mirick's Tavern did a brisk Sunday business. The women, patient creatures that they were, probably endured the torture

without alcoholic aid. Years later, this house became the property of the Fay Family; moved and rotated to face Mountain Rd; owned by the Yaglou's; and today it is owned by the Salerni family.

In addition to these two taverns, William Richardson kept a Public House and general store at the foot of the present Common (near the War Memorial). Col. Richardson had come from Lancaster in 1770 and from the start took an active part in Town affairs. In 1774, for instance, he served simultaneously as selectman, town clerk, and assessor. His tavern stood between the sites later occupied by D. H. Gregory's and Ivory Wilder's, now Rocky Mason and Dix Davis.

But of greater interest to our story are two taverns owned and operated by the Gale brothers — Amos and Abraham — in the western part of Town. From Anita Woodward's research, we are fairly sure that Amos Gale's tavern stood on the south side of the Bay Path, near the four corners made by its intersection with Gates Road. Abraham Gale's house stood in Lot 30, near the No. 6 Schoolhouse on Ball Hill Road, about where the railroad crosses it today.

One gathers that the pitch of discontent in 1786 varied from tavern to tavern, depending somewhat upon the views of the proprietor. Subsequent events suggest that malcontents found Col. Sargent's a favorable environment, but that Mirick's would not have been. Probably the two taverns kept by the Gale brothers in the western part of Town were hotbeds of dissent.



Schoolhouse #6 on Schoolhouse Rd off Ball Hill Rd. demolished and rebuilt as a private home.

The year 1786 got off to an inauspicious start. A diphtheria epidemic during the first three months .all but wiped out two Princeton families — the Paul Matthews, who lived at or near Mary Guest's house (to the left of Echo Lake Rd.), and the Abijah Harrington's, who lived in the house now owned by Mrs. James S. Russell (Gregory Hill Rd.). Scattered deaths elsewhere in Town brought the total to twenty-five, mostly children under the age of sixteen.

In addition to disease, there was debt. Every man seemed to be in debt to someone else. Everybody knew of good, sound men whom creditors had forced into debtor's prison. Probably the most outstanding Princeton example of a good, sound business man who had been forced into debtor's prison was none other than Col. William Richardson himself, Princeton's tax collector in 1786, who at the age of fifty-five, because of arrears in the Town's taxes was arrested and hauled off to the Worcester Jailhouse.³ Apparently Col. Richardson overcame his difficulties, however, for in 1787 he was keeping tavern in Princeton as before.

Half the men of Worcester County were in danger of losing, not only their goods and livestock, but their farms as well, and with the farms their standing as free men and their right to vote. The 1780 Massachusetts Constitution allowed only men of property to vote and only the wealthy to hold high office. Samuel Eliot Morison says: "The Constitution of 1780 was a lawyers' and merchants' constitution, directed toward something like quarterdeck efficiency in government, and the protection of property against democratic pirates."⁴ In 1786 Maritime Massachusetts still paced the Commonwealth's quarterdeck, and would for years to come.

In 1786 the threat of debt and imprisonment lurked behind every glacial boulder in Worcester County. With a population of some 50,000 at that time, two thousand debtor actions a year crowded the dockets of the Court of Common Pleas. In 1784, for example, one hundred and four offenders had been committed to the County Jail in Worcester. Ninety-four of these were under sentence for debt.⁵ It is said that the old Worcester Jail was so crowded that poorer debtors were crowded fifteen to a room.

When you consider that families were large in those days, it is not unreasonable to estimate that at least half the people of the County were threatened with economic disaster. And things were just as bad farther west in the Connecticut Valley and in the Berkshires, and to the east in Middlesex County. Hard money was scarce; paper money worthless — not worth a continental as the saying went. With almost no market for farm products, how could a farmer pay his taxes? Or a town, in turn, pay its?

By the summer of 1786 — the summer of their discontent — Massachusetts veterans had a new grievance, beyond the misery of debt and taxes. At long last the Commonwealth was preparing to redeem, with interest, the old securities issued as payment to war veterans. The trouble with that move was, the veterans no longer held the securities. Years before they had been forced to sell their scrip to speculators at a fraction of its original value. Now, as the holders of real estate, they were to be taxed to guarantee a profit to Boston sharpers. Boston, once considered so radical, had now become the stronghold of vested interests. By 1786 the Massachusetts Senate was fully as unpopular in the rural parts of the Commonwealth as the House of Lords had been a decade earlier.

And usually the debt a man incurred, though small to begin with, could balloon to much greater proportions once it was fed into the legal hopper. Take the case of Abraham Gale. In 1774 he had come to Princeton from Shrewsbury. He had barely settled on his place on Ball Hill Road when the Lexington Alarm called him, and thirty-eight other Princetonians, into action. Abraham then went on to serve five years in the Revolutionary Army, gaining the rank of Captain before he was finally discharged. After the War he went back to farming and innkeeping, and was taxed in 1779 as the owner of real estate valued at 735 pounds. ⁶ His personal property was valued at 230 pounds.

Altogether he would have been worth several thousand dollars, at least, in our present money.



On the 16th day of April, 1786, Captain Gale contracted a small debt to John Russell, storekeeper at Russell's Corner, who lived across the road from Col. Sargent's tavern. The amount was small, 14 shillings, 11 pence. A year later, Constable Elisha Allen, who lived near Wooten's, (he who was later most foully murdered by Samuel Frost) ⁷ was ordered by the Sheriff to seize the goods, chattels, or real estate of "said Gale and pay unto the said Russell - the aforesaid sum together with eleven shillings and eleven pence cost of process and one shilling and eight pence for this writ and therefore also to satisfy yourself your own lawful fee." ⁸ Altogether, 2 pounds, 2 shillings, 8 pence were required to collect a debt of 14 shillings, 11 pence. A debt of approximately \$2.10 in our money had more than tripled.

The writ further specified that in case Gale's goods, chattels, or real estate, when sold at public auction, were not sufficient to pay his debts, the constable was to "take the body of the said Gale and him commit unto our Goal in our county of Worcester aforesaid." But this Constable Allen failed to do, for by April of 1787 said Gale had left the Commonwealth.

One old codger summed up the grievances of his time in words strongly hinting at rebellion: "I've to pay everyone, but nobody pays me. I've lost a deal by this man and that man and t'other man, and the great men are going to get all we have. I think it's time for us to rise and put a stop to it, and have no more courts, nor sheriffs, nor collectors, nor lawyers, and I know that we are the biggest party, let them say what they will."

Talk in a Princeton tavern may have gone something like this:

"What we should do," said Capt. Abraham Gale, while dispensing liquor to his friends and neighbors, "is what the men over to Pioneer Valley done."

"What's that, Abe?" asked Norman Clark, who lived on the back road, long since discontinued, that ran through the woods behind the Simonatis place.

And Abe replied, "Well, they marched on the Hamden County Courthouse to keep the Court from settin'. And that's what we should do, too. Go to Worcester on September 5 and keep the Court from settin'."

"Wouldn't we get arrested?" asked one.

"Hal The jail's full now," said another. "Where'd they put us? Besides we'll all land in jail anyhow, soon's the sheriff gets through with us. Him and his auctions. LOOK, what he done to Col. Richardson."

"Heard of a man t'other day, whose cow fetched only 2 shillings at the sheriff's auction. She was a good milker, too. I say let's go."

Sadey Mason, a man of fifty or more, who had been one of the Town's early settlers, spoke up. "I was over to Sargent's t'other day, when Adam Wheeler come ridin' through on his way to Lancaster to meet up with Job Shattuck. He says the Hubbardston folks is real riled up. I'd think they'd join us."

"Moses Smith over to Barre will bring some men, I'd warrant," added Oliver Davis, owner of the grist and saw mills on the Ware River.

"Yeah, and the folks from Westminster, Petersham, and Athol will join in, too," added another, "were we to spread the word. People from all them towns is upset, and that's a fact."

So, the plan grew. And here's the way Isaiah Thomas reported the incident in the Worcester Magazine for the first week in September. The Worcester Magazine, incidentally was the Massachusetts Spy in disguise. Isaiah Thomas hoped by this ruse to avoid paying a prohibitively high tax on newspaper advertising. Here's the way the account went:

"Early on Tuesday morning last, this town was visited by a body of men under arms

from several towns in the North-west part of the County, who surrounded and took possession of the Court-house, in order to stop the sitting of the Court of Common Pleas by law to be holden on that day; they were soon joined by a number of others from various towns, not in arms. About 12 o'clock the Judges of the Court preceded by the High Sheriff proceeded to the Court-house, but were stopped at the door by the point of bayonets. The Court were firm, and did honour to the dignity of their stations." ⁹.

This episode is more graphically described by Marion Starkey in a charming book entitled "A Little Rebellion". Speaking of Judge Artemas Ward, she says: "looking out from the house where he and his colleagues had assembled, seeing the courthouse square (Lincoln Square) two hundred men, at least half of them armed, Judge Ward became the soldier again. (He had led the Massachusetts troops during the Revolution until Washington became the Commander-in-Chiefs.) He didn't look it; his silken robes billowed about an aging figure of enormous, unmilitary girth. But he had the spirit that wins battles, and in that spirit, he gave his orders." ¹⁰.

Samuel Briggs, Crier of the Court, and Sheriff Greenleaf from Lancaster led the way, and the judges followed in grave procession, "quite as if this were a usual day in court with no one to bar the way."

"The way was barred. A sentinel leveled his gun at them, and in the gun a bayonet was fixed.

"What's your business here?" snapped Ward, and the sentinel, who had been one of his own subalterns in a happier day, fell back in confusion and, instead of stopping the judicial progress, presented arms to his general.

"The judge went on. Before the courthouse stood a file of men with fixed bayonets, and before them a graying veteran with drawn sword (Moses Smith of Barre). The town crier turned to the chief justice inquiringly.

"Go cry the court," said Ward.

"His voice still conveyed command." The file on the steps actually parted to let the crier through, and no one lifted a hand to stop him when he threw open the door. But the courtroom was occupied; a squad of infantry leveled their muskets on the judges from just inside the door.

The ranks closed again when Ward made to follow.

"Who is your leader, and what are you doing here?" he demanded. And when there was no answer: "I say, who is your leader?"

"It was a question no one was prepared to answer. Leaders there obviously were: each town's company had its own. Nevertheless, a leader in any official sense there was none. Apparently, no one had thought of it, and there was that in Judge Ward's manner that inspired a certain reluctance to claim the distinction. But he was insisting.

"I'm not the leader," said Wheeler of Hubbardston, "but I can tell you what we're here for. We've come to relieve the distress of the people. There will be no court until they have redress of their grievances."

It was a confrontation such as we have seen frequently of late. A rabble had seized the courthouse, and the establishment (to use the modern term), represented by the judges, was demanding admittance.

But let Miss Starkey continue with the story.

"I'm not afraid of your bayonets!" snapped Ward. "You've been deceiving these people. Give me a position where they can hear me and I'll prove it to them."

"For nearly two hours Judge Ward addressed the crowd in the square exposing the 'fallacy' of the 'supposed grievances pointing out that only civil war and anarchy could result from the method of redress chosen, and expounding the meaning of treason.

"What was remarkable was that for those two hours the men in the square gave him their attention. Sabbath meeting had accustomed them to long listening, had even given them a taste for it. They interrupted him sometimes, but they heard him out. Some flinched from his reference to the gallows as the penalty for treason, and one insurgent listened so carefully that he repented and when he got home wrote a letter saying so and sent it to Isaiah Thomas, who printed it.

"The exhortation was stopped at last, not by subversive action, but by rain, Judge Wards robes were getting wet.

"May the sun never shine on rebellion in Massachusetts," he concluded dramatically, and retired to the United States Arms" (a tavern near the Worcester Courthouse).

"The judge's eloquence had not, however, got him into the courthouse. In the afternoon Ward and his colleagues were put to the now familiar expedient of opening court in the tavern and waiting for the militia, which Sheriff Greenleaf had been sent to muster. They waited in vain. Some of the militia already stood in the square barring the courthouse from its lawful occupants. The rest, being approached, ordered, and expostulated with only murmured their regrets. Deprecatingly their officers said that their men, though of varying sentiments, were unanimously against interfering." ¹¹.

On Wednesday afternoon, Judge Ward gave up and adjourned the Court of Common Pleas without setting a date for its reconvening. The Court of Sessions was postponed until November 21. The men from Princeton, along with those from Hubbardston, Rutland, Holden, Barre, Westminster, and Athol, went home.

Back home in Hubbardston, Capt. Adam Wheeler was having afterthoughts. The Captain, a man in his fifties, was a patriot, a veteran of both the French and Indian War and the Lexington Alarm. Well liked in his home town, it didn't sit too well with him to be accused of treason. He decided to write a letter to Isaiah Thomas and explain his point of view, hoping that his letter would be published in the Worcester Magazine, which it was.

"We have lately emerged from a bloody war," he wrote, "in which liberty was the glorious prize we aimed at. I earnestly stepped forth in defense of this country, and cheerfully fought to gain this prize. And liberty is still the object I have in view. In stopping the Court," he explained, "my object has not been to destroy public government, but is a consequence of my distress in seeing valuable and industrious members of society dragged from their farms to prison, to the great damage not only of their families but the community at large." ¹²

It was a fair statement of rebel aims and objectives, but neither Governor Bowdoin nor the General Court paid the slightest attention to it, nor to the dozens of petitions drawn up by County Conventions held in the western two thirds of the Commonwealth. Instead, the General Court and the Governor passed "An Act to Prevent Routs, Riots, and tumultuous assemblies, and the evil consequences thereof," and suspended the right of habeas corpus.

Adam Wheeler was having thoughts other than those published in the Worcester Magazine. And no doubt he discussed them with his good friend Abraham Gale, possibly in the latter's tavern near the No. 6 Schoolhouse. On that fateful day in September, when they had stopped the sitting of the Court of Common Pleas in Worcester, Judge Ward had raised a crucial point. Shouldn't there be a leader — someone who could coordinate the actions of rebellious farmers all over the Commonwealth? What we need, he thought, is a military leader like George Washington. But regretfully, no man even remotely resembling Washington came readily to mind.

After much cogitation, considerable riding to and fro, and long debate in many a smokey tavern, someone thought of Daniel Shays, a poor farmer and former Revolutionary War officer who lived in Pelham, some fifteen to twenty miles west of Barre. During the Revolution, Shays had shown great military promise. He had been singled out to receive a sword from General Lafayette for his conspicuous bravery, his efficiency, and the thoughtful treatment of his men. Shays' list of War engagements was impressive — Bunker Hill, Ticonderoga, Saratoga, Bennington, and Stony Point. In the latter battle, he had served under General Rufus Putnam from New Braintree. The two men were friends.

When Captain Shays learned that he was wanted to lead the new rebellion — the one that would eventually go down into the history books bearing his name — he said in effect, "Who, me?" But having reluctantly agreed to undertake the project, he began energetically to plan his strategy. It is interesting to speculate: Had history taken a slightly different turn at this point, had for instance the Governor assumed a little more sympathetic stance, Daniel Shays might well have joined General Putnam and helped to establish the Marietta Colony at the mouth of the Muskingum River in Ohio. Instead, he led a rebellion against the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and became a fugitive from justice.

All that was necessary to have changed the course of events was some small, slightly conciliatory move on the part of the "establishment," i. e., the General Court and the legal machinery. Instead, the Supreme Judicial Court, when it met in Worcester late in September, indicted three men from northern Worcester County as "disorderly, riotous and seditious persons," and ordered their arrest. The men named were Adam Wheeler from Hubbardston, Abraham and Henry Gale from Princeton.

Henry Gale was Abraham Gale's younger brother, seven years his junior. In 1786 Princeton was full of Gales, most of whom lived in the western part of Town. There were three brothers, the sons of Josiah Gale, and there were two cousin Elishas. One of the cousins is thought to have lived at Potash Harms (East Princeton) as early as 1767, and the other probably lived on Watertown Harm Lot #1, near the Enoch Brooks place on Westminster Road. We are not sure just where Henry Gale lived, but evidence seems to indicate that it was somewhere near the present Scout Land south of Old Colony Road, near the Ware River.



Enoch Brooks homestead, now removed, part of Mt Wachusett State Reservation

According to Blake, Henry Gale moved to Princeton from Sutton about 1778. He had a good farm in the western part of town and attained fair social standing. He is said to have been a man of good education, well informed, and Blake says that he joined heartily in the discussions of the day. ¹³ Does this rather ambiguous statement mean that his voice was loud in one of his brothers' taverns? At Col. Sargent's? Or in Town meetings? Like his brothers, Henry achieved a rank of Captain during the Revolution.

On November 21, when the Court of Sessions was scheduled to meet in Worcester, the Insurgents

from northern Worcester County marched again. According to Isaiah Thomas the affair went much as before. "The court met according to adjournment, at Mr. Patch's tavern — a petition was presented to them. After this the men in arms, with their leaders, took possession of the ground adjoining the Court-house. the Court . . . preceded by the High Sheriff, made an attempt to enter the Court-house . . . but were stopped a little distance from the steps by three rows of pointed bayonets — the High Sheriff then read the proclamation in the Riot Act." ¹⁴.

According to Miss Starkey, one of the intruders then shouted something about the high rate of court fees, and Sheriff Greenleaf, evidently a pompous and choleric man, retorted angrily, "If you think court costs are too high, you need not wait long for redress, for I will hang every one of you gentlemen, with the greatest pleasure and without charge." ¹⁵.

But some of the effect of this bombast had been spoiled by a daring insurgent who had sneaked up behind the Sheriff and inserted a spring of hemlock, the symbol of the Shays men, in the Sheriff's hat. At this point everyone, Shaysites and government men alike, shouted with laughter and the crowd dispersed. For a second time the insurgents had managed, without bloodshed, to stop a Worcester Court from sitting.

The men returned home in time for Thanksgiving dinner and prepared for a third invasion of Worcester on December 5, when the Court of Common Pleas, postponed from September 5, was scheduled to meet. This was to be the first real showdown between the Shays forces and the Governor of Massachusetts. Shays himself would be there; Governor Bowdoin would be represented by the militia, some local men and some from the eastern part of the Commonwealth. It was rumored that Shays, after stopping the court in Worcester, planned to march on Boston and Bostonians shivered apprehensively.

At this point the Lord decided to take a hand in Massachusetts affairs. Perhaps he thought the time had come to "cool it," as the saying goes. In any case, on Monday evening, December 4, a northeaster of epic proportions swept over the area. Impartially it battered coastal towns and blanketed inland regions — drifting the narrow roads, burying farmhouses to their eaves, dividing friend from friend and foe from foe.

The snow fell and the gale howled all day Tuesday. Under the circumstances, there was no court to stop. The much heralded militia from eastern Massachusetts bogged down near Hopkinton, unable to reach Worcester. The insurgents, now estimated at several thousand, found shelter where they could. Some went to the homes of friends, some to the Rutland barracks, and there, until the storm blew itself out on Wednesday, Shays himself was quartered. Apparently, all the Princeton men returned to their homes safely, but one unfortunate from Hubbardston was found frozen to death in a snowdrift the next day.

"For God's sakes!" exclaimed George Washington down at Mt. Vernon, when he heard of the rebellion in Massachusetts. "What is the cause of these commotions? Do they proceed from licentiousness, British influence ... or real grievances which admit of redress? If the latter, why were they delayed until the public mind had become so agitated?" A good question, but no one in Massachusetts was listening.

Thomas Jefferson was in Europe when he heard of the commotions in Massachusetts, and perhaps greater distance made him more sanguine than Washington. "I hold it," he said, "that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical. The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure."

So far, only one man in central Massachusetts had lost his life because of the Shays' Rebellion, and that death was attributable to accident rather than to warfare. Nevertheless, the situation was dangerous. Massachusetts was rapidly becoming two armed camps. Major General Benjamin Lincoln, another exceedingly stout man of valor, had been placed in charge of a force of Commonwealth troops raised largely from the Boston area and financed by Boston businessmen.

Daniel Shays and his close advisors faced a tough decision. It was now too late to back down, for the Government was threatening to hang them. Warrants were out for their arrest; armed horsemen scoured the hills looking for culprits. Job Shattuck from Groton had been captured and Adam Wheeler had narrowly escaped a similar fate. Moreover, if General Lincoln was going to lead troops against the Shays men, the insurgents would need more arms and ammunition than they could round up from the limited stores in the various towns. An obvious source of such supplies was the Springfield Armory, where an arsenal of military hardware was available.

Toward the end of January, Shays decided to attack the Armory, which was not very strongly guarded. True, General Shepard commanded some nine hundred men, and he could boast one small cannon, known as the "Government's puppy." But the men were of dubious loyalty, and no one thought that when the chips were down General Shepard would actually give the order to fire on his friends and neighbors.

But that is exactly what he did. When the Shays men advanced to within one hundred yards, General Shepard ordered his gunners to fire. And they obeyed — five times! The first two volleys were aimed deliberately high, but when the rebels continued to advance, the next three plowed into the ranks of the surprised insurgents. Yelling, Murder! they broke and ran. Three rebels were killed outright; a number of others were injured.

As a bitterly cold January 25 drew to a close, Shays managed to reassemble his men in Ludlow, a few miles to the east of Springfield. Here they received the news that General Lincoln's troops, having marched from Boston through Worcester, were now approaching Palmer, only ten miles away. Obviously a major showdown could be expected soon.

While these military excursions were taking place, many of the Insurgents were having second thoughts about offering their blood to refresh the "tree of liberty." Henry Gale of Princeton, for one, felt that matters had gone too far. Even before the rebels had marched to stop the Court of Common Pleas the second time, Henry had told a friend in Sutton that he wished the people had not risen to stop the courts. When asked why the people did not stay at home, he had said that they were afraid the Light Horse would take them and abuse them as they had Job Shattuck.

Job had been taken on the last day of November, and though injured in the scuffle had been thrown untended and incommunicado into a Boston jail. Rumors, of course, were rife. Some said that innocent women and children had been wantonly mutilated and that Job himself had been hacked to death. Though denied by the Boston papers, such rumors persisted. The cause had a martyr; the purpose of the rebels, who might otherwise have quit, stiffened.

Phineas Flagg of Worcester later testified that late in January he had had occasion to visit various Princeton taverns while trying to persuade the people there of their error. He had met Captain Henry Gale at Gale's tavern and had found him "willing to return to his duty if only a door could be opened."¹⁶ A few days later, Mr. Flagg again met Captain Gale, this time at Sargent's tavern and then at Mirick (It sounds as though they had been making a grand tour of Princeton taverns.) where he heard Captain Henry Gale say that he would be glad to sign any paper unconditionally.

Some of the others, however, — Adam Wheeler and his close advisor Abraham Gale -- felt that they should all stick together, or, to use Ben Franklin's famous words, "assuredly they would all hang separately." But Henry Gale decided that he had had enough. He had a wife, his father and mother, and four small boys to consider. He decided to leave Pelham, where the Shays men were then congregated, and return to his home in Princeton. He had waited too long, however. On February 1, while he was attending Town Meeting in the old Meetinghouse across from the Cemetery on Meetinghouse Hill, the Sheriff stalked in and arrested him. It was as easy as that. As with Job Shattuck two months earlier, Henry Gale was hauled off to Boston and there confined in jail.¹⁷

While Henry languished in Boston, the Shays men, though still free, were being harried from place to place in western Massachusetts. From Ludlow they moved north to Amherst. From there they moved east to Pelham. But when word came that Lincoln's troops had reached Hadley, Shays decided that even his home town was no longer safe. On the morning of February 3, his men began a cold fifteen-mile hike to Petersham, where they arrived late in the day with frostbitten ears, fingers, and toes, and where they were billeted with sympathetic friends.¹⁸ Their march had taken them eastward across a part of the Swift River Valley now flooded by the Quabbin Reservoir. (Some see the Quabbin Reservoir as Boston's final revenge against central Massachusetts for the Shays Rebellion, though it was created more than a century later.)

Feeling relatively safe in Petersham, the Shays men settled down to a pleasant weekend, unaware that Lincoln had decided to lead his men on a forced, night-march of thirty miles from Hadley by way of Shutesbury and New Salem. The weather in the Connecticut Valley had been fairly warm when the army set out over the hills to the east, but at Shutesbury the men encountered a bone-chilling wind. By the time they reached New Salem at 2 a. m. on Sunday morning a violent snowstorm battered them. Nevertheless, the army trudged on. What else was there to do? There was no shelter for miles around. They had to march to survive. Leading the way was the artillery; the wheels of the gun carriages, wider than the path, filled it with loose snow, making travel hideous.¹⁹

At nine in the morning of February 4, Shays' men looked out from the warm houses where they were enjoying Sunday breakfast to see General Lincoln's advance guard with two cannon coming up the narrow road into Petersham. An eighteen inch fall of snow had drifted so as to protect the flanks of the army. Shays realized that there was no way of attacking Lincoln's column, which stretched out five miles along the road, except from the front. And there Lincoln's cannon could mow the rebels down as fast as they advanced. How useful a ski patrol would have been at this point!

The rebels decided to run for their lives. And Shays ran with them — up the seven-mile stretch of snow-blocked road to Athol. Adam Wheeler and Abraham Gale stayed with Shays, and together they all escaped across the northern border into New Hampshire and points unknown. In a day or two the rebel forces had vanished. Except for a few skirmishes in western Massachusetts, the Rebellion was over.

On the same February 4 that saw the rout of the rebels in Petersham, the General Court of Massachusetts, meeting solemnly in Boston, rather belatedly declared a state of rebellion to exist in the Commonwealth. A price of \$70 was put on the head of Daniel Shays, who was already in foreign territory. Adam Wheeler and Abraham Gale were valued at \$500 each. But they, too, were out of reach.

Six weeks later, on March the 23rd, twenty-nine Princeton men and boys went before Asa Whitcomb, the Justice of the Peace, to turn in their firearms and to take an oath of allegiance.²⁰ Three Gales did so, but Abraham was not one of them. Nor was Henry, for he was still in a Boston jail. There he remained until April 12, when he was released temporarily on bail and ordered to appear at the next term of the Supreme Judicial Court when it would meet in Worcester on the 25th of the month.

It is of interest to note that various friends and neighbors of Henry Gale came forward at this time

to assist him. Blake says that William Thompson and Seth Savage (the father of Princeton artist Edward Savage) went surely for a bond of 200 pounds put up by Henry Gale as bail. And no less a person than Judge Moses Gill himself sent a letter to Governor Bowdoin commending these men as "being amply sufficient security." ²¹.

In the meantime, on the 1st of April, a Commonwealth general election had been held, in which Governor Bowdoin was resoundingly defeated by the more liberal-minded John Hancock. There was now hope that affairs in Massachusetts might take a turn for the better. Three quarters of the legislature had been turned out along with the Governor. The new General Court, which contained almost twice as many representatives from western districts as before, was of quite different stamp from its predecessor. ²².

When Henry Gale appeared in Worcester for his trial on the 25th of April various friends and neighbors stepped forward to attest to his sterling character and good intentions. But in the meantime, the Governor's Council, faced with ruling on hundreds of cases, decided to cut through much red tape and free all but a token of those taken. They ordered that as an example two men each from Hampshire and Berkshire counties and one each from Worcester and Middlesex should pay the penalty for treason. Since Henry Gale was handy and his more culpable brother Abraham was not, the Court convicted Henry of high treason and sentenced him to hang on June 21.

At this news a veritable snowstorm of petitions reached the Court. Henry himself wrote one. And so did his wife Betty and his father and mother. These petitions can be read in Blake's History of Princeton. ²³ Two other petitions bore the signatures of 158 persons, many of them, says Blake, fellow townsmen. When you consider that there were only about 150 families in Princeton at the time, nearly every man in Town must have come to the aid of Henry Gale. No Princetonian of spirit wanted to see Henry made the scapegoat for the whole county.

But the establishment was bound to have its pound of flesh! So, on June 21 Henry Gale was marched from the Worcester jail (where he had been incarcerated since his conviction) to the scaffold on the Worcester Common. Swarms of people had gathered — interested spectators and sympathetic friends. Henry mounted the scaffold, and when everything was in readiness the sheriff stepped forward to announce that the hanging would be postponed to August 2. Everybody else went home. Henry went back to jail.

At this point the Rev. Timothy Fuller plays a role. Apparently by Town action, he was chosen to carry a petition to Governor Hancock and was paid 15 shillings travel expense. At a further cost to the Town of 6 shillings, 2 pence, a horse of Uriah Moore's was furnished for the trip. Mr. Moore lived on Rhodes Road, (80 Rhodes Rd.) where the John Bennet, Jr.'s now live. Uriah had been an active Shaysites, but had taken the oath of allegiance in March and had returned his firearm. One might think that for such a worthwhile cause he would have furnished the horse free of charge. But he didn't. Perhaps as with so many others he needed money to pay taxes.

The Town's petition carried by the Rev. Mr. Fuller may have turned the trick, for on July 25 Henry Gale was again reprieved this time to September 20. And before the third date for his execution rolled round Henry was fully pardoned by the Governor. On Sunday, September 18, he was discharged from custody and returned to his Princeton home a free man.

It had been a long, seven-and-a-half-month ordeal for Henry, however, and no doubt he felt bitterly about Massachusetts justice. Sometime before 1790 he packed up his family and moved to Barre in the Republic of Vermont. ²⁴ later he moved again — to Brighton, N. Y., today a suburb of Rochester, where he died at the ripe old age of 84, half a century after the Shays Rebellion. Shays, too, after many moves, died in up-state New York, some thirty miles from Henry Gale's home. One wonders whether the two old men ever got together to rehash old times. Or would relations between them still have been too strained?

But Henry wasn't the only Gale to leave Princeton. All the other Gales left, too. Some went to Alstead, N. H., a little town north of Keene. Others went to Barre, Vermont. Before the Shays Rebellion fifty Gales had lived in Princeton. In 1790, when the first United States Census was taken, not a single person of that name remained, though two or three of Elisha Gale's daughters had married Princeton men.

A number of other families, though not wiped out, were severely decimated. One example is the Oliver Davis family. Three of his older boys had served in the Revolution and were active Shaysites. Though the father and one of his sons took the oath of allegiance, Oliver, Jr., and Simon did not. It is possible that Simon was not in Town at the time of the oath taking. Where was he? Nobody knows. All that is known for sure is that in 1791, or thereabouts, Simon Davis returned to Princeton and lived out the rest of his life in the western part of Town near his father's mills. Two brothers, however, David and Oliver, Jr., did not continue to live in Princeton. The vital records show that they did not marry or die in Princeton. We can only assume that they left some time after the Shays Rebellion. Perhaps they felt that there were better opportunities in the new areas then being opened to the west.

A similar story can be told of the Keyes family of East Princeton. A little before the Revolution Cyprian Keyes came to Princeton from Shrewsbury. His oldest son died in that War. But two other sons, who had also served in the Revolution took an active part in the Shays Rebellion. Though the father and two of his sons took the oath in 1787, only one son remained to be counted in 1790. Peabody Keyes had moved to Tioga County, Pa., part of the Yankee-settled northern tier of counties in that state.

Others who left Town were: Nathaniel Andrews, Samuel Bartlett, William Bordman, Josiah Chase, Norman Clark, Theodore Gibbs, Jason Hoyt, Jacob Morse, and Artemas Newton. All in all, Princeton lost between 75 and 100 of its citizens — one tenth of its population — because of the Shays Rebellion. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the economic conditions which brought about the Rebellion may have made it desirable for them to find homes in other areas.

The Shays Rebellion was not a long nor a bloody war. Most of the few deaths were due to inclement weather rather than gunfire. But the weather, in many cases, may actually have prevented bloodshed. Who knows what might have happened at the Worcester Courthouse on December 5th, if the northeaster had not intervened, or at Petersham had an open battle been feasible.

But the "Little Rebellion," as Miss Starkey terms it, had major consequences. The first was the Massachusetts, under Governor Hancock, took several steps to improve conditions. Taxes were lowered, and the merchants were required to pay a fairer proportion of them. The right of habeas corpus was restored, court costs were reduced, and years later imprisonment for debt was finally outlawed. But the second consequence was what modern rebels would call counterproductive, i.e., it achieved just what the Shays men least desired — a federated union of the separate American states, with a strong enough central government to bind them together. And that is quite a consequence!

In the long view, the Shays Rebellion can be thought of as one step in the long struggle of the common man for greater freedom and better recognition. Of course, events of the last few years point up the fact that the battle still has not been won. We are now inclined to think that it may be a long, long time before man's inalienable rights to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" will be fully guaranteed. But Princeton can be proud that some of her sons took part in an action which, as Jefferson said, refreshed the "tree of liberty."

On the upper right corner is a label which reads:

Mrs. Raymond Murphy,
Westminster Rd.,
Princeton, MA, 01541

Footnotes

1. The Worcester Magazine (the Massachusetts Spy) for the second week of October, 1786, p. 334.
2. Francis E. Blake, History of the Town of Princeton, Vol. I, p. 357
3. See paper in the Princeton Tax Records
4. Samuel Eliot Morison, The Maritime History of Massachusetts, pp. 28-29.
5. William Lincoln, History of Worcester, Mass., 1862, p. 131.
6. Princeton Tax Records; Blake, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 108.
7. Blake, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 4.
8. Blake, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 248.
9. The Worcester Magazine the first week of September, 1786, p. 278.
10. Marion L. Starkey, A Little Rebellion, New York, 1955, p. 36.
11. Starkey, op. cit., pp. 38-39.
12. Starkey, op. cit., pp. 41-42.
13. Blake, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 248.
14. The Worcester Magazine, third week of November, 1786.
15. Starkey, op. cit., pp. 97-98.
16. Blake, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 250.
17. Blake, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 249.
18. Monroe Stearns, Shays' Rebellion, 1786-7, 1968, p. 52.
19. Stearns, op. cit., p. 5.
20. Blake, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 258.
21. Blake, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 249.

22. Stearns, op. cit., p. 57.
23. Blake, op. cit., Vol. I, p. 251-255.
24. Vermont was not admitted to the Union until 1791.

During the summer of 2022, this document was OCR scanned, images added from the PHS collection, and slightly updated using images and parenthesis to clarify locations of places mentioned in this document by William "Bud" Brooks. The original typed versions can be found in a Gray File Box entitled "PHS Previous Research and Talls".

