

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

A BLOODY ENCOUNTER: "THE BODY OF THE PEOPLE ASSEMBLED IN ARMS"

Escalating tensions in Massachusetts reached a crisis point at the United States Arsenal at Springfield. Both sides claimed they were defending the rights of the people; the government prevailed with the help of the Arsenal cannon.

United States Arsenal, Springfield, Massachusetts, late afternoon, January 25, 1787

Overview

At the Arsenal

In Springfield, Massachusetts, January 25, 1787, dawned cold; the four feet of [snow](#) on the ground made it seem colder still. Their breath steaming in the frigid air, over 1,200 local [militia](#) under the command of Major General William [Shepard](#) waited tensely for the attack on the United States [Arsenal](#) they had been told to expect at any time. Men who days earlier had handled [manure forks](#), gripped [muskets](#); others stood ready alongside two cannons hauled into position from the Arsenal's [artillery park](#).

Assault

Their wait ended late that afternoon when they saw a column of over a thousand Massachusetts men led by Captain [Daniel Shays](#) of Pelham approaching the [Boston Road](#). Armed with clubs and muskets and determined to possess the Arsenal's military stores and shelter, the advancing men ignored two warning shots from the artillery. The next cannonballs crashed directly into the front of the column as accompanying [howitzer](#) fire spewed deadly [grapeshot](#). The blood of three dead and over a dozen wounded men stained the snow as men in the rear fell back in confusion. Lacking support, the troops leading the assault fled. The battle for the Springfield Arsenal was over.

Shays' Rebellion

The fight at the Arsenal that winter afternoon would be the most violent clash in the series of confrontations between the Massachusetts government and its citizens. Like [Daniel Shays](#), many of the farmers, laborers, shopkeepers and tradesmen attacking the Arsenal were former Revolutionary War soldiers and officers. Why had these men taken up arms against their government?

Government

Confident

The temperature had dipped well below [freezing](#). Some of the younger men were pale with fear and excitement. Still, morale remained high among the militia who had turned out to defend the government and people of Massachusetts. They had beaten Shays' [mob](#) in the race to the United States [Arsenal](#) and its stores.

At All Hazards

Like their commander, the men were determined to hold the Arsenal "at all hazards" including those few who faced fellow townsmen and neighbors. The alternative was too frightening to contemplate: thousands of rebels

marching on Boston armed with cannons and [muskets](#) seized from the Arsenal. This militia might very well be all that stood between anarchy and overthrow of the government by an armed and lawless [banditti](#). Those without weapons drew muskets from the Arsenal stores. Others muscled two of the Arsenal [cannons](#) into position, ready to rake the road the rebels would use.

Warnings Ignored

When the mob appeared, General [Shepard](#) generously gave them three minutes to disperse peaceably. After they contemptuously refused this good advice, the General ordered the artillery to fire warning shots. Ignoring this sterner warning, the rebel leaders rashly ordered their men forward. The next [cannonballs](#) smashed straight into the advancing rabble. An unfortunate mistake while loading the [howitzer](#), blew apart a Greenfield man, but the rest of the gun crew continued firing. The combined artillery fire cast the rebels into confusion without a musket being fired on either side. [Shays'](#) mob turned tail and fled, leaving behind their dead and wounded. They would think twice before they took up arms against their government and its citizens again.

Regulators

Arms and Shelter

Cold and poorly equipped, the [Regulators](#) eagerly anticipated taking advantage not only of the [Arsenal's](#) stores but also the shelter it offered from the bitter cold. Many men carried only stout sticks or cudgels. The cannons and [muskets](#) stored at the Arsenal would solve this problem. The sun was already low in the winter sky, and Captain Shays rode to the rear of the column to bring up the rest of the men at all possible speed.

Confidence

For those too young to have fought in the recently-ended Revolution, the veterans in their midst bolstered courage and confidence. True, Luke [Day's](#) regiment was missing due to an unfortunate miscommunication. Still, the two regiments of Regulators present numbered well over 1,400. It would be an easy business to overawe their outnumbered countrymen defending the Arsenal. As at the courthouse closings of earlier months, perhaps there would be no bloodshed at all. The Massachusetts legislature had turned a deaf ear to the increasingly desperate petitions and pleas for relief from crushing economic burdens. Taking the Arsenal, the Regulators reasoned, would force the government to listen to the peoples' grievances and concerns.

"Murderers!"

Cannonballs and [grapeshot](#) tore into the first men in the advance, dispelling all hope that this would be a bloodless confrontation. The inexperienced men still forming in the rear of the advance fled in horror in the wake of the unexpected, brutal barrage. Unsupported, the veteran troops leading the assault had no choice but to fall back. Shocked and outraged, cries of "Murderers!" rose from the din of the confused and panicky retreat.

Rollovers

Text for rollovers in the interactive scene illustrations.

Arsenal

Only 10 years old, the United States Arsenal has become a focal point in Massachusetts internal protests that some are calling a rebellion. [Click for more information.](#)

Militia

Over 1,200 men from nearby towns have responded to General Shepard's call for militia to defend the Arsenal.

Regulators

A column of over 1,400 Regulators, also known as insurgents, marches eight abreast up the broad road toward the Arsenal.

Trying to Form

As the men coming up behind are pounded by artillery, the veterans leading the long column make an abortive attempt to form for battle.

Open Fire

Flanked by his aides, General William Shepard orders the gun crew to fire at the advancing Regulators at "waistband height." [Click for more information.](#)

Dead and Wounded

Cannon and howitzer fire kill three men instantly and wound over a dozen more.

Featherbed

General Shepard's so-called "Feather bed Company" of "lawyers students merchants and scholars" gets a clear view of the action.

Gun Crew

Men with artillery experience man the howitzer and cannon under the command of Captain William Stevens of Colrain. [Click for more information.](#)

Boston Mile Marker

Artillery shot pits a mile marker erected by Joseph Wait in 1762, marring its engraved Masonic symbols of brotherhood. [Click for more information.](#)

Arsenal Buildings

The fledgling Arsenal buildings consist of barracks, an infirmary, a powder house and artillery park, and a few storage buildings.

Artillery Park

Determined to hold the Arsenal "at all hazard," General Shepard uses the artillery and other Arsenal weapons and ammunition without the permission of the United States Congress.

Snow

Men on both sides endure brutally cold temperatures and several feet of snow.

Artillery Placed

General Shepard positions the artillery in front of the infantry to rake the approaching column.

Weapons for All

Convinced that he has no choice, General Shepard orders his troops to arm themselves with Arsenal weapons to use against the insurgents.

David Hoyt

Determined to defend the Arsenal, David Hoyt, Jr., begins to load his weapon, tearing open a paper cartridge containing gunpowder and a 75 caliber musket ball. [Click for more information.](#)

Captain Hugh McClellan

An experienced veteran and officer, Captain Hugh McClellan orders Jonathan McGee of Colrain to finish loading his musket. [Click for more information.](#)

Howitzer Fire

Deacon David Harroun is determined to keep the cannon firing as rapidly as possible. [Click for more information.](#)

Deadly Mistake

John Chaloner's artillery experience will not prevent a tragic mishap when he attempts to swab out a loaded cannon during the assault. [Click for more information.](#)

Artillery Officer

William Stevens of Colrain directs the artillery at the advancing mob, knowing that many of his neighbors are among them.

Arsenal Barracks

The Arsenal barracks they prepare to defend are providing the militia much-needed shelter from the bitter cold and snow.

Flintlock

The musket this man holds is a British short land pattern musket he picked up off a Revolutionary War battlefield. [Click for more information.](#)

French Weapons

Like the men they face, many of the militia do not own their own weapons. The French Charleville flintlock musket this man loads is from the Arsenal stores. [Click for more information.](#)

Cannon

Several rounds of four-pound cannonballs hinder or halt the rebel advance before they come in musket range. [Click for more information.](#)

Hunting Shirt

Also known as a rifle shirt, these caped and fringed linen shirts were the everyday uniform for many American soldiers by the end of the Revolution. [Click for more information.](#)

Tricorn

The tricorn was a popular style of hat worn by civilian as well as military men throughout much of the 18th century [Click for more information.](#)

Agrippa Wells

Captain Agrippa Wells of Greenfield stands his ground as grapeshot and cannon balls slam into his company "at waistband height." [Click for more information.](#)

Henry McCulloch

Captain Henry McCulloch struggles to control his horse as another round of cannon and grapeshot crashes into the column. [Click for more information.](#)

Defiance

John Wheeler has vowed to lodge either at the Arsenal "or in Hell." He stands his ground, but is forced to retreat as the Regulators fall back.

Caleb Philips

Caleb Philips of Ashfield turns to flee as men all around him are struck down. [Click for more information.](#)

Fallen Regulator

Jabez Spicer of Leyden is killed instantly by the murderous cannon fire.

Shocked and Horrified

Armed only with a stout cudgel, young Alpheus Colton of Longmeadow watches in horror as lethal grapeshot tears through the line of men ahead of him.

Mounted Men

Horses and riders panic at the sound of booming cannon.

Flintlock

Poorly equipped and short on weapons, the Regulators had hoped to seize flintlocks like this Brown Bess musket from the United States Arsenal. [Click for more information.](#)

Proud veterans

Those who own them make a point of wearing their Revolutionary War uniforms.

Cartridge box

Cartridge boxes keep paper cartridges filled with black powder and musket balls dry.

Colors

Twelve years earlier, Massachusetts men carried flags to defy what they called British tyranny. Now they carry flags to rally men against the Massachusetts government. [Click for more information.](#)

Deep Snow

Men struggle to run through deep drifts and crusted snow.

Musket in snow

Loaded muskets are left behind in the general panic.











Hemlock Cockade






As in Revolutionary days, some Regulators wear a sprig of hemlock as a cockade in their hats to identify them as opponents of tyranny.

Arsenal Cannons

The Arsenal cannons begin firing into the midst of the column; the Regulators never come within range of the militia's muskets. [Click for more information.](#)

Related to this scene

-  [Action at the Arsenal](#)
-  [Address to the People from Several Towns](#)
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-  [Benjamin Lincoln](#)
-  [Bullet mold](#)
-  [Daniel Shays](#)
-  [Day's Demands to Shepard](#)
-  [Day writes to Shays](#)
-  [Deposition of Buffington](#)
-  [Gazette Account of Rebellion](#)

-  [Gazette Report on Troop Movements](#)
 -  [Lincoln writes to Shays](#)
 -  [Luke Day](#)
 -  [Quilted Grapeshot](#)
 -  [Troop movements](#)
-

Observers

Abigail Adams London, January 29, 1787

"Ignorant, restless desperadoes, without conscience or principles, have led a deluded multitude to follow their standard under the pretense of grievances which have no existence but in their imaginations."

[Click for more information.](#)

Thomas Jefferson Paris, February 22, 1787

"The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive. It will often be exercised when wrong, but better so than not to be exercised at all. I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the Atmosphere."

[Click for more information.](#)

John Marshall Virginia, January 1, 1787

"Massachusetts is rent into two equal factions & an appeal I fear has by this time been made to the god of battles."

Elizabeth Porter Phelps Hadley, MA, January 14, 1787

"Thusday Morn my Husband set out with sleighs to help the men to Springfield which are raised in this town for support of Government...it Looks as Dark as Night, a very great Army is coming from Boston and some are Collecting on the other side. It appears as if nothing but the immediate interposition of providence could prevent Blood."

[Click for more information.](#)

Themes

Getting By and Getting Ahead

An economic crisis worsened relations between heavily-taxed, financially-strapped Massachusetts citizens and their state legislature.

[Click for more information.](#)

We the People

Both the Shaysites and the militia that opposed them believed they were defending hard-won freedoms gained in the American Revolution.

[Click for more information.](#)

The Wider World

The battle at the Arsenal was a heavy blow to those striving to convince friends and foes that America's experiments in self-government were a success.

[Click for more information.](#)

Everyday Life

Men from communities throughout western Massachusetts fought at the Arsenal on both sides.

[Click for more information.](#)

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