

A little Bicentennial detective story

Anton Chaitkin looks into a new angle on Shays' Rebellion, the uprising that convinced many American leaders that a permanent national government was needed.

This month the world observes the 200th anniversary of the United States Constitution. In the spirit of celebration, we offer to our readers a little "detective story," which gives a new slant on the dramatic events leading up to the drafting of the Constitution.

Following the 1783 victory in the Revolutionary War, the United States remained without an effective central government, and slid into chaos. Unable to cope with British trade war, the American economy collapsed. Mob violence against government facilities spread from Massachusetts to many other states.

It appeared to General George Washington and other Revolutionary leaders that the nation could lose its newly gained independence, and they pushed successfully for a meeting of the states to form a permanent national government. Washington and the nationalists warned that British Tory efforts at counter-revolution might lie behind the mob uprisings.

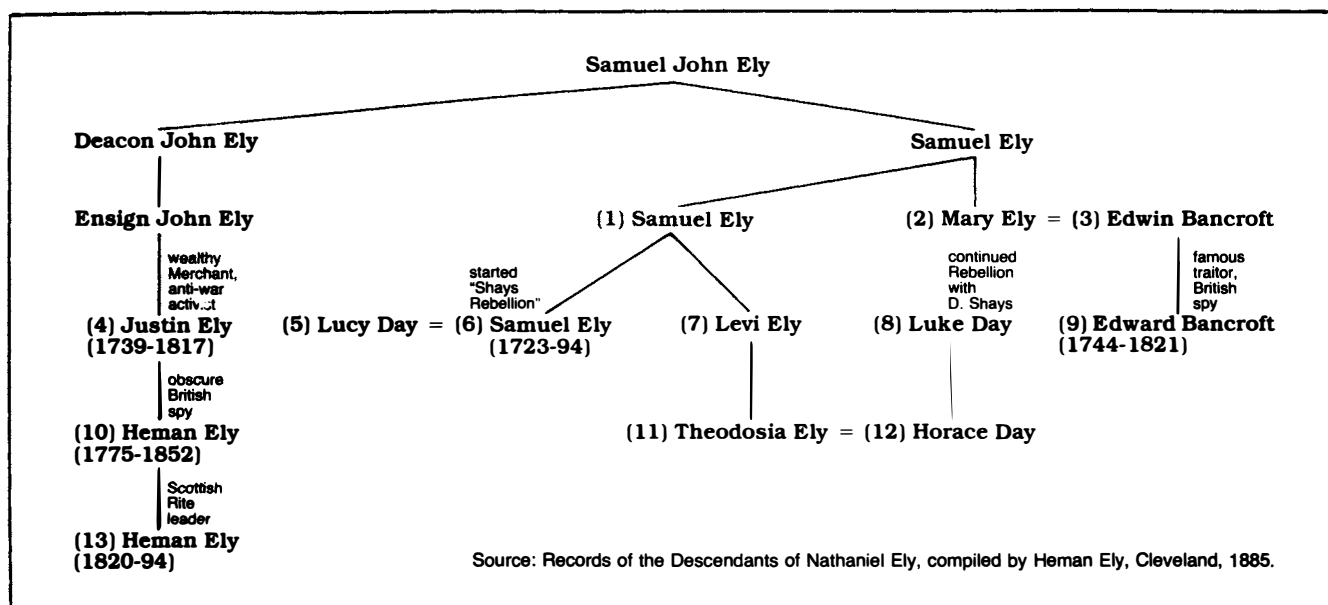
The 1786 Massachusetts civil disorder, which sparked riots throughout the country, is known to history as Shays' Rebellion. Captain Daniel Shays, a disgruntled former Revolutionary officer, was "immortalized" as the popular but

ineffective leader of the poor, desperate debtors who attacked the courthouses of western Massachusetts.

Twentieth-century historians have pooh-poohed George Washington's suggestions of Tory intrigue behind the mob violence. It would be dangerous to allow the public to believe in the possibility of "aristocrats" running such "democratic" movements. Revisionist historians have, after all, spent too many decades portraying the American Revolution as an Upper Class affair.

An interesting new book by Richard B. Morris, *The Forging of the Union, 1781-1789*, has given us a clue to the puzzle presented by Shays' Rebellion. In his Bicentennial book Dr. Morris, who is Emeritus Professor of History at Columbia University, has plowed through an enormous volume of historical material, throwing out leads on many important topics for reader-researchers to follow up. As in his prize-winning 1965 book *The Peacemakers*, Morris has not paid too much attention to ideology (including that of the participants!); but his torrent of information is presented cheerfully and fearlessly.

Dr. Morris reminds his readers that the western Massachusetts rebellion did not start in 1786, but in 1782; and that



its instigator was not Daniel Shays, but one *Samuel Ely*.

These two troublesome facts about the origin of the movement, it turns out, are universally acknowledged by historians. “Troublesome”—because in 1782, unlike in 1786, the Americans were still at war with Britain. Everyone in the revolted colonies at that time was either a Patriot, a Tory, or in hiding. A “people’s uprising” against the Revolution, during the Revolution, sounds pretty much like British guerrilla warfare.

And who was this Samuel Ely? Unfortunately, neither Professor Morris nor the other historians of the period provide any concrete biographical facts about the man, except that he had been a preacher in Somers, Connecticut, and had come across the border into Massachusetts after “factional quarrels.”

The name Ely rang a bell with this reporter; a family by that name was described in his book, *Treason in America*, as associated with British Tory politics in western Massachusetts. Had a member of this gang been the one whose “rebellion” pushed America to adopt its Constitution? A search through older sources on this question proved fruitful, indeed.

The Ely family genealogy published in 1885—a portion of which is shown in the accompanying illustration—combined with other historical material, has allowed for a positive identification of Samuel Ely, the instigator of the uprising.

Historians agree that in 1782 Samuel Ely was arrested for leading a riotous mob attack on a Massachusetts government installation. Instead of being shot as a spy, he was freed from jail by another mob. He seems to have been re-arrested, and was jailed in Boston.

Was this man the same person as the Samuel Ely, number (6) on the genealogical chart? If so, he is a member of a family whose head, Justin Ely (chart, no. 4) is the richest merchant in Springfield, the representative of the area in the Massachusetts legislature, and a massive property owner in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine. Justin Ely was later widely known as a factional leader of the pro-British party in Massachusetts during the War of 1812. So our rebel Samuel would be a rich man’s “poor man.”

Historians also agree that a former army officer named *Luke Day* was, four years later, a co-leader of the armed “rebellion” with Daniel Shays.

Well, *our* Samuel Ely is seen to have married a Lucy Day (no. 5); and Samuel’s niece Theodosia (no. 11) married Luke Day’s son Horace (no. 12)! The “Shays” rebellion actually continued under the leadership of the same instigating group; the Days and the Elys are multiply connected in the area, in effect a single family.

The clincher

We are getting closer to certainty about rebel leader Ely’s identity. What we need above all is confirmation of his *character* as a spook, a spy.

The Ely family genealogist, Heman Ely (chart, no. 13),

was Grand Treasurer of the Scottish Rite of Freemasonry; his father, Heman (no. 10) was to all appearances a British military intelligence officer operating in the Napoleonic wars. So the genealogist is not forthcoming with information about our mysterious Samuel Ely’s life, besides the bare facts of his parentage, his birth and death, and his two marriages. Other historians tell us that Samuel went to Yale, and the official Yale Dexter biography of alumni for the 1760s quotes Yale president Timothy Dwight about Samuel Ely, the rebel:

He was “voluble, vehement in address, and brazen-faced in wickedness . . . under the accusation and proof of his crimes [Ely] would still wear a face of serenity, and make strong professions of piety. At the same time he declared himself, everywhere, the friend of the suffering and oppressed, and the champion of violated rights. Wherever he went, he industriously awakened the jealousy of the humble and ignorant. . . .”

Ely served as a wild fundamentalist preacher, beginning in 1767, in the town of Somers, Connecticut, just south of the Ely family base in Springfield, Massachusetts. The “factional quarrels” Professor Morris mentioned, was just that Ely’s congregation voted to oust him, as a similar aristocratic pro-irrationalist preacher, Jonathan Edwards, had been ousted by an area congregation years before. After leading a secessionist grouping from congregation until 1773, Samuel Ely returned to Massachusetts.

We have established our “perpetrator” as being in a raging fight against the rationalist perspective of the Americans republicans. His outlook is seen as identical to the British corruptionists who scorned Reason, and mocked Religion.

The clincher to the case, however, is in the Bancroft connection.

Our Samuel Ely’s Aunt Mary (chart, no. 2) married one Edwin Bancroft (no. 3). Her husband soon died. But Mary raised their two infant sons, Samuel Ely’s two little cousins. Both of these became Tories; one of them, Edward Bancroft (chart, no. 9), was one of the most famous spies in world history.

It was not until the mid-19th century, when the British Foreign Office released some relevant papers, that the world learned of the treachery of this Bancroft, from the Ely family gang. Edward Bancroft was a confidential secretary and espionage agent for Benjamin Franklin and the top leadership of the Americans in France during the American Revolution. But each week, Bancroft left a message in a hollow tree for his superiors in the British Secret Service.

His payment was handsome. King George III personally read his reports. His treachery was enormous: He routinely told the enemy about American and allied ship movements, so that our ships could be sunk or captured.

When his real side lost the war in 1783, Edward Bancroft is known to have returned to America, for an extended visit, before surprising everyone by permanently moving to England. We are not sure of his movements on that visit. Did he go to Massachusetts, to help further the counter-revolution-

ary "rebellion" simmering there? Certain facts make this a strong likelihood.

Ely-Bancroft's boss, the official manager of agents in Europe for the British Secret Service, was one Paul Wentworth, a relative of the last royal governor of New Hampshire, Sir John Wentworth. Like Sir John, and like Justin Ely, Paul Wentworth was a substantial New Hampshire landowner.

Royal Governor John Wentworth fled from New Hampshire to Nova Scotia, the reception-ground for thousands of Tory refugees from the American conflict; and he became royal governor of Nova Scotia, ruling until 1808.

It was a matter of bitter experience, often complained of by American leaders in the years after the Revolution, that Canada—still a British colony—served as the base for countless cross-border intrigues, including the close management of Indian uprisings. During the War of 1812, Wentworth's successor in Nova Scotia, Sir George Prevost, escalated from his covert operations to leading an army invasion across into New York. During the American Civil War, the Confederate Secret Service was headquartered in Canada.

During the "Shays Rebellion" of 1786, it was commonly remarked that "Canadians," including returned Tory refugees, were operating in Massachusetts as anti-American guerrillas. If so, they would have had good professional management on the scene with Mr. Samuel Ely, his family and friends. But as to these details, we cannot yet be sure. In these matters, there is still much mystery to be solved.

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