

Shay's Rebellion

Following the attainment of freedom from Great Britain in 1783, the American Colonies were in reality a group of loosely confederated states having no real power either at home or abroad. European powers such as Great Britain, France and Spain, facing economic realities, refused to negotiate trade agreements with the thirteen states, contributing to the economic straits that prevailed from New Hampshire to Georgia. Continental currency, even today recognized as a description of something having no value at all when something is referred to as not being "worth a Continental".

In 1786 the country was again deluged with money, issued, not by Congress, but by the several states. The people raised a loud cry against this, and their obstinacy ruined trade and business. Most of the states yielded to the demand of the people; and the refusal of Massachusetts to do so, coupled with a decision to pay her quota to Congress, caused an uprising led by Daniel Shays, known as Shays' Rebellion. Shays had a following of some two thousand men, mostly debtor-farmers, and Governor Bowdoin was obliged to send General Lincoln to disperse them. This rebellion, perhaps, did more than anything else to arouse in the lovers of peace and order a sense of the need of a stronger government.

Such was the condition of national affairs under the Confederation. Congress had but the shadow of power, and the national authority was a dream. But the seeds of discontent were taking root in many hearts. Wise men saw that unless a stronger government was formed, the fruits of the Revolution would be lost and the opportunity of the new civilization in the Western World would be fatally impaired. Washington looked with dismay upon the drifting of the people toward anarchy. As early as June, 1783, he had written a long circular letter to the governors of all the states, in which he urgently recommended "an indissoluble union of the states, under one federal head." But in one thing there was already an important nucleus of nationality; one solid foundation stone had been laid, and that consisted in the possession by the general government of the western lands, a vast tract equal in extent to all the thirteen states combined. These lands had been turned over to the federal government by the various states; New York and Virginia set the example, followed by the others, Georgia being the last to do so in 1801. In July, 1787, an ordinance was passed by Congress to govern the Northwest Territory, between the Ohio River and the Great Lakes. This famous "Ordinance of 1787" provided for the temporary government of the territory and for its ultimate division into states; it provided for personal and religious liberty and for the means of education; it guaranteed civil rights and the proper treatment of the Indians, and above all, it excluded slavery forever from the territory. By this act Congress exercised sovereign power which had not been granted by the Articles of Confederation, and yet there was little public outcry against it. Its acceptance was one of the signs that pointed to a closer union and a stronger government. This ordinance, which was ratified by the first Congress under the Constitution, has been rightfully pronounced next in importance to the Declaration of Independence and the federal Constitution in its results for the United States.

Two of the greatest statesmen of our new nation (and indeed in all the subsequent years) were Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. These two men disagreed in most policies, but were united by one powerful force; their patriotism. Each loved his country above all things; but here the parallel ceased. They differed as day from night in their methods of constructing the Constitution, in their ideas of what the government should be.

Jefferson loved liberty with a passionate devotion, and his faith in the people's capacity for self-government was implicit and abiding. Hamilton loved liberty also, but the first law of his mind was order, and it called for stability of government. Jefferson studied the people, understood them as no other man of his times; he believed in universal education, as that alone would bring intelligent self-government and happiness. Hamilton did not understand the people; he called them "a great beast," he felt that they could be kept within proper bounds only by the strong hand of a centralized government. Jefferson feared that a strong government would endanger liberty. Hamilton feared that a weak government would encourage anarchy. Of Shays' insurrection Jefferson simply stated, "Whenever our affairs go obviously wrong, the good sense of the people will interpose and set them right;" while Hamilton was horrified at that episode, and would have crushed all such rebellions with a hand of iron.

This thumbnail sketch of Shays' Rebellion is intended to accompany the article entitled "The Yarn Beam Cannon", which puts forth a proposal that the yarn beam in the attic of 561 Colebrook Road might have symbolic significance reaching far beyond the boundaries of Colebrook, and might even epitomize the attainment of some of our most important national liberties.