

The Legacy of Bacon's Rebellion

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*We appeal to the country itself.... Let us trace these men in authority and favor...; let us observe the sudden rise of their estates compared with the quality in which they first entered the country or the reputation they have held here amongst the wise and discerning men, and let us see whether their extractions and education have not been vile.*¹

Nathaniel Bacon, *Declaration of the People*, July 30, 1676

The founding of English colonies in North America opened enormous windows of opportunity for wealth and status for England's elite. Merchants would grow richer, speculators' holdings would grow larger, and the commoner's vision of land ownership - the very essence and foundation of freedom in England - was much closer to realization. Those who traveled to the English New World, voluntarily and involuntarily, to work as indentured servants in exchange for land and freedom hoped for a new start that would allow them and posterity to prosper. But the conflict between rich and poor present in England would not disappear in the North American colonies - a conflict now ancillary to the growing racial hostility between the colonists and native inhabitants of the land. The antagonism which occurred between poor whites newly emancipated and granted small portions of land and neighboring Indian tribes would prove to be a difficult problem for the ruling class to manage. What would ultimately culminate into Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia was a prime example of how racial hatred, class enmity, and the desire for land and prosperity threatened the very survival of England's colony.

Hostilities between colonists and American Indian tribes were omnipresent in the second half of the seventeenth century. In New England, Metacom's War devastated the landscape in 1675-76, and New Englanders were, according to Gary Nash, indeed fighting for their lives. At war's end several thousand colonists and twice as many Indians were dead. Twelve Puritan towns were destroyed and another forty attacked by the resisting tribes. Indian villages were even more devastated. The lessons of such a war reverberated throughout the colonies: Many Indian nations "were prepared to risk extinction rather than become a colonized and culturally imperialized people," and they would go to great lengths, particularly by banding together in confederation, to defend their way of life, their survival.²

It was at about the time of Metacom's War that similar hostilities were brewing in Maryland and Virginia. But unlike the war in New England, Bacon's Rebellion would seemingly hit without any warning. It was a complex affair, led by a wealthy proprietor who owned a sizable tract of land north of Jamestown, along with a number of slaves, against Native Americans foremost but also against a new elite that emerged after the founding of the colony. Racial hostility, land greed, class antipathy, and outright fanaticism combined to bring a deadly rebellion to one of England's most prosperous colonies.

Virginia had grown to about 40,000 inhabitants, free and unfree, by 1670. The colony's royal governor was William Berkeley, who held the position off and on for some twenty years. He had been involved in creating various treaties with neighboring Indian tribes during his tenure, guaranteeing lands north of the York River into Virginia's interior to the Powhatan tribes. Indeed, Berkeley's policies were designed to avoid further Indian uprisings that plagued the landscape in the early part of the 1600s. After the 1646 Indian uprising there was relative peace for almost thirty years. And with peace came economic prosperity through the fur trade with neighboring tribes. But of course, many in the colony complained that the trade solely benefited Berkeley and his compatriots.³ Moreover, the class divide in the colony was glaring, with two different societies in existence. There was the plantation elite of the Tidewater "who dominated the assembly and ran the government," and there were the small farmers "who penetrated the foothills, or piedmont, of the Appalachian ridges, and beyond them." These two societies were a foretaste of the bifurcation most evident in the 1860s that separated Virginia and West Virginia - "the slave-owning, tobacco-growing, cultured, elitist, leisured" folks on the coast and the "much more rugged farming society in the interior."⁴

The interior was where the problems were most difficult. Recently manumitted European servants were pushing the borders of white settlements and encroaching on Indian lands, furthering the already sharp tension between the red and white societies. Land fever seemed to infect everyone outside of the more populated English settlements. So while the ruling class created a buffer between themselves and American Indian societies through treaties, thus securing towns like Jamestown from Native molestation, relations between poor whites and Indians were nowhere near as trusting.

Clashes between the two groups became more numerous by 1675. In July a group of Doeg Indians, trading in Stafford County, Virginia, entered the property of Thomas Mathew claiming he had neglected to pay them for goods traded by them. As retribution they attempted to take a number of his hogs. Mathew thwarted this attempt and killed a number of them. The Doegs soon took revenge by killing several of Mathews' cohorts, followed by thirty neighboring planters retaliating by killing ten Doegs and fourteen Susquehannocks - who had been friendly with the Virginia government for years. The Indian tribes demanded reparations, and when the Virginia government refused to respond, more rancorous attacks occurred in outlying white settlements along the frontier of Maryland and Virginia. More attacks by English settlers would soon follow, intent on "takeing up the very Townes or Lands (the Indians) are seated upon, turning their Cattell and hoggs on them, and if by vermin or otherwise any be lost, then they exclaime against the Indians, beate & abuse them."⁵

Virginia governor Berkeley initially raised a force to wage war against the Susquehannocks, but later recalled it before any further bloodshed. Instead he would opt for a defensive policy. At Berkeley's request, the legislature attempted to quell anti-Indian hysteria by authorizing the building of forts "at the head of each great river" and would be manned by some 500 soldiers from the lower counties. Natives in this region would be permitted to trade with the forts if they enrolled against the enemy, but all private trade was forbidden. Berkeley's opponents in the lower counties saw this as an attempt for the wealthy elite to profit from the new policy. The new forts, many believed, "would contribute more to the wealth of the men who built them than to the security of the people they were supposed to protect." What was more, in order to pay the soldiers and for the building of the forts, a huge levy would have to be paid by the poorer farmers, the commoners.⁶

II

Enter Nathaniel Bacon. Bacon was a relative newcomer to the Virginia colony, having made a modest fortune for himself in England and intent on making a good start in America as well. He and Berkeley were somewhat close and Bacon's wife was friendly with Lady Berkeley (apparently the two knew each other back in England). "He was a kinsman and a namesake of one of Virginia's elder statesmen," Edmund Morgan explains, "and though he was only twenty-nine years old, Berkeley nominated him at once to the council." Under Berkeley's direction, Bacon established a home upriver of Jamestown and a plantation farther still.⁷

Despite Nathaniel Bacon's connection to Berkeley and proclivity towards wealth, he had a disdain for the new Virginian elite - those from "vile" beginnings, whose "tottering fortunes have bin repared and supported at the Publique chardg."⁸ He denounced the ascendancy of a "provincial elite lacking the traditional accouterments of power - old wealth, high social status, a 'liberal' education."⁹ This antipathy would bode well with the less prosperous planters who despised Berkeley's economic policies which they saw as oppressive. Bacon had something else in common with the common farmer: contempt for Indians. All of these factors made Bacon a practical candidate for leading a rebellion against all of these entities.

One event in particular brought Bacon into the leadership role he would take in the struggle against the American Indians. The Susquehannocks made another attack in the winter of 1675-76, killing thirty-six colonists. Angry frontiersmen then took revenge on the Indians closest at hand (Appomattox and Pamunkeys) who resided on land long-coveted by neighboring whites.¹⁰ In April 1676 Bacon and several others had lost servants who had been killed by Indians. The men decided that the measures taken by Berkeley were nowhere near enough to deal with the ongoing problems. They were nervous about future Indian insurgencies and felt more had to be done to rid the landscape of a seemingly increasing "savage" problem. Bacon insisted that the country must be defended "against all Indians in generall for that they were all enemies." He would later tell Berkeley that this was a position "I have alwayes said and doe maintaine."¹¹ His rationale for this position was that the Indians "have so cunningly mixt among the severall Nations of familyes of Indians that it hath been very difficult for us, to distinguish how, or from which of thos said nations the said wrongs did proceed."¹²

Bacon asked Berkeley for a commission to lead his growing army of volunteers, most of whom would be poor frontiersmen and farmers, against all Indians in the region. This was an ingenious method of ensuring Berkeley that there would be no mutinies against him; for Bacon was part of the landed elite, and if he could gain the trust of the masses then the chance of a rebellion against Berkeley's tax policies would diminish. Morgan explains:

"Since being with my volunteers," he wrote to Berkeley, "the Exclaiming concerning forts and Leavys has beene suppressed and the discourse and earnestness of the people is against the Indians...." Bacon was offering Berkeley a way to suppress a mutiny. The Indians would be the scapegoats. Discontent with upper-class leadership would be vented in racial hatred, in a pattern that statesmen and politicians of a later age would have found familiar.¹³

Berkeley refused to grant Bacon's request, perhaps out of distrust for his burgeoning number followers, or for Bacon himself, or both. He believed that any actions must be sanctioned through the colony of Virginia and not a ragtag army led by a rebel. And a rebel Bacon was, as he refused to stop organizing and would proceed his attacks without the governor's approval.

III

Bacon moved on his evenhanded crusade against all Indians. He hired one group of Indian, the Occaneechees, to capture a number of Susquehannocks for him - and they did. After killing all of the prisoners, Bacon then annihilated the Occaneechees too. After all, all Indians were the enemy, not just hostile ones. He then returned again to Berkeley trying to convince him that all he sought was a commission to defeat the Indians, nothing more. At first willing to pardon Bacon and offer concessions but no commission, he proposed to send Bacon back to England to allow him to state his case before the King. Bacon, however, chose to state his case to the people of Virginia and he refused to apologize for defying the governor. Berkeley then labeled Bacon and all his followers (including some well-to-do planters) rebels engaging in treasonous actions punishable by death. This would only add to the increasing hostility among the masses against the governor and his council.

In May a series of new elections took place throughout Virginia, and despite is rebel status, Bacon was elected to the assembly from a district in which he was quite popular. On 6 June he entered Jamestown to take his seat in the assembly. Immediately Berkeley was able to capture the rebel, brought him before the House of Burgesses on his knees, and forced him to confess his sins against the governor and the King. Then, in yet another interesting political move, he pardoned Bacon and placed him back on the governor's council in an attempt to save face and mollify Bacon's supporters. No longer able to be on the assembly, Bacon left Jamestown to visit his wife. He still was without his much longed-for commission.

The Bacon-Berkeley drama yet continued. With explicit instructions from Berkeley to stay out of New Kent, a region Berkeley feared would rebel against him if coaxed, Bacon disobeyed him and gathered new volunteers for his anti-Indian forays. On 22 June he was back in Jamestown to yet again demand a commission from the governor. Again the governor denounced Bacon as a rebel challenging the governor's authority. But this time Bacon demanded his commission at gunpoint, and the reluctantly governor acceded. He was also granted the authority to gather volunteers and to enslave all Indians captured in battle. Thus he and his men now became government troops.¹⁴

Nathaniel Bacon would now use this as an opportunity not only to plunder Indians but also to garner more support through the denunciation of the governor and his tax policies. Bacon's artful playing of the race and class cards would win him support all over the countryside. Of course, his first object was a war of extermination against the Indians. But if he believed that he now had the true support of the governor he was gravely mistaken. Berkeley declared Bacon's commission, obtained under force, to be null and void. He then formed a contingent of his own supporters to put down the rebellion and restore relative peace to the colony. For the rest of the summer the two forces would chase and maneuver around each other, "sniping at each other's heels in quasimilitary forays." A civil war had broken out over what was initially a disagreement between two groups over Indian policy, and there seemed no way to bring it to an end.¹⁵

Things seemed to be going Bacon's way come September. He recruited thousands of men to outnumber Berkeley's forces. He promised freedom to all servants and black slaves who joined his cause. He laid siege to Jamestown and forced Berkeley and his followers to escape on boat. Jamestown was burned to the ground on September 19. English authority in the colony itself was besieged and there seemed to be no way to preserve it.

The momentum ran out for Bacon's followers in October. On October 26 Nathaniel Bacon succumbed to dysentery and died, and with him so did the spirit of his rebellion. Soon after a vessel carrying a thousand British troops arrived to restore

order. Many who followed Bacon immediately changed their allegiance once again to the governor and King. The last Bacon supporters to surrender were eighty black slaves and twenty English servants, apparently still fighting for their own freedom. By November Berkeley was settled once again in his office of governor and the rebellion was over, though certainly the issues and grievances that led to violence remained.¹⁶

IV

Bacon's rebellion seemed to happen out of nowhere, fulminating into an uprising stemming from land greed, racism, and class issues. "It was a rebellion," Edmund Morgan says, "with abundant causes but without a cause." Indeed, it was not even intended to be a rebellion in the first place. And as Morgan observes, it is quite surprising that Bacon was able to garner and maintain as much support as he did, "considering the grievances of Virginia's impoverished freemen."¹⁷

The physical effects on the colonists were actually negligible. There were relatively few white deaths throughout the whole insurgency, and the escapade concluded as an extension of the anti-Indian raids that started the whole uprising. Meanwhile, the Indian nations of the region were devastated. Their safety in previously agreed upon lands could not be guaranteed, and with their numbers in perpetual decline it would only be a matter of time that the genocidal actions of Virginia's citizens would lead to the utter destruction of the American Indian in the territory. Such anti-Indian actions came as a direct result of the governor's inability to control the conduct of the frontiersmen. As Paul Johnson observes, the rebellion illustrates just how fragile authority was in colonial Virginia. Indeed, Bacon's Rebellion, Nash concluded, proved "that even the highest authorities in an English colony, dedicated though they might be to preserving peace between the two societies, could not prevent genocidal attacks by white settlers."¹⁸

What was also shown in the aftermath of the rebellion was the constant fear among the elite of revolt from below. That is, unrest among those they sought to control. A fact that the ruling class would utilize time and again in American history started to become quite apparent in the days of Bacon's Rebellion: "Resentment of an alien race might be more powerful than resentment of an upper class." The Virginia legislature soon backed up this notion with law in 1682 by declaring all imported non-Christians slaves *for life*, meaning Indians and Africans alike. Thus, white servants were elevated in status both *de jure* and *de facto*. The American Indian and the Negro were officially "lumped together in Virginia legislation, and white Virginians treated black, red, and intermediate shades of brown as interchangeable."¹⁹

The land greed and anti-Indian hatred, steeped in racism, that was the foundation of Nathaniel Bacon's rise to rebel leader status would not only result in the further displacement of an entire population of people, but also would have a startling impact on black-white and rich-poor relations. The new laws that were passed during and after this event would be designed to quell the unrest and antagonisms between the landed and landless, the elite and the poor. Using racism by which the ruling class would divide and conquer, the Indian populations would be destroyed for the purpose of clearing land for industrious poor farmers and newly manumitted servants so that they could obtain wealth and status to dominate those who would have no chance at either.