

Bacon's Rebellion

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On September 19, 1676, three hundred and fifty years ago today, Nathaniel Bacon and his followers burned Jamestown, the capital of the Virginia Colony. The destruction of the seat of government was the culmination of a year of conflict between Governor Sir William Berkeley and poor settlers in the colony. Fears of another such uprising in the future led Virginia lawmakers to make sure poor men would not make common cause, passing laws to divide them along racial lines.

The crisis had begun a year before, in the fall of 1675, when Thomas Mathew refused to pay members of the Doeg tribe what they believed they were owed for goods they had sold him. They raided his farm on the Northern Neck of Virginia, taking some of his pigs. A number of Doegs were killed in the skirmish.

The Virginia militia retaliated for the raid but mistakenly fell on a village of Susquehannocks, who were actually allied with the Virginia government. Blindsided and furious, the Susquehannocks began to raid local farms.

The raids set a smoldering power struggle within the colony ablaze.

Since the colony's beginning in 1607, both English custom and the drive to produce cash crops had created a clear line between men who had land and power and those who worked for them. Horrific death rates made those men who had paid for the passage of workers from England to North America drive them hard to get as much labor out of them as possible before they died.

After the arrival of Africans to the colony in 1619, those enslaved people joined indentured white workers to make common cause against their "masters." They worked and socialized together and, according to advertisements and court cases, ran away, committed crimes, and had children together.

They also suffered similar punishments when they ran afoul of the law. And those few who lived past the deadly early years of their servitude shared similar access to the benefits of freedom, although slaves could not simply outlive their contracts but had to buy their way out of bondage with money they earned in their spare time.

At first, so many poor Virginians died in the colony that the few who survived posed little threat to their former masters. But by the 1660s, the survivors had grown into a large population of poor men, white and Black both, who were free but could not

afford prime land in the eastern part of the colony, so they migrated to the western frontier hoping to become farmers.

There, these settlers thoroughly resented the eastern government that seemed to ignore their interests. In 1675 they saw the increased fighting with the local tribes as an opportunity to weaken those tribes and take their lands.

But Governor Berkeley disagreed. He wanted to avoid an expensive war and he wanted to honor a 1646 treaty under which allied tribes paid an annual tribute to the colonial government and fought alongside the English against tribes that didn't have such an agreement.

Nathaniel Bacon had arrived in the colony in 1674. He was well connected and wealthy—he was actually related to Berkeley by marriage—but was frustrated that Berkeley wasn't following his advice. Bacon began to speak for the angry westerners and by spring 1676 had welded them into a powerful coalition that was attacking local Indigenous tribes without the government's blessing. Finally, Berkeley declared Bacon a rebel.

Under Bacon, vagrants and poor farmers, including former slaves and servants, went to war against the Pamunkey tribe and the Indigenous tribes who lived around them. And then they marched on Jamestown. On July 30, 1676, Bacon issued the Declaration of the People of Virginia, complaining that the governor had raised taxes too high, was corrupt, had put his own "ignorant" judges in place, and had failed to protect settlers against Indigenous Americans. He included a list of Berkeley supporters he called "Confederates, aiders, and assisters" of Berkeley's perfidy. Bacon ordered them all to surrender to him within four days and declared that he and his men intended to confiscate their estates.

In a dramatic affront to the colonial system in which leaders held their positions by virtue of the Crown, Bacon signed his name "Nathaniel Bacon, Generall by Consent of the people."

Bacon's men held control of Jamestown from July through September before Berkeley's forces forced them to retreat. Berkeley's men abandoned the town when Bacon's men tried to recapture it. Aware that more of the governor's men were on their way, Bacon's forces burned the town down on September 19.

On October 26, Bacon died from dysentery, the "Bloodie Flux," and the rebellion fell apart. But the crisis had left the colony in ruin with its people dead or wounded, farms plundered or burned, crops ruined from lack of care.

In the wake of Bacon's Rebellion, Virginia's wealthy elite set out to preserve their control over the colony. They pushed Indigenous Americans off their land and enslaved those who fought back. From 1670 to 1715, colonists enslaved between 30,000 and 50,000 Indigenous Americans. Entire tribes disappeared, and white farmers moved onto their lands.

And the elites set out to drive wedges between Black slaves and white servants, establishing greater punishments for Black Virginians. In 1705 the Virginia Slave Codes pulled all those regulations together and went further. They prohibited Black Americans from owning cattle, hogs, or horses. They made it legal to kill an enslaved Virginian in the process of "correcting" them. And they made enslavement hereditary.

At the same time, they gave white servants new legal rights and limited the length of white indentures. The assembly passed laws requiring masters to provide white servants with food and clothing, as well as money to set themselves up after they earned their freedom. This, combined with a booming tobacco market, enabled more white men to buy land. The assembly also reduced the poll taxes for voting, making it easier for poor white men to vote.

And they made it costly for white and Black Virginians to socialize. Any white person attempting to marry across race lines would be fined and sent to jail, and the minister performing such a marriage would be fined the astonishing price of ten thousand pounds of tobacco. White servant women who had mixed-race children had to either pay a whopping fine or have their term of service extended for five years. And the child would be a slave until they turned thirty-one.

As leaders bound Black Americans more tightly into slavery, they courted white Virginians into joining the cultural and social world from which they had previously been excluded. Wealthier Virginians reached out to their less-prosperous neighbors, rubbing elbows with poorer white men in taverns and welcoming them into their imposing homes to emphasize that they were all friends.

Indeed, the needs of poor white landowners were not all that different from those of wealthier planters, and it was easy to believe that all Virginia voters had the same interests. They understood what it meant to be under the thumb of a tyrant, for they saw enslaved people and their enslavers all around them. They believed that owning land made a man independent, for that was their experience. And, unlike the royal officials who used their offices to enrich their friends, Virginia voters could argue that they had the best interests of the country at heart. They were free and independent.

They were, one might say, created equal.