



FAITHFUL TO THE LAW

Gen. William Shepard's last battle was against 'the misrule of anarchy'

By Bill Hudgins



Massachusetts Patriot William Shepard fought for his state and country in both the French and Indian War and the Revolutionary War. He served in numerous local and state positions and in Congress. But he is perhaps most often remembered for protecting the federal armory in Springfield, Mass., during Shays' Rebellion.

Shepard was born in Westfield, Mass., on December 1, 1737, to John Shepard Jr. and Elizabeth Noble Shepard. In 1754 at the age of 17, he enlisted in the Massachusetts militia to fight in the French and Indian War. The 6-foot-tall youth was apparently a born soldier—he fought until the war ended in 1763.

In 1759, he received a 2nd lieutenant's commission from King George II in the 2nd Battalion of Foot. He took part in the disastrous attack on Fort Ticonderoga in New York and was promoted to captain before the war's end. Shepard returned to Westfield and settled down on his farm with his wife, Sarah Dewey Shepard.

SERVICE WITH DISTINCTION

As relations with England deteriorated over the next few years, Shepard supported the Patriot cause. He served on the town's Committee of Correspondence, helped lead the local Minutemen and joined the provincial army in 1775 as a lieutenant colonel in

the 4th Massachusetts Regiment (3rd Continental Regiment).

His unit took part in the siege of Boston. In October 1776, he was commissioned a colonel, according to *General William Shepard: An American Patriot*, by Westfield historian John D. Leary Jr. (AuthorHouse, 2014).

Shepard served with distinction for the duration of the American Revolution. His regiment took part in many major battles, including New York, Trenton, Princeton, Saratoga, Monmouth and Rhode Island.

Shepard spent the winter of 1777–1778 at Valley Forge. He wrote home about the terrible conditions, and his letters prompted Westfield citizens to send shoes and stockings to the suffering men.

In 1781, Shepard and his regiment were part of a force General George Washington left at West Point to make the British think an attack on New York City was imminent, while the bulk of the army marched to Yorktown and victory.

Shepard was discharged from the army on January 1, 1783. He later learned that one of his "men" had actually been a woman—Deborah Sampson. She had disguised herself as a man, fought and was wounded. Shepard wrote a letter of commendation for her service, which helped her receive an honorable discharge, according to Leary.

POST-WAR PROTESTS

Shepard returned to his Westfield farm after the war and entered public service. He served in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1785 and 1786 and as selectman for Westfield from 1784–1787.

In the post-war era, economic turmoil wracked Massachusetts, as well as other states. The new nation was in a fiscal slump, which hit farmers especially hard, including Shepard. Many farmers had borrowed to buy more land to supply the army's demand for food, and the war's end erased that market.

Also, the states had often issued promissory notes to soldiers in lieu of pay, and speculators bought them from the cash-strapped veterans for cents on the dollar. After the war, the speculators sought to redeem the notes.

According to Leary, fewer than 40 "eastern elites" held most of the Massachusetts certificates and effectively controlled the legislature. Shepard could do nothing to stop them from voting to redeem the discounted certificates at full face value. They also voted to increase property and poll taxes. If someone couldn't pay, sheriffs seized their property for auction and sometimes put the farmers into debtors' prison.

The legislature adjourned in August 1786 without considering the farmers' petitions. Some of the hard-pressed farmers declared they were being unfairly taxed.

Their protests soon turned more aggressive. Calling themselves Regulators after an earlier, similar movement in North Carolina, bands of farmers began disrupting local courts and freeing their imprisoned neighbors.

Daniel Shays, a former Continental Army captain from Pelham in western Massachusetts, emerged as a de facto leader of the movement. The insurgency divided the state: Some viewed the Shaysites as heroes, while others saw them as criminals and anarchists.

On September 19, 1786, the state Supreme Judicial Court indicted 11 of the ringleaders. Instead of quelling the movement, the indictments incited participants to march on the court when it next met in Springfield on September 26.

Governor James Bowdoin asked Shepard to call out the militia to protect the courthouse. He surrounded the building and prevented the protestors from entering, though he did allow them to parade and demonstrate at a distance.

The standoff effectively shut down court proceedings, and Shays and his men left. Belatedly, Shepard realized he had left the Springfield Armory unprotected. If the rebels had broken in, they could have armed themselves and overwhelmed the poorly armed militia.

Following Shays' Rebellion, the legislature met again and granted some relief, but it also approved measures prohibiting speech critical of the government, suspending habeas corpus so prisoners could be kept in jail, and promising pardons in exchange for oaths of allegiance. This angered the rebels even more and by January 1787, they talked about overthrowing the state government, according to Leary.

The Supreme Judicial Court was slated to meet again in Springfield in January 1787, and Bowdoin again ordered Shepard to protect it. Bowdoin also authorized raising funds for a private army led by Revolutionary War General Benjamin Lincoln to quash the rebellion.

Shepard deployed his 1,200 men around both the courthouse and the armory. Though he lacked specific permission to do so, he armed his men with weapons from the federal stockpile, including a cannon and a howitzer.

On January 25, about 1,500 Regulators advanced on the armory. Shepard tried to



Present at the Battle of Trenton, William Shepard is in John Trumbull's painting "The Capture of the Hessians at Trenton." Shepard is on the far left beside the sword-holding officer in white.

persuade them to leave. When that failed, he ordered his artillerymen to fire warning shots over their heads. They halted briefly, then continued to advance.

Feeling he had no other options, Shepard ordered his artillery to fire grapeshot "at waistband height" into the column of insurgents. The blasts killed three men immediately, mortally wounded a fourth and injured at least 20 others. The stunned Regulators fled in disarray. By mid-February, the revolt was over.

Shays' Rebellion and similar protests in other states helped spur calls for reform that led to the creation of the U.S. Constitution to replace the Articles of Confederation. Under the Constitution, the federal government assumed the states' war debts and began putting the nation on a firm economic footing.

A TARNISHED LEGACY

Though state officials approved of his actions, Shepard's reputation never fully recovered from the encounter. Many of his neighbors and even in-laws had sympathized with the rebels' plight. Shepard was not a wealthy man and faced the same conditions.

So why did he not side with the farmers, or at least stay on the sidelines? In a December 17, 1786, letter to Secretary

of War Henry Knox, Shepard said it was a matter of "*whether we are to have the satisfaction of living under a [state] constitution and fixed, permanent and known laws, or under the misrule of anarchy.*"

He suffered for his decision. In a 1790 letter to Knox, Shepard mourned that it had "*excited against me the keenest Resentments of the disappointed Insurgents, manifested in the most pointed Injuriys, such as burning my Fences, injuring my Woodlands, by Fire, beyond a Recovery for many Years—wantonly & cruelly butchering two valuable Horses, whose ears were cut off and Eyes bored out before they were killed—insulting me personally with the vile Epithet of the Murderer of my Brethren.*"

Though Shepard ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 1792, he was successful in 1796. He served three terms, from March 1797 to March 1803.

Shepard lived the rest of his life on his Westfield farm and died in 1817 just before his 80th birthday. He was increasingly impoverished—he had spent his own money to outfit his militia and was never reimbursed.

Shepard is buried in Westfield's Mechanic Street Cemetery. There is a statue of him in the town, and an annual Patriots Day ceremony includes a celebration of his family. 🌿