

Note: the following is the entire text content from the interactive historic scene.

PETITION AND PROTEST: "OUR PROPERTY IS TORN FROM US"

As the recession deepened, communities throughout Massachusetts petitioned the State legislature for fiscal relief. As in 1774, thousands marched to shut down courts they believed betrayed the principles of free government.

Courthouse at Springfield, Massachusetts, Tuesday, September 26, 1786

Overview

Under Siege

Springfield, Massachusetts, was accustomed to hosting the justices, lawyers, [plaintiffs](#) and defendants who attended the quarterly sessions of the [Courts of Common Pleas](#) and the [Supreme Judicial Court](#). The court scheduled to open on September 26, 1786 was a different story, however. Hard economic times had ignited smoldering resentment against the Massachusetts legal system as court [dockets](#) filled up with lawsuits for unpaid debts. Angry [Regulators](#) already had stopped Courts of Common Pleas in five other Massachusetts towns that summer and fall. Now, men from surrounding towns flocked to Springfield in response to the government's call for militia to protect the Supreme Judicial court and its proceedings. Still more came to make sure the court did not open.

Troubled Times

[General William Shepard](#) of Westfield commanded the hastily-gathered government [militia](#). He issued muskets from the stores of the nearby United States [Arsenal](#) to the men who lacked weapons and positioned two of the arsenal cannon in front of the courthouse. Thus protected, the court convened, but found it impossible to conduct any business. The judges inside could hear the constant shouts, taunts and threats of the hundreds of Regulators armed with [muskets](#), [swords](#) and clubs marching and countermarching around the courthouse. Curious bystanders swelled the crowd; a few joined the government militia while some marched with the demonstrating Regulators. Others refused to take sides and simply observed the unfolding drama.

An Uneasy Truce

[Captain Daniel Shays](#) of Pelham rode forward to speak with General Shepard on behalf of the Regulators. He asked that the state legislature refrain from indicting any man who had been part of the previous court closings, that no more courts convene until the people's grievances had been considered and [redressed](#), and that the government dismiss the government militia guarding the courthouse. General Shepard refused to consent to any of these demands. He did agree that the Regulators could peaceably march and demonstrate before the courthouse. In return, Captain Shays promised that his men would not molest either the militia guarding the courthouse or the justices inside. After two tense days, the court adjourned and the militia removed to the Arsenal grounds where they were dismissed. Once the Regulators took possession of the empty courthouse, they too disbanded and returned to their homes.

Government

Unsettled Times

Unrest plagued Massachusetts throughout the summer and fall of 1786. Out-of-control personal spending and the post-war recession had proven a disastrous combination for many citizens. These same irresponsible people blamed the legislature for their troubles. Towns petitioned for paper money and other ill-advised debtor relief. Ignorant and willful men stirred up resentment at unconstitutional county conventions. The more lawless and desperate elements had actually taken up arms and stopped [Courts of Common Pleas](#) across the state from convening.

Friends of Government

Now the mob had the audacity to march on the Supreme Judicial Court at Springfield. The government prudently called out the local [militia](#). Thanks to the swift response of hundreds of loyal friends of government, the justices were safe inside the courthouse. [Major General William Shepard](#) of Westfield wisely issued weapons from the stores of the nearby United States [Arsenal](#) to the men who arrived without firearms. He also positioned two arsenal [cannon](#) in front of the courthouse.

A Lawless Mob

Meanwhile, hundreds of [insurgents](#), most armed only with clubs, marched about the courthouse shouting threats and making a noise in general. The uproar attracted crowds of spectators, some of whom joined the militia. Others, duped by false arguments and trumped-up grievances, joined the [mob](#). [Captain Daniel Shays](#) of Pelham rode forward to speak on behalf of the insurgents. General Shepard received him courteously but refused to agree to any demands, including the self-serving insistence that no one be arrested for stopping court proceedings. The General agreed that the insurgents could parade before the courthouse, however. After two days of turmoil, the justices adjourned. The militia withdrew to the Arsenal hill and Shays' mob took possession of the empty courthouse.

Regulators

Regulators

In the summer of 1786, thousands of Massachusetts citizens calling themselves [Regulators](#) began forcibly stopping sessions of the quarterly [Courts of Common Pleas](#) across the state. Armed with [muskets](#), [swords](#) and clubs, the Regulators demanded that no courts convene until the government reformed the judicial system and amended the flawed 1780 state constitution.

Unscrupulous Men

The courts represented all that was wrong with the government. Judges and lawyers got rich while sheriffs auctioned off the land of imprisoned debtors lacking the cash to pay either their court costs or their suing creditors. Wealthy investors had bought up state-issued [promissory notes](#) at ludicrously low prices from impoverished veterans and widows in desperate need of cash. Now, the legislature laid heavy taxes to redeem these same notes for far more than these rapacious [speculators](#) had paid for them. Faced with ruin, towns begged the state for relief from crushing taxes and [petitioned](#) for constitutional reforms, to no avail.

Defenders of Liberty

Hundreds of Regulators converged on Springfield to stop the [Supreme Judicial Court](#) scheduled to open on September 26. Veterans wore their uniforms; as in the early days of the Revolution, men wore evergreen sprigs in their hats symbolizing resistance to tyranny. Their ranks swelled as many men coming to protect the court belatedly realized that the Regulators, not the Massachusetts government, were the true defenders of liberty. About 200 government [militia](#) commanded by [General William Shepard](#) of Westfield held the courthouse. The General refused to agree to any of the demands [Captain Daniel Shays](#) of Pelham presented on behalf of the Regulators. Clearly outnumbered, however, he had little choice but to allow the Regulators to parade with [fife and drum](#) before the courthouse. After two days, the justices conceded defeat and adjourned. The government militia

departed and the Regulators triumphantly took possession of the empty courthouse before returning to their homes.

Rollovers

Text for rollovers in the interactive scene illustrations.

Regulator Leader

A veteran of the Continental Army, Moses Sash of Worthington, is a Regulator leader and one of Captain Daniel Shays' "counsel." [Click for more information.](#)

Demands Received

Major General William Shepard receives the demands presented by Captain Daniel Shays on behalf of the Regulators. [Click for more information.](#)

Spokesman

Captain Daniel Shays of Pelham has taken on the role of spokesman for the Regulators. [Click for more information.](#)

A Change of Heart

Captain Agrippa Wells marched to Springfield to defend the court, but he and many of the men in his company have decided that their true sympathies lie with the Regulators. [Click for more information.](#)

A Revolutionary

As in the Revolution, Jason Parmenter marches with Captain Wells, this time to preserve the liberties he believes the Massachusetts government is taking away. [Click for more information.](#)

Uneasy Truce

Justin Hitchcock of Deerfield passed many Regulators on his way to defend the court. He warily eyes the assembled 'mob' he estimates at over 1,200 men. [Click for more information.](#)

Angry Regulators

This man shouts his defiance of the court as he marches in military formation around the courthouse with hundreds of other Regulators.

Militia

Two hundred well-armed militia listen to the threats and shouts of the parading Regulators, ready to defend the courthouse from the men they call the 'mob.'

An Observer Only

Like many other Massachusetts citizens, this Springfield resident observes the standoff between the government militia and the Regulators, but chooses not to join either side.

Concerned Bystanders

These women have hurried from their houses without bothering to remove their work aprons.

Choosing Sides?

The drama taking place at the courthouse has drawn this cooper out of his shop. Should he join the Regulators or the Government Militia?

Keeping Time

The beat of the snare drum lends a military air to the Regulators' protest. [Click for more information.](#)

Martial Music

The Regulators parade with colors and military music. [Click for more information.](#)

Common Style

Hats are commonly worn by both men and women. The three-cornered hat, or tricorne, is a popular military and civilian style. [Click for more information.](#)

Armed and Determined

Those who have muskets march with them in a mute demonstration of determination and military prowess. [Click for more information.](#)

Courthouse

The judges of the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts inside the courthouse can conduct no business and must listen instead to shouted threats and taunts from the Regulators.

A Fine Horse

General Shepard takes a great deal of pride in the fine horses he raises at his Westfield farm.

Well-Mounted

In addition to wearing his Continental Army uniform, Captain Shays is mounted, signifying his authority and status as a spokesman for the assembled Regulators.

In Uniform

Regulators who own them, make a point of wearing their army uniforms to remind themselves and observers of the sacrifices they have made in the cause of liberty.

Carrying Cudgels

Only a few hundred Regulators carry muskets. Those without arms brandish sticks and cudgels.

Symbol of Liberty












Regulators place sprigs of hemlock in their hats as a symbol of solidarity and defiance of what they consider a tyrannical Massachusetts government.

Regulator Demands

Captain Agrippa Wells holds a list of the Regulators' demands.

Related to this scene

-  [British Short Land Pattern Musket](#)
-  [Canteen](#)
-  [Cartridge Box](#)
-  [Cavalry saber](#)
-  [Charleville Infantry Musket](#)
-  [Drum](#)
-  [Excerpt from "Our Busy Town"](#)

-  [Excerpts from the Journal of Captain Park Holland](#)
-  [Excerpts from the Journal of Sarah Howe, volume 2](#)
-  [Fife](#)
-  [Governor's Proclamation November 7, 1786](#)
-  [Holland Journal Entry About Shays' House](#)
-  [Lincoln Writes to Washington](#)
-  [Pelham Town Hall](#)
-  ["Petition of Robin Hood"](#)
-  [Proclamation from James Bowdoin](#)
-  [Remnant of Revolutionary Flag](#)
-  [Report on the General Assembly of Rhode Island](#)
-  [Shepard Writes to Bowdoin](#)
-  [Soapstone Bullet Mold](#)
-  ["The History of the Insurrections"](#)
-  ["To the Public"](#)
-  [Tricorn Hat](#)
-  [Washington Writes to Lincoln](#)

Observers

Secretary of War, Henry Knox Hingham, MA, October 3, 1786

"The mal-contents were much more numerous, but not well armed. They were headed by a Captain Shays of the militia, and formerly in the continental army, but who resigned a considerable time before the conclusion of the war. They were embodied in a military manner, and exceedingly eager to be led to action, but the prudence of their leader prevented an attack on the Government troops."

[Click for more information.](#)

Diary of Nahum Jones Templeton, MA, September 21, 1786

"The insurgents of this parrish have returned from their expedition to Concord, triumphant, very much elated with their repeated successes in stopping courts. They now think themselves...almost invincible—that they are able to bear down all opposition, and that no force which government may raise will be able to oppose them."

Henry Lee Virginia, October 1, 1786

"What renders the conduct of the insurgents more alarming is, that they behave with decency, and manage with system...It must give you pleasure to hear...the late officers and soldiers are on the side of the government unanimously. The insurgents, it is said are conducted by a Captain of the late army, who continued but a small period in the service and possessed a very remarkable character."

Diary of Jonathan Judd Southampton, MA, September 26, 1786

"60 or 70 of Militia set off for Springfield, very early to support the Government. About 8 I set out, some from Westhampton likewise got to Springfield about 10...About 1 the Mob marched down in order and back; about 900 armed and unarmed. Government upwards of 1,000. Court sit in the afternoon. A very sorrowful day. Brother against brother, Father against Son. The Mob threaten the Lives of all that oppose them. Came away

about sunset."

[Click for more information.](#)

Themes

Getting By and Getting Ahead

Massachusetts citizens struggled to stay solvent in the face of rising taxes and a chronic shortage of cash.

[Click for more information.](#)

We the People

Court closings and county conventions revealed fundamental disagreements among Massachusetts citizens over what activities were truly "constitutional."

[Click for more information.](#)

The Wider World

Massachusetts was not the only state in turmoil in the 1780s.

[Click for more information.](#)

Everyday Life

The events of the 1780s re-opened old divisions and created new ones within communities.

[Click for more information.](#)
