

## Activity Sheet Two: Shays' Rebellion Role Play

### The Situation.

It is September, 1786. In late August, over one thousand farmers from Western Massachusetts formed a protest march outside the Northampton courthouse to call attention to their grievances. When the judges arrived at the courthouse, the protesters refused to let them enter the court. These actions prevented more debtor-farmers being thrown in jail. Other court closings followed in Worcester, Great Barrington and Concord. The Massachusetts legislature has been meeting in emergency session and is considering passing a series of strict laws that will restrict the civil liberties of citizens. The Governor wants to arrest several of the rebels as an example to the others.

### Student Instructions.

Each student will be assigned to a small group. You will read together the ROLE CARD for your group and prepare to report back to the rest of the class. You may read aloud quotations from the ROLE CARD as part of your presentation. You may also include other facts you have learned from studying the causes of Shays' Rebellion. Your group must propose a PLAN to solve this crisis in order to avoid a full-scale rebellion. As you listen to the other groups, prepare to argue against the parts of their PLANS that your group will not accept.

Note: There is one final ROLE CARD expressing the opinion of George Washington at the time of Shays' Rebellion. The teacher should pick a student to read Washington's words to the group.

Your teacher or a designated group of students will moderate the discussion.

## ROLE CARD: YEOMAN FARMERS

You have strong feelings about the way the government is handling the present situation. You and all the families you know are loyal citizens. Many of the men are veterans of the American Revolution and fought with distinction. Daniel Shays even received a ceremonial sword from George Washington's second in command, the Marquis de Lafayette, for his bravery and leadership. You feel that the present situation is an impossible one for farmers who have no way to get hold of hard currency in order to pay their taxes and pay back their creditors.

*"The legislature seems to be listening only to the merchants. Merchants and creditors demand that debts be paid in silver and gold hard money, when all the farmers have is crops and cattle for payment. We've all had to borrow because of the war. We figured that we would have more time to pay or that the state would start printing cheaper paper money. The government is not listening to us. We are the backbone of this state's economy and way of life. Our families are starving. If they take our land, we will have nothing. If we are put in jail, we will have no way to earn money to pay off the debts we owe. We need more time. Things will eventually improve. We want to pay our debts. Right now, times are hard and we need help. All we want is to be treated fairly. This Boston government is 100 miles away. They might as well be England for all the sympathy we are getting. Is this what we risked our lives for in the Revolution? To be thrown in jail because the merchants and the lawyers are so greedy they don't even care about their own people? We're beginning to lose our patience with this whole system! We must protect our homes, our families and our way of life. We fought once for our freedom, and we'll do it again if necessary!"*

## ROLE CARD: BOSTON MERCHANTS

You and your fellow city merchants are under a lot of pressure to pay back your creditors in England. During the Revolution, English merchants and bankers loaned you money so that you could continue to ship products to the Islands in the West Indies and even England. Money was in short supply, so you only had to pay back the interest, and pay it in silver and gold. Now that the War is over, the English banks are calling for repayment in gold.

*“If we don’t repay, we will go bankrupt, our ships will be repossessed and the entire Massachusetts economy will probably collapse. We have spent years building up a successful business. The port of Boston has always been very busy with ships from all over Europe. During the War, we were able to give credit to the farmers, since many of them were fighting and could not always keep up their farms. We even bought up the bonds they were paid for their army service. Of course we paid less than the full market value for the bonds and made profits on the transactions, but that’s how businessmen make money. Take risks, and if the risks pay off, then we make a profit. Our situation is that we need money—hard money—to pay back the English merchants and bankers. We are owed money from the townspeople and the farmers. If we have to we’ll bring them to court and make them pay. It’s only right. If they can’t pay us, they’ll have to pay the legal consequences. Jail. Fines. Or give up their lands. It’s simple business. If they don’t like it, they never should have borrowed in the first place!”*

## ROLE CARD: SKILLED ARTISANS (TOWNSPEOPLE)

You and your group live in towns. You own small businesses, and your main customers are other townspeople and nearby farmers. The farmers buy your products such as cloth, nails, iron tools, leather goods, and supplies they can't raise on their farms or make themselves. You have been generous to the farmers in the past and have extended credit for many items, accepting crops and chickens or meat as payment. Now times are hard. The large merchants who supply your products from Boston and England are demanding you pay them with hard money.

*"We're really stuck between our creditors, the city merchants, our suppliers, and the farmers who owe us for things we have sold them on credit. We don't want to lose our local customers, but if we don't call in our loans, the bankers will shut us down. It's hard to know what to do. We sympathize with the farmers. They are having a hard time making ends meet. But if we're going to be able to get more products to sell, we need money to pay our suppliers. I wish the legislature in Boston would do something to solve this huge crisis. How about loan the store owners some money or print up some paper money? The paper money wouldn't be worth as much as silver and gold coins, but at least we could keep our stores open and the farmers would stay out of jail. How does someone pay off their debts while they are in jail? We liked being able to run our own lives out here. Now it seems the state wants to take control of everything. I don't like the ways things are going. The way the farmers around here talk, there could be a rebellion!"*

## ROLE CARD: LABORER-WORKERS (TOWNSPEOPLE)

You and your people live in towns, but also work on the nearby farms when there is work. You don't make a lot of money, but you are willing to work hard and know the value of getting paid for a full day of labor. To you, the government seems very far away. You don't own land, so you don't pay many taxes. You are not supposed to be allowed to vote, but usually the towns don't enforce that particular law.

*"We used to like it here in a small town. It used to be simple. People knew each other and helped each other out. Since the War, things have changed. Everyone seems to be more greedy and thinking only of themselves. It used to be if you needed to buy something, stores would give you credit. And people always managed to pay. Lots of people let us work off our debt with labor. If I owed one of the farmers, I would pay him back with my labor. If I owed a store owner, they would let me work off the debt. But things have changed. Rich merchants and bankers have been coming in and setting up bigger stores and charging more money. They want "Cash Only." It's been harder and harder to find work. Lots of people are tired of the way things are being run. It's like all of a sudden we need money for everything. It's not good. People don't trust each other any more. I'm thinking I'll probably move somewhere else where there are more jobs and people aren't so worried about money!"*

## ROLE CARD: STORE RETAILERS (TOWNSPEOPLE)

You feel that it is time for change. You are part of the new middle class. You like being able to acquire money and the things that money can buy. For you, "money commands respect." You like being able to walk down the street and be noticed for the way you dress. You see no reason why your business can't grow. Growth is good for towns. Money brings opportunities. You like the idea of being able to buy land and build a house and fill it with nice furniture. You like making friends with other business people, bankers, lawyers and government officials. You are a little suspicious of farmers, with their less refined ways. Besides they don't have much money and usually ask for credit.

*"The way of business is the way of the future. Competition in business is good for everyone. It keeps prices low and quality high. Those who can't compete, unfortunately don't always stay in business. If you work hard and know your way around you will become successful and make money. If you show too much sympathy for someone down on their luck, you won't be successful. Follow the saying, "business comes before friendships." It may sound hard but it's the only way to succeed. We buy goods like rum or glass or clothing in large quantities wholesale from the city merchants in Boston for a low price, then add the costs of shipping and labor and charge a higher price here in town. That's how it's done. We also will buy from farmers who can sell us high quality livestock and crops at a low price and then we sell them for a higher price in the larger cities. That's how you run successful businesses. What's bad for business is too much debt. People who owe must pay. With interest added. Any person who can't pay for any reason must be brought to court and made to pay. If they can't pay, then they will lose what they have of value. Their furniture, their animals or even their land. Nothing can stop the accumulation of wealth. And debtors must not stand in our way if this country is to move forward and be a great nation!"*

## ROLE CARD: BANKER-GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS IN BOSTON

You feel that the farmers are not being realistic in demanding that the state print paper money and temporarily suspending the courts. Just in the past year, creditors' lawyers have filed over 4,000 lawsuits in our courts to try to collect back taxes and debts. Most of the debtors are farmers, of course. And many fought in the Revolution. They were foolish to sell their government bonds to speculators. They lost a lot of money doing that. And now they have almost nothing to pay off their creditors with. They have to get used to a more modern way of life. They are stuck back in the seventeenth century. These are modern times and they need to get used to the idea that profits run business and business runs the way we live.

*"This movement by the farmers to shut down our courts has gotten out of hand! We live in a country where laws must be obeyed, not ignored or violated. The courts are an essential part of our government. Without courts to judge people accused of crimes or settle legal disputes we would have no rule of law. We would have everyone making their own laws and no respect for law and order. What kind of example are these people setting for the rest of us? And what about their children? What kind of parents refuse to pay their debts and then try to shut down the courts so that their cases can't come to trial? The rule of law must be maintained! If we have to call out the army to round them up, then that's what we'll have to do. Our government cannot maintain order when our citizens refuse to obey its laws. We just finished fighting a Revolution to win our independence from England. In order to fight the war, we borrowed money from European governments. The national government needs each state to contribute to that war debt. Our Massachusetts government borrowed from our wealthy merchants in order to pay our expenses. We had to tax our people in order to raise the money. Now we are in a situation where we must raise taxes again. And people like the farmers who can't pay will have to suffer the consequences and have their land taken away. The government can't let one group get away with not paying taxes, and enforce taxes on all the others. It's a question of fairness. Remember the saying, "Real liberty consists in being good subjects of your government!"*

## ROLE CARD: GEORGE WASHINGTON, REVOLUTIONARY WAR GENERAL

The radical movement of farmers was seen as a threat to the stability of the Massachusetts state government and demonstrated the ineffectiveness of the central government to act quickly and decisively in a crisis. The following quotation is from a letter written by George Washington to fellow Virginian, Henry Lee, in which he shows great concern for the future of the United States, if the situation in Massachusetts cannot be resolved quickly. Taken from John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Writings of George Washington*, XXIS, 33-34.

*"They [the incidents] exhibit a melancholy [sad] proof of what our transatlantic foe [England] has predicted; and of another thing perhaps, which is still more to be regretted, and is yet more unaccountable, that mankind, when left to themselves, are unfit for their own government. I am mortified beyond expression when I view the clouds that have spread over the brightest morn that ever dawned upon any country.*

*"You talk, my good Sir, of employing [using] influence to appease the present tumults in Massachusetts. I know not where that influence is to be found, or, if attainable, that it would be a proper remedy for the disorders. Influence is no government. Let us have one [a government] in which our loves, liberties, and properties will be secured, or let us know the worst at once. Under these impressions, my humble opinion is, that there is a call for decision. Know precisely what the insurgents [rebel farmers] aim at. If they have real grievances, redress [take care of] them if possible; or acknowledge the justice of them, and your inability to do it in the present moment. If they have not [real grievances], employ [use] the force of government against them at once. If this is inadequate, all will be convinced, that the superstructure is bad, or wants support. To be more exposed in the eyes of the world, and more contemptible than we already are, is hardly possible. To delay one or the other... will add to their [the rebels] numbers; for, like snow-balls, such bodies increase by every moment unless there is something in the way to obstruct and crumble them before the weight is too great and irresistible...."*

Sources: Gross, Robert, *In Debt to Shays*, pp. 7-21; Richards, Leonard, *Shays' Rebellion: The American Revolution's Final Battle*, pp. 1-40; Szatmary, David, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection*, pp. 1-20.