

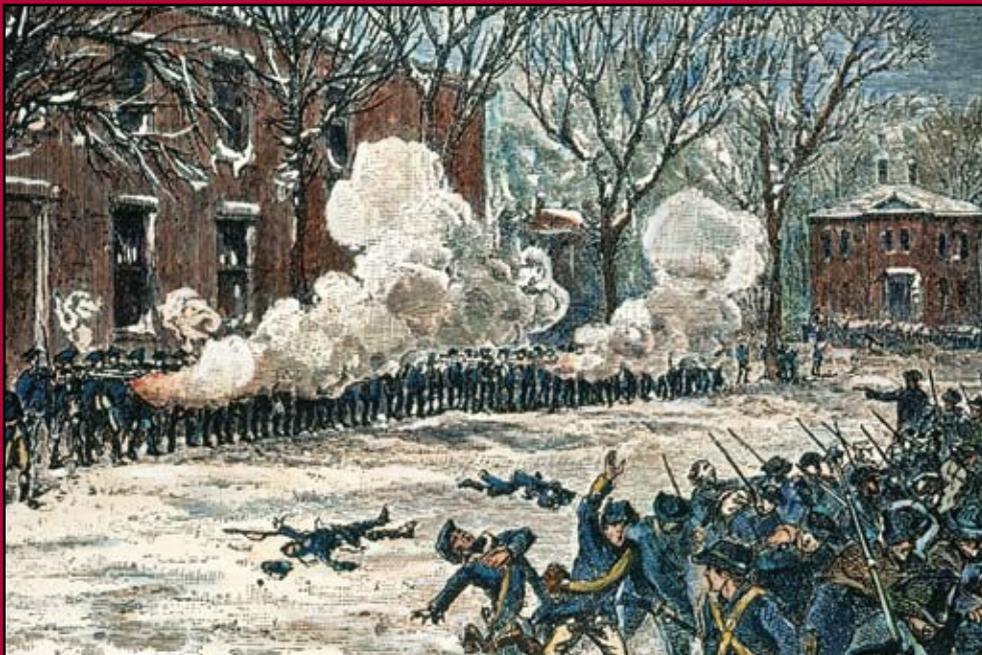
The  
Hanging  
If

Henry  
Gale

By Lisa Saunders



ON THE NIGHT OF APRIL 18, 1775, Paul Revere rode through the dark backcountry to spread the news—700 British soldiers were approaching Lexington to capture rebel leaders John Hancock and Samuel Adams. Church bells rang and guns fired to call in the minutemen. Among the more than 50 who responded was a 24-year-old farmer named Henry Gale. On that night—and into the next morning—Gale boldly rose to the challenge and helped launch the American Revolution. A decade later, Captain Gale rose to the challenge again—only this time against the very government he had jeopardized his life to create—as a leader in what would become known as Shays’ Rebellion.



A 19th-century colored engraving illustrates the armed confrontation between Daniel Shays’ rebels and government troops before the arsenal at Springfield, Mass., on January 26, 1787.



## AN INSURGENCY IS BORN

**R**evolutionary War soldiers had been paid in scrip (in effect, an I.O.U.), redeemable after the war. But Gale's brother, Abraham, like other cash-poor veterans and farmers, needed money before the note matured, so he sold it to Boston investors for a fraction of its worth. In order for the Commonwealth to pay off the mature scrip, it taxed real estate—the bulk of a farmer's holdings. Short on cash, Abraham borrowed money from a storekeeper. Unable to meet the due date, the debt ballooned with fees. Now Abraham was threatened with the loss of his land and a jail sentence until the debt was paid. Merchants were desperate to collect on these debts because they, too, owed money. A post-war credit crisis gripped the nation.

Farmers petitioned the government for relief with no result. So in September 1786, the Gale brothers—with help from several hundred comrades armed with clubs and bayonets—blocked a Worcester County judge from holding court. The insurgents, calling themselves the “Regulators,” listened for two hours while the judge expounded the meaning of treason, referring to the gallows as punishment. When it began to rain, the judge concluded dramatically, “May the sun never shine on rebellion in Massachusetts,” wrote Marion Starkey in *A Little Rebellion* (Knopf, 1955).

The Gale brothers and nine other leaders were indicted on the charge of being “disorderly, riotous and seditious persons.” They were wanted men.

In Boston, government leaders hired a band of vigilante merchants, lawyers and doctors to raid homes late at night to capture the ringleaders. They awoke families and attacked some of the leaders, badly wounding one across the knee with a sword. The vigilantes ordered farmers to help them along the way, and, if uncooperative, they threatened to brutally kill them.

In *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), author David Szartmary suggests that Gale wholeheartedly regretted this violent outcome of his defiance against the courts and considered “returning to the duty of his allegiance,” but it was too late. In January, Governor James Bowdoin called more than 4,000 militia soldiers from Boston to oppose the insurgents. Daniel Shays, whose service as a Revolutionary War captain had been distinguished, led the Regulators in their attack against the Springfield arsenal. Shays called on the rebel farmers to arm themselves and march against the militia.

But Gale had never intended to overthrow his government and was desperate to avoid the upcoming clash. As the state soldiers marched closer, wrote Starkey, Gale told mediators that he “would sign any paper, take any oath unconditional.”

“Though he had flung himself into the insurgent movement while Shays was still hesitating, like Shays he was a man of divided heart,” Starkey wrote.

General William Shepard, guarding the Springfield arsenal with 900 soldiers, knew the Regulators were on their way. On January 25, Shepard and his men watched Gale and 1,200 others march in columns toward them through the snow. As the insurgents, wearing sprigs of hemlock in their hats in memory of their days fighting the Revolution, drew ever closer, Shepard, “picking out the faces of others with whom he had served during the Revolution, wondered how it would be possible to give the order to fire ... His men, like him, were spotting old friends,” Starkey wrote.



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The Regulators were warned and given a chance to retreat, but they continued their march. At first, cannons fired grape-shot over their heads. Yet on they came. Then the shots were fired right into Gale and his comrades. Three insurgents lay dead with 30 more injured. The Regulators, never firing a musket, scattered and fled, shouting “Murder! Murder!”

The insurgents regrouped in Pelham, Shays' hometown. Gale, however, left his post, returned home and prepared to throw himself on the mercy of the government. But at a town meeting a few days later, he was arrested by the sheriff and jailed in Boston. Shays eluded capture by escaping over the New Hampshire line. Gale's brother, though badly wounded by a kick from Shays' horse, escaped with him. But 150 other insurgents were not so lucky.

Popular support of the insurgents and their cause brought pardons for most of the captured. But examples had to be made of the traitors. Sam Adams insisted, “The man who



dares rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death.”

The least rebellious counties would only need one hanging instead of two. Henry Gale, it was decided, would hang for Worcester.

## PARDONING THE PATRIOT

Gale’s indictment read that he “traitorously did devise and conspire to levy war against this Commonwealth ... with a great number of rebels and traitors ... armed and arrayed in a warlike and hostile manner with drums beating, fifes playing and with guns, pistols, bayonets, swords, clubs.” Despite court testimonies in his defense, Gale was found guilty of high treason and rebellion—and was sentenced to be hanged.

Gale’s father, Josiah, a veteran of the French and Indian War, pleaded with the governor for his son’s life, but the execution date was set.

Frantic, Gale’s wife, Betty, pleaded with Gov. Bowdoin to spare her husband’s life and save their children from ruin. The townspeople also rallied to Gale’s defense. But, luckily, it wasn’t up to Gov. Bowdoin. Gale’s execution date fell under the administration of the new governor—John Hancock. Hancock read the desperate petitions sent to the previous governor, plus one from Shays and the other leaders in hiding, reminding him that they had resorted to rebellion because their rights had been infringed upon with no recourse.

Gale himself pleaded with Hancock, too. Writing from jail, he begged for mercy, promising that if his life was spared, he would live quietly, stay loyal to his government and instill in his children the same sense of loyalty. Hancock was sympathetic to Gale’s cause, but the council insisted

there must be a show of the state’s power against those who resorted to arms.

So there Gale stood, on June 21, 1787, blindfolded upon the gallows, noose around his neck and seconds away from death. The clergy offered solemn prayers for his soul. His wife had watched Gale survive the war as a respected patriot, but now perhaps she was among the crowd below him and would watch him die a traitor.

But suddenly, moments from execution, the sheriff withdrew a piece of paper from his pocket. Reading it aloud, he announced to Gale and the stunned crowd that Hancock had granted him a temporary reprieve. On September 12, he was fully pardoned and released.

Several months later, Gale’s seventh child, Justus, was born. Perhaps he was named because his parents wanted to honor what his father had so gratefully received—justice.

In addition to pardoning Gale and other nonviolent rebels, Hancock lowered taxes and required merchants to pay their fair share. Court fees were lowered, and eventually imprisonment for debt was outlawed.

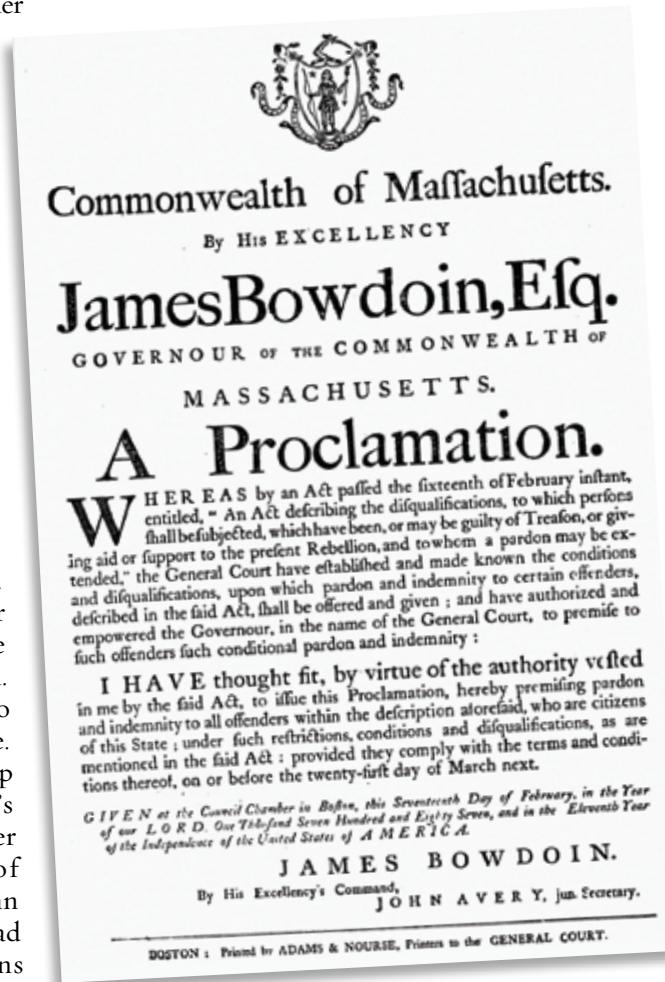
## THE TREE OF LIBERTY

George Washington came out of retirement to join Benjamin Franklin and others in attending the convention that crafted the Constitution of the United States of America. Addressing many of the root causes of the rebellion, it was formally adopted on March 4, 1789. Speaking of Shays’ Rebellion, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical

...The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.”

True to his word, Gale lived a quiet life, eventually settling in upstate New York. Instead of tearing down courthouses, he was one of two masons who helped build one in Lyons, N.Y. 🍌

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This 1787 broadside shows Gov. James Bowdoin’s proclamation of pardon for the participants in Shays’ Rebellion.