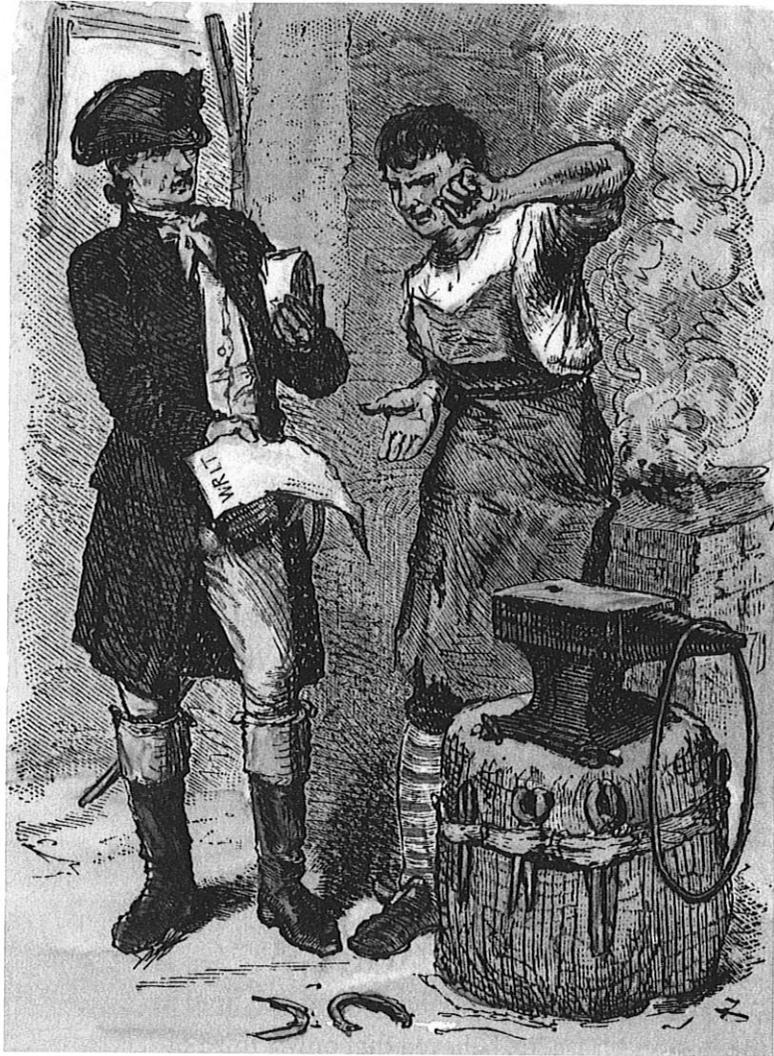


CHAPTER FIVE
REVOLUTIONS

THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR WAS FOUGHT between Great Britain and its colonies in North America. But other rebellions took place during the revolutionary years. Soldiers turned against their officers, Indians sided with their old enemies, and poor farmers in Massachusetts took up arms against their brand-new American government.

War and Mutiny

JOHN ADAMS, THE MASSACHUSETTS lawyer who defended the soldiers who had fired in the Boston Massacre, believed that only a third of



the people in the colonies supported the Revolution. A modern historian named John Shy, who studied the Revolutionary Army, thinks that only about a fifth of the total population actively turned against Britain.

But just about every white male in the colonies had a gun and could shoot. The leaders of the Revolution distrusted mobs of the poor, but they needed their help if they were going to beat Britain. How could the Revolutionary leaders win more people to their cause? One way to win support was by offering the rewards of military service. Men from the lower classes joined the army hoping to rise in rank, gain some money, and move up in society.

Historian Shy found that poor people “did much of the actual fighting and suffering” in the Revolution. Not all of them were volunteers. Just a few years earlier, colonists had rioted against the British practice of impressment, seizing men and forcing them to serve in the navy. But by 1779, in the middle of the Revolution, the American navy was doing the same thing.

The Americans lost the first battles of the war, at Bunker Hill and Brooklyn Heights. They won

(left)
Blacksmith being served
a tax writ, 1786.

small battles at Trenton and Princeton, then a big battle at Saratoga, New York, in 1777. While George Washington's frozen army hung on at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin was in France, looking for help. Britain had defeated France in the Seven Years' War, and the French were hungry for revenge. They joined the war on the American side.

The war moved to the South. The British won victory after victory, until British and American armies met at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781. With the help of a large French army, and with the French navy blocking the British from getting more men or supplies, the Americans won this final victory, and the war was over.

Throughout the war, rich and poor Americans came into conflict. Rich men led the Continental Congress, which governed the colonies. These men were connected to each other by marriage and family relationships, and also by business ties. They looked out for each other.

The Congress voted that army officers who stuck to the end of the war would receive half their military pay for the rest of their lives. This ignored the common soldiers, who were not getting paid.

On New Year's Day, 1781, some Pennsylvania troops mutinied. They killed one of their captains, wounded others, and marched with cannon toward Philadelphia and the Congress. George Washington, commander of the army, made peace with the rebellious soldiers.

Soon afterward, when soldiers mutinied in New Jersey, Washington took a sterner stand. He ordered two of the ringleaders shot by firing squads made up of their friends, who cried as they pulled the triggers. It was "an example," Washington said.

Soldiers' mutinies were rare. Rebellion was easier for people who were not in the army. Civil disorder flared up in half a dozen colonies, even while the colonies were fighting against Great Britain.

In the southern colonies, the lower classes did not want to join the Revolution. They thought the war had nothing to do with them. Whether or not the colonies won independence from Britain, they would still be ruled by a political elite.

Nathanael Greene, Washington's general in the South, wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson telling how his troops dealt with some Loyalists, colonists

who had remained loyal to Britain. Greene wrote that “upwards of one hundred were killed and most of the rest cut to pieces.” He added that this action had a “happy effect” on people in the area who had held back from supporting the Revolution.

Tenant farmers became a threatening force during the war. These farmers paid rent to landlords who owned huge estates. When they stopped paying rent, the Revolutionary government feared a rebellion. So the government seized Loyalists’ land and sold some of it to tenants. These new landholders no longer had to pay rent—but now they had to pay the banks that had loaned them money to buy land.

Much property taken from Loyalists went to enrich the Revolutionary leaders and their friends. The Revolution gave these colonial elites a chance to seize power and property from those who had been loyal to Britain. The war also gave some benefits to small landholders. But for most poor white working people and tenant farmers, the Revolution brought little change.

Indians and Blacks in the Revolution

IN THE SEVEN YEARS’ WAR BETWEEN Britain and France, many of the Indians of North America had fought on the side of France. The French were traders who did not try to take over Indian lands, but the British wanted living space.

After the Seven Years’ War, the French ignored their Indian allies and gave French territory in the Ohio Valley to the British. There the Indians attacked British forts, and the British fought back. One of their weapons was biological warfare. They gave the Indians blankets from a hospital, hoping to spread the deadly disease smallpox among the tribes.

But the British could not destroy the will of the Indians, so in 1763 they made peace. Britain declared that the land west of the Appalachian Mountains was Indian territory. Colonists were forbidden to settle there. This angered the colonists and gave them another reason to turn against Britain. It also explains why many Indians fought on the side of the British, their old enemies, during the Revolution. After the war, with the British out of the way, the Americans could

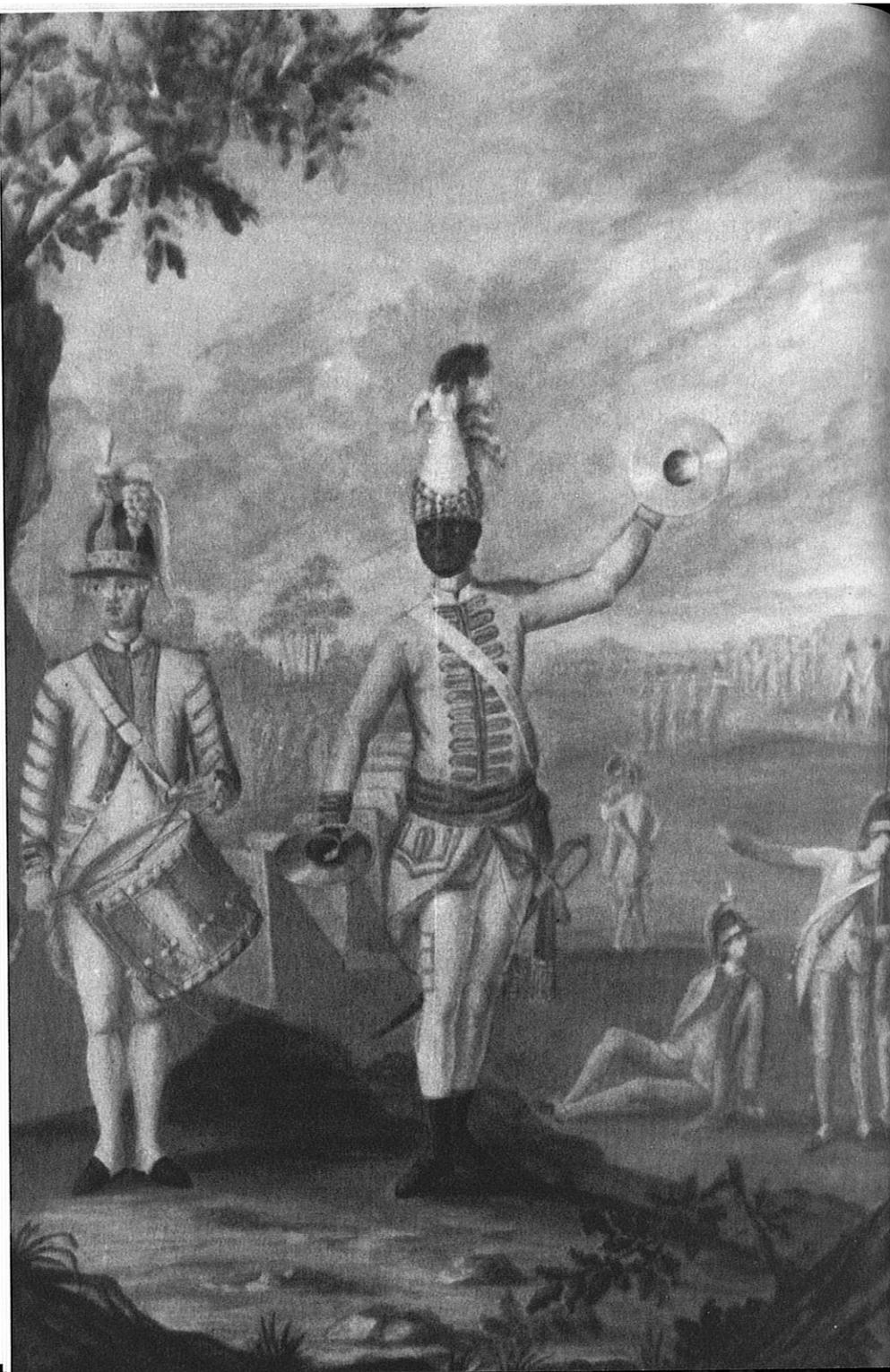
begin pushing the Indians off their lands, killing them if they fought back.

Black slaves also fought in the Revolution—on both sides. Blacks seeking freedom offered to fight in the Revolutionary Army. George Washington turned them down. In the end, though, about five thousand blacks served with the Revolutionaries. Thousands more fought for the British.

The Revolution encouraged some blacks to demand more from white society. In 1780, for example, seven blacks in Massachusetts asked the legislature for the right to vote. They pointed out that Americans had just been fighting a war for the right to govern themselves, and they reminded lawmakers that many “of our Colour” had fought for the Revolutionary cause.

After the war, slavery ended in the northern states—but slowly. In 1810 about thirty thousand people remained enslaved in the North. By 1840 there were still a thousand slaves. In the lower South, slavery expanded with the growth of rice and cotton plantations.

(left)
Revolutionary War
soldiers, 1780.



Farmers in Revolt

BY THE TIME OF THE REVOLUTION, certain patterns were already set in the American colonies. Indians had no place in the new society. Blacks were not treated as the equals of whites. The rich and powerful ran things. After the war, the Revolutionary leaders could make those patterns into the law of the new nation.

A group of leaders met in Philadelphia in 1787 to write the United States Constitution. Hanging over them was the fear of revolt. The year before, a farmers' uprising called Shays' Rebellion had turned western Massachusetts into a battleground.

Massachusetts had passed state laws that raised the property qualifications for voting. People couldn't vote if they didn't own enough land. In addition, only the very wealthy could hold state office. Farmers who could not pay their debts were angry that the state lawmakers did nothing to help them.

A countryman named Plough Jogger spoke up at a meeting to say how the government had mistreated him—and what he wanted to do about it:

I have been greatly abused, have been obliged to do more than my part in the war; have been loaded with class rates

[taxes], town rates, province rates, Continental rates and all rates . . . been pulled and hauled by sheriffs, constables and [tax] collectors, and had my cattle sold for less than they were worth. . . . The great men are going to get all we have and I think it is time for us to rise up and put a stop to it, and have no more courts, nor sheriffs, nor collectors nor lawyers. . . .

Some of the discontented farmers were veterans of the Continental Army. They had fought for the Revolutionary cause, but when the war ended, they did not receive their pay in cash. They were in debt, but they had no money. When the courts met to take away their cattle and land, the farmers protested. Large, armed groups marched to courthouse steps, keeping the courts from carrying out their actions. Farmers' mobs also broke into jails to free imprisoned debtors.

The political leaders of Massachusetts became alarmed. Samuel Adams, who had acted against the British government in Boston, now insisted that people stay within the law. People in the town of Greenwich answered back. They said: You in Boston have the money. We don't. And didn't you act illegally yourselves in the Revolution?

Daniel Shays was a poor farm hand when the

Revolution broke out. He joined the army and fought at Lexington, Bunker Hill, and Saratoga. In 1780 he quit the army because he had not been paid. Back home, he found himself in court because he couldn't pay his debts. He saw the same thing happening to others. One sick woman, unable to pay, had her bed taken from under her.

When the Massachusetts Supreme Court charged leaders of the farmers' rebellion with crimes, Shays organized seven hundred armed farmers, mostly veterans. As they marched toward Springfield and the court, others joined them. The judges cut the court session short.

The farmers kept up the pressure, but winter snows began to interfere with their trips to the courthouses. When Shays marched a thousand men toward Boston, a storm forced them back, and one man froze to death. Then Boston merchants raised money to pay for an army to take the field against the farmers. The rebels were outnumbered and on the run. Shays fled to Vermont. Some of his followers surrendered. A few died in battle. Others carried out desperate acts of violence against authority, such as burning barns or killing a general's horse.

Captured rebels were put on trial. Although Shays was later pardoned, a dozen were sentenced to die. Sam Adams claimed that there was a difference between rebelling against a king, as he had done, and the farmers' uprising. Treason against a king might be pardoned, Adams said, "but the man who dares rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death."

Thomas Jefferson felt differently. He thought that such uprisings were healthy for society. Jefferson wrote, "I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing. . . . It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government."

But the political and economic leaders of the new nation did not share Jefferson's view. They feared that revolt would spread, and that the poor would demand a share of the rich people's property. These fears were in the minds of those who wrote the U.S. Constitution.

The Constitution—Business as Usual

MANY AMERICANS HAVE SEEN THE Constitution as a work of genius, put together by wise men who created a legal framework for democracy and equality. But there is another way to look at it.

In 1935, historian Charles Beard put forward a view of the Constitution that angered some people. Beard studied the fifty-five men who met to write the Constitution. He found that most were wealthy. Half of them were moneylenders, and many were lawyers. They had reasons to create a strong federal, or central, government that could protect the economic system that they understood and were part of. Beard also noted that no women, blacks, indentured servants, or people without property helped write the Constitution. So the Constitution did not reflect the interests of those groups.

The Constitution said that each state's lawmakers would elect the senators who would represent that state in the federal Congress. The state lawmakers would also choose electors, who would elect the president. The president would name the members of the Supreme Court. The only part of the government that the people would elect

directly was the U.S. House of Representatives. Even in those elections, each state set its own voting requirements. Women, Indians, and slaves could not vote. In almost every state, men without property could not vote, either.

The problem of democracy went deeper than the Constitution's limits on voting. It lay in the division of society into rich and poor. Some people had great wealth and power. They owned and controlled the land, the money, the newspapers, the churches, and the educational system. How could voting cut into such power?

The time came for the states to ratify the Constitution—to accept it and make it the new national law. Some people wanted the Constitution and its strong central government. Others felt that the thirteen states should remain independent or loosely connected.

In New York, debate over ratification was intense. Supporters of the Constitution were called Federalists. One of the leading Federalists was Alexander Hamilton, who believed that society was naturally divided into classes. In Hamilton's view, the upper class should run things, because true democracy was dangerous:

All communities divide themselves into the few and the many. The first are the rich and well-born, the other the mass of the people. . . . The people are turbulent and changing; they seldom judge or determine right. Give therefore to the first class a distinct permanent share in the government. . . . Nothing but a permanent body can check the imprudence of democracy. . . .

The Federalists published papers explaining the advantages of a central government. One advantage, said James Madison, was that riots, revolts, and civil disorder would be less likely to arise in “a large nation ranging over thirteen states” than in a single state. People’s desire for such “wicked” things as “an equal division of property” might overcome a state government, but not a federal one.

About a third of the people in the United States owned some property. Most of them owned only small amounts of land. Still, one-third of the population felt they had something that a strong, stable government could protect. In addition, crafts workers in the cities wanted a central government that could protect their jobs by taxing imported goods. This was a larger base of support for government than

anywhere else in the world at the end of the eighteenth century.

The Constitution served the interests of a wealthy elite. But it also did enough for small property owners and middle-income workers and farmers to win their support. The Constitution became even more acceptable after Congress passed the amendments, or changes, known as the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights seemed to make the new government a protector of people’s liberties. It guaranteed the right to speak, to publish, to worship, to be tried fairly, and so on. It also guaranteed the right of habeas corpus, which means that no one can be imprisoned without a hearing. But the First Amendment shows how quickly liberty could be taken away.

The First Amendment says that Congress will make no law that limits freedom of speech or of the press. But in 1798, just seven years after the Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution, Congress passed a law that clearly limited the right of free speech.

That law was the Sedition Act, which made it a crime to say anything “false, scandalous and malicious” against the federal government. Criticism

that might turn the people against the government was forbidden. The Sedition Act seemed to violate the First Amendment, but ten people went to prison for saying things against the government.

Congress also passed new taxes to pay for war bonds. Although society's richest people owned most of the bonds, ordinary people had to pay the taxes. One law, the Whiskey Tax, hurt small farmers who made whiskey to sell. When farmers took up arms against the tax in 1794, the government sent troops to put down the rebellion. Even in the early years of the Constitution, some parts of it, such as the First Amendment, could be treated lightly. Other parts, such as the power to tax, were powerfully enforced.

Were the Founding Fathers wise and just men trying to create a balance of power? They did not want a balance, except one that kept things as they were. They certainly did not want an equal balance between slave and master, rich and poor, or Indian and white. Half the people in the country were not even considered by the Founding Fathers. These "invisible" citizens were the women of early America.