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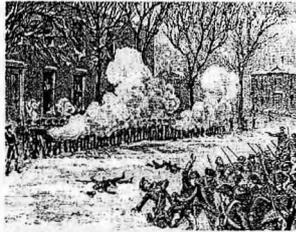
Recommended Citation

DiCamillo, Michael () ""They Crucified Two Thieves": The Executions of John Bly and Charles Rose, Shays's Rebels," *The Histories*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol5/iss2/2

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I

"They Crucified Two Thieves":
The Executions of John Bly and Charles Rose, Shays's Rebels
By Michael DiCamillo (Graduate Student '06)



"With him they crucified two thieves; the one on his right hand, and the other on his left."
-- Mark 15:27

"Merciful God... look on us, miserable offenders, with an eye of pity, through the merits of thy dear Son, who promised a blessing to the dying Thief."
-- Last Words of John Bly, December 5th 1787

They had marched for eight hours despite cold winds and rocky terrain, now, at 4AM on the 4th of February 1787, General Benjamin Lincoln and his frostbitten, half-drunk, barely lucid soldiers hacked their way through a debilitating snow storm.¹ Undeterred, Lincoln pushed his men in pursuit of the infamous Daniel Shays, believed to be the "generalissimo" of an ongoing rebellion in western Massachusetts. Actually, Shays was only one of three commanders when rebels failed to seize Springfield's federal arsenal on January 25th, and he was only one of hundreds rebelling against the state. Still, Shays's reputation as an experienced veteran of the American Revolution, one whom the esteemed Marquis de Lafayette honored with a gold-handled sword, singled him out as significant. Shays later sold the sword which also explains why some called the uprising in western Massachusetts "Shays's" rebellion. Perceived as disdain for the Revolution, pawning his sword became one reason for labeling Shays an antagonistic malcontent and a threat to the new and tenuous republican government. As fear grew and Shays remained at large, his rumored intentions became more diabolical. Would he march his men east and set Boston aflame?²

Lincoln trudged his men through the frigid night determined to ice the rebellion. The intelligence Lincoln received had Shays located in Petersham, a small town in Hampshire County, the most rebellious county in all of Massachusetts.³ At 4AM, Lincoln's men were still a five-hour march away, nevertheless, they continued through the night. Even if his men arrived exhausted, he assumed the rebels were unarmed and

¹ "Generals congratulations to troops victory after a hard march of 30 miles in the snow, etc. (Gen. Lincoln)," Massachusetts Archives, Boston (MA) 319:21;

² Leonard Richards, *Shay's Rebellion* (Philadelphia, 2002), 26-30

³ Richards, 55-57, 59-62

doubted the scoundrels could put up a fight. A week prior, Shays et al. attacked the federal arsenal at Springfield, but fell into retreat after the mission failed. If General Lincoln could catch the rebels off guard, he believed he would easily capture Shays and the majority of the insurgents. However, the snow continued to fall, and Lincoln's weary men did not enter Petersham until 9AM. They found the rebels surprised, but also strategically positioned uphill. In the pandemonium that followed, Shays and many of his men eluded capture while Lincoln and his troops struggled up icy slopes. Some prisoners were taken, but a good number of rebels vanished into the countryside, headed for safety across state borders. Despite losing Shays, Lincoln immediately wrote Massachusetts governor James Bowdoin proclaiming the attack a success. Lincoln praised his men's bravery after marching a rugged thirty miles through the night. He also claimed to have captured and imprisoned 150 insurgents.⁴

In the melee at Petersham, John Bly, a young man barely twenty-two and fighting under Daniel Shays, absconded with a large group of fleeing rebels across the state border into New York.⁵ For many of Bly's comrades, it was too soon to give up the fight, and Captain Perez Hamlin easily regrouped the scattering men. Some were certainly former Revolutionary soldiers with legitimate gripes against the state of Massachusetts. The state, like many others, issued promissory notes as payment for services rendered during the war. Years after veterans had returned to their farms, the state still had not made good on its notes. Desperate to keep their farms solvent, many veterans sold their notes at depreciated values to speculators. Using their connections in state government, the speculators managed to convince the legislature to pay back the notes at face value rather than the going market rate. In order to generate the funding, the state enacted several tax bills which put a particular burden on the war veterans/farmers in the west. The American Revolutionary soldiers were not going to accept a new state government that taxed them heavier than the British Crown. They fought the war believing victory would bring progress, not more of the same debauchery.

In addition to disgruntled veterans, Bly's party also would have included prominent citizens from western Massachusetts towns. These men rebelled out of contempt for the current state constitution. They contended the document never had their approval since a snow storm prevented most western delegates from attending the winter convention responsible for amending and approving the language. They claimed eastern elites had used the opportunity to usurp governing power from local leaders and transfer regional autonomy to an insulated, centralized authority. The backcountry filed petition after petition asking for their concerns to be addressed, but they felt their efforts were regularly ignored. To grab the attention of the legislature, bands of citizens began shutting down state courts, crippling the most powerful arm of the centralized authority. From Worcester to Berkshire County, armed men blockaded courtroom doors demanding alterations to the state constitution. Gradually, the scattered court closings gained cohesion in an all-out insurrection.⁶

⁴ "General Lincoln to Governor Bowdoin, February 4th, 1787," 318:172, MA; "General Lincoln to Governor Bowdoin, February 5th, 1787," 318:175, MA; Richards, 31-32

⁵ "Extracts from the Last Words and Dying Speeches of John Bly and Charles Rose...", Worcester Magazine, second week of January 1788, p 186.

⁶ Richards, 63-88

John Bly was not a Revolutionary War veteran feeling cheated of his pay, nor was he a prominent citizen seeking constitutional amendments. The former tailor's apprentice had just finished his indenture and came to the state in 1785 most likely seeking work as a tailor. Having only been in the state for two years, Bly, a simple artisan, had little reason to despise the Massachusetts state government. However, he was young, impressionable, and at the mercy of older, more powerful men. Violence was on many of their tongues, and according to his own statements, Bly was compelled to join the rebellious movement. He landed under the command of Daniel Shays, fled at Petersham, and now was herded back into duty by Captain Hamlin.⁷

Hamlin knew weapons and victuals had to be secured if his men were to continue any sort of fight, so he made plans to re-enter Massachusetts and attack the town of Stockbridge. The attack caught the town off-guard, and the rebels successfully raided homes and farms for food and ammunition. Hamlin then moved his men to the town of Sheffield. Believing that the rebels aimed to pillage Sheffield too, the local militia and others prepared for the oncoming rogues. Shots were exchanged resulting in four deaths and thirty wounded. Many rebels were taken prisoner, including John Bly. The ill-fated individual who happened to get caught in the crest of the tide now found himself jailed for treason.⁸

Fortunately for Bly, the Supreme Judicial Court dismissed his case because of insufficient evidence. Released from prison, Bly returned to New York and hoped to wait out the rest of the rebellion.⁹ In May, believing the rebellion had died down, Bly re-entered Massachusetts. Again, poor timing plagued the unlucky man. Daniel Shays, who had been MIA since the flight at Petersham, was rumored to be reentering the state via Vermont.¹⁰ Former rebels, stirred by the prospect of Shays's return, called on colleagues to help raise men and armaments to reinforce whomever Shays might bring across the border. To achieve this end, raiding parties again prepared to ransack neighboring homes. Bly planned to return immediately to New York, but before he could reach the border "some principal men" of the rebellion compelled him "to go with a small party to get arms." Bly was part of the outfit that fell upon the towns of West Stockbridge and Becket. In Becket, homes were robbed of their weaponry including the home of Nathaniel Kingsley, which lost between fourteen and twenty guns. Bly left the state again, "waiting to hear if Shays was going to do anything or not." When Shays never materialized, Bly returned to Massachusetts and settled back into his home at Tyringham. However, in his absence, a burglarizing charge had been filed against him. Bly was soon arrested and jailed on the accusation of robbing the property of Captain Brooks of Lanesboro, an apparent victim of the May-June raiding parties. Bly never denied robbing certain homes under the orders of his rebel leaders, but he maintained until his death that

⁷ "John Bly's Petition for Pardon October 21, 1787," Governor's Council, Pardons Not Granted, 1785-1810, Series 771, Massachusetts Archives, Boston; "Extracts from the Last Words and Dying Speeches of John Bly and Charles Rose..." Worcester Magazine, second week of January 1788, p 186.

⁸ "General Shepherd to Governor Bowdoin, March 1787," 319:28, MA; "Rations Issued Prisoners March 8th 1787," 319:41, MA; "List of Prisoners at Pittsfield...March 12th, 1787," 319:49, MA; Richards, 34-36;

⁹ "Extracts from the Last Words and Dying Speeches of John Bly and Charles Rose..." Worcester Magazine, second week of January 1788, p 186.

¹⁰ "Col. Ezra Badlam in Northampton on activities of insurgents in Vermont, March 24th, 1787," 319:68, MA; "Secy. Joseph Fay in Bennington, VT agreeing to action against insurgents if necessary, March 29th, 1787," 319:72, MA

he had not committed any crime against Brooks and had never personally profited from any of the raids. Despite his insistence of innocence and subsequent pleas for pardon, the Supreme Judiciary Court sentenced Bly to death on the charge of robbery.¹¹

In prison with Bly, and waiting for the fulfillment of his own death sentence, was Charles Rose. Rose, an immigrant, was also an outsider in Massachusetts who in his own words “came into [the] country with a design to get an honest living.” He was working in Sheffield, Massachusetts where he “heard of grievances, of taxes, of salaries, and of oppressions, this being the universal topic of conversation.” The foreigner, “not being able to make proper distinctions,” sided with the rebellion when the backcountry rose up against the state. According to Rose, his allegiance to the rebellion was the result of sympathy for friends rather than any injustice the state had done to him. As an immigrant, he would not have harbored the generational animosity long-time westerners held for eastern elites, nor was there any reason for the state to have paid Rose with rapidly depreciating promissory notes. By all accounts, Rose was earning a respectable living “keeping school” when he was swept into the surging revolt. Rose fell in with Daniel Shays and eventually became part of the May-June raiding parties that included John Bly. Like Bly, Rose was arrested and jailed on charges of robbery. The state found him guilty, denied his request for pardon, and scheduled execution for December 6th.¹²

Old Revolutionaries like Samuel Adams believed the captives should face severe punishment. To men like Adams, the rebellion in western Massachusetts threatened to destroy all the American Revolution had so recently struggled to win. Since overthrowing the un-elected, unrepresentative British authority, Massachusetts had established a state approved constitution and had elected a body of men representative of each state county. In order for the republican experiment to work, citizens now had to surrender some autonomy to the centralized power. Adams feared the state’s republican styled government would soon crumble into anarchy if citizens brazenly defied rulings with backcountry violence. There were appropriate channels for handling dissent; Shays and his rebels flouted this sacred republican tradition. In Adams’s words, “Rebellion against a king may be pardoned, or lightly punished, but the man who dares to rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death.”¹³

Despite the calls for blood, Governor Bowdoin accepted a plan guaranteeing pardons for most of the common rebels.¹⁴ Many close to the governor’s ear believed executions for treason would only increase the animosity in rebellious regions, particularly since a large portion of the rebels were prominent citizens in their local communities. In order to receive the pardon, rebels had to surrender their arms, confess to treason, take an oath of allegiance, and pay a small fee. Once a man met these conditions, his citizenship was reinstated. Of the hundreds who participated in the rebellion, those captured were either released or pardoned. Only 18 were formally

¹¹ “John Bly’s Petition for Pardon October 21, 1787,” Governor’s Council, Pardons Not Granted, 1785-1810, Series 771, MA; “Extracts from the Last Words and Dying Speeches of John Bly and Charles Rose...,” Worcester Magazine, second week of January 1788, p 186; Richards, 39-42

¹² “Charles Rose’s Petition for Pardon October 22, 1787,” Governor’s Council, Pardons Not Granted, 1785-1810, Series 771, MA; Richards, 39-42

¹³ Richards, 16

¹⁴ Letter from Secretary to Judges of the Supreme Judicial Court urging postponement of warrants, April 12th, 1787,” 319:100, MA

sentenced to death.¹⁵ Of the 18, only Bly and Rose would actually be executed. Why did these two men meet such an unfortunate fate?

Three reasons explain why Bly and Rose were executed while every other captured insurgent, even those sentenced to death, went free. The first reason was wealth. As historian Leonard Richards has explained, many of those who rebelled against the state were economically better-off than their neighbors. His research demonstrates that western citizens whose financial status placed them in the top twenty percent of their community were more likely to rebel than those less financially secure.¹⁶ Bly nor Rose can be considered top twenty percent in either of their respective towns. Bly was only twenty-two, and as a beginning tailor, he was unlikely to have established himself among the wealthiest in his community. Likewise, Rose was an immigrant worker “keeping school”. It is unclear if he was attending classes, instructing students, or most probably maintaining school grounds. Still, in any of these roles Rose would not have achieved a great deal of wealth. Wealth was important. Though the state issued general pardons for common rebels, the reprieves only covered treason; they did not protect rebels from independent citizens suing for damages. Rebels possessing wealth could reimburse potential litigants for their losses and keep charges from being filed. Others, unable to pay out of pocket, found themselves in court possibly facing fines, jail time, and if the charges were serious enough, execution. Bly and Rose were officially charged with the robbery of a Lanesborough resident, Captain Brooks, an apparent victim of a Shaysite raiding party. Unable (or unwilling—Bly claimed he was innocent of the charge) to pay for the damages, Bly and Rose were hauled into court. Bly argued that though he had under orders robbed other men’s property, he did not commit any crime against Captain Brooks. Rose continued to hold that the crime was committed in conjunction with the rebellion, an irrelevant matter as any pardon of treason from the state did not excuse an individual from a civil suit. Brooks and other members of his family gave testimony that Bly was indeed present at the time of the robbery and must have positively identified Rose as well. A conviction and sentence followed: Bly and Rose were to be hanged. Perhaps if either man had the money to reimburse Captain Brooks for his losses their fates might have been avoided.¹⁷

Another reason Bly and Rose did not escape the hangman’s noose was that neither man possessed any clout, nor did either have connections to someone who did. Among the other sixteen men associated with the rebellion and sentenced to death, there were some guilty of worse crimes than robbery, but most were men of some stature in their communities or had access to other eminent people. For instance, Jason Parmenter, 51, shot and killed a government man during an exchange between rebels and soldiers. Found guilty of firing upon a government supporter, he was ineligible for a general pardon and subsequently received a death sentence. However, Parmenter, a veteran of the Revolution, was an elected official and tax collector in his town. Obviously possessing more respectability than low profile men like Bly and Rose, Parmenter

¹⁵ Richards, 39-41

¹⁶ Richards, 89-116

¹⁷ “John Bly’s Petition for Pardon October 21, 1787,” Governor’s Council, Pardons Not Granted, 1785-1810, Series 771, MA; “Charles Rose’s Petition for Pardon October 22, 1787,” Governor’s Council, Pardons Not Granted, 1785-1810, Series 771, MA; “Extracts from the Last Words and Dying Speeches of John Bly and Charles Rose...,” Worcester Magazine, second week of January 1788, p 186.

received a last-minute reprieve and escaped the gallows.¹⁸ Job Shattuck was also reprieved just before his execution. Shattuck was a well-known agitator and had led approximately one hundred men in the closing of the Middlesex County Court. But the former selectman from Groton, like Parmenter, had many supporters back home. The state was overwhelmed by petitions demanding Shattuck's release and decided it best to show the insurgent leader mercy.¹⁹ One by one the state found an excuse not to follow through with other executions, be it prominence, petitions, or liberal re-evaluations of the evidence. William Manning, awaiting his death alongside Bly and Rose, fell into this third category. With his scheduled execution just weeks away, Manning's case was reconsidered after authorities discovered a second William Manning living in the same county. Questioning whether they had indeed arrested the more rebellious of the two, a decision was made to lessen the sentence of the captured William Manning.²⁰ As for Bly and Rose, they had no money, no status, no connections, and the cases against them were without loopholes. Still, one other factor played a role in their demise.

Even as late as the 5th of December 1787, twenty-four hours before their scheduled execution, John Bly and Charles Rose must have maintained a glint of optimism. There was still a chance that neither man would feel the rope tighten around their neck the following afternoon. The state had granted every one of the men sentenced to die some sort of reprieve; it made sense that Bly and Rose would be pardoned too. They would hold out hope until the last breath choked from their lungs, for on Parmenter's day of execution, he had been led to the gallows and fitted with a noose before the sheriff finally revealed the state's pardon.²¹ Nevertheless, John Bly penned and signed his last words and dying speech. Charles Rose, approving of Bly's sentiments, also put his signature to the drying parchment. Bly addressed his writings "To the good people of Massachusetts, more especially DANIEL SHAYS, and other officers of the militia, and the Selectmen of towns who have been instrumental in raising the opposition to the government of this Commonwealth."²² Bly apparently felt the sting of injustice as he awaited his day of execution while the insurrection's principal leaders went unscathed. Indeed, Shays and others believed to be the chief instigators of the rebellion continued to avoid capture. Reportedly, the men gallivanted outside state borders in Vermont. Vermont governor Thomas Chittenden received several petitions to return the insurrectionists, but Chittenden had been unable or unwilling to cooperate.²³

For the most part, the backcountry had quieted down, but another uprising was not out of question. The former rebels still lived discontented, and rumors of Shays returning with a force of Green Mountain Men titillated. For good measure, state troops

¹⁸ Randall Conrad, "A Captain with the Insurgents: Jason Parmenter of Bernardston," in Martin Kaufman, ed., *Shay's Rebellion: Selected Essays* (Westfield, MA 1987), 67-79

¹⁹ Richards, 19-21, 39-42

²⁰ "Secretary's Letter to... Sheriff of Berkshire County Removing Wm. Manning to Castle Island, January 8th, 1788," 319:205, MA; Richards, 41

²¹ "Governor's Order to Sheriffs of Hampshire and Berkshire Counties to Keep Reprieves Private until Culprits are Brought to Place of Execution, June 16th, 1787," 319:159, MA

²² "Extracts from the Last Words and Dying Speeches of John Bly and Charles Rose...", *Worcester Magazine*, second week of January 1788, p 186.

²³ "Letter from Governor Bowdoin to governors of other states asking that fleeing rebels be captured and returned, February 2nd, 1787," 318:164, MA; "Royall Tyler to Governor Chittendon, February 17th, 1787," 318:223, MA

remained stationed in the field.²⁴ Perhaps in the case of Bly and Rose the government believed it had to send a message. It could awe its population with benevolent clemency, but retained its right to condemn. Bly and Rose became examples of the latter for they made easy scapegoats: little known, little role, little care. There is no record of their deaths causing any citizen backlash; for sure, 1788 saw a quieter western Massachusetts.

The Articles of Confederation were widely criticized and the movement for a stronger national government was in motion before Daniel Shays attempted his attack on the Springfield Arsenal. However, word of the insurrection in Massachusetts hastened people to action. Using a puffed-up image of Daniel Shays, Massachusetts leaders frightened other states into believing anarchy lurked at their door step. Indeed, various regions in New England, the middle states, and the South felt the pressure of their own discontented citizens. Even prominent founders James Madison and George Washington cited the rebellion as a reason for creating a "more perfect union." "Shays's Rebellion" was then an important catalyst for the convention in Philadelphia. Western Massachusetts citizens closed courts in 1786 hoping for a new state constitution; little did they know their actions would lead to the creation of history's most famous political agreement.

During the tenuous post-Revolutionary period and through the early American Republic there were three notable rebellions against the newly formed state or federal governments: Shay's Rebellion, The Whiskey Rebellion, and Fries's Rebellion. Many rebels from each of these uprisings were sentenced to death, but only John Bly and Charles Rose were actually executed. This was a low number of executions considering the usual blood and terror that followed other nations' major revolutions. Instead of feeding the guillotine or carrying out purges, the United States usually showed mercy toward its opposition. Still, the United States has not been totally able to avoid bloodletting, and in this Bly and Rose have a unique, if unfortunate place in the nation's founding.

²⁴ "Vouchers for troops in the field, October 1787-December 1787," 319:196-199, MA

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(Primary source material: see footnotes)