

Bacon's Rebellion

Bacon's Rebellion was an uprising in 1676 in the Virginia Colony in North America, led by a 29-year-old planter Nathaniel Bacon.

About a thousand Virginians rose because they resented Virginia Governor William Berkeley's friendly policies towards the Native Americans. When Berkeley refused to retaliate for a series of Indian attacks on frontier settlements, others took matters into their own hands, attacking Indians, chasing Berkeley from Jamestown, Virginia, and torching the capitol.

It was the first rebellion in the American colonies in which discontented frontiersmen took part; a similar uprising in Maryland occurred later that year. A protest against raids on the frontier; some historians also consider it a power play by Bacon against Berkeley, and his policies of favoring his own court. Their alliance disturbed the ruling class, who responded by hardening the racial caste of slavery.^[1] ^[2] While the farmers did not succeed in their goal of driving Native Americans from Virginia, the rebellion did result in Berkeley being recalled to England.



Bacon's Castle was occupied by Bacon's followers during the rebellion

Background

In 1674 a group of yeomen farmers on the Virginia frontier demanded that American Indians living on treaty-protected lands be driven out or killed. There were frequent conflicts between the groups. In September 1675, a group of Doeg Indians allegedly stole hogs from planter Thomas Mathews, in retaliation for his failure to pay them for trade goods. Colonists killed several Indians in the raiding party. In retaliation, the Doeg killed Mathews's herdsman, Robert Hen.

Two militia captains, both with a history of aggression toward the Indians, went after the Doeg, but indiscriminately killed 14 friendly Susquehannock in the process. A series of retaliatory raids ensued. John Washington took a party from Virginia into Maryland, and with Maryland militia surrounded a Susquehannock fort. Although the Susquehannock held out for six weeks, when five chiefs came out to parley, the colonists attacked and killed them.

Seeking to avoid escalation of war with the tribes, Governor Berkeley advocated a policy of containment of the Native Americans. He proposed building several defensive forts along the frontier. Frontier settlers thought the plan both expensive and inadequate. They regarded it as an excuse to raise tax rates.

The Rebellion

When Berkeley refused to go against the Native Americans, farmers gathered around at the report of a new raiding party. Nathaniel Bacon arrived with a quantity of brandy; after it was distributed, he was elected leader. Against Berkeley's orders, the group struck south until they came to the Occaneechi tribe. After getting the Occaneechi to attack the Susquehannock, Bacon and his men followed by killing most of the men, women, and children at the village. Upon their return, they discovered that Berkeley had called for new elections to the Burgesses in order to better facilitate the Indian problem.^[3]

The recomposed House of Burgesses enacted a number of sweeping reforms. (Bacon was not serving his duty in the House; rather, he was at his plantation miles away.) It limited the powers of the governor and restored suffrage rights to landless freemen.^[4]

After passage of these laws, Bacon arrived with 500 followers in Jamestown to demand a commission to lead militia against the Indians. The governor, however, refused to yield to the pressure. When Bacon had his men take aim at Berkeley, he responded by "bearing his breast" to Bacon and told Bacon to shoot him himself. Seeing that the Governor would not be moved, Bacon then had his men take aim at the assembled burgesses, who quickly granted Bacon his commission. (It is interesting to note that Bacon had been promised a commission before he retired to his estate if he could only be on "good" behavior for two weeks.) While Bacon was at Jamestown with his small army, eight colonists were killed on the frontier in Henrico County (where he marched from) due to a lack of manpower on the frontier.^[5]

On July 30, 1676, Bacon and his army issued the "Declaration of the People of Virginia." The declaration criticized Berkeley's administration in detail. It accused him of levying unfair taxes, appointing friends to high positions, and failing to protect frontier settlers from Indian attack.

Beginning to move against the Indians, Bacon and his men attacked the innocent (and friendly) Pamunkey. The tribe had remained allies of the English throughout other Indian raids. They were supplying warriors to aid the English when Bacon took power.

After months of conflict, Bacon's forces, numbering 300-500 men, moved to Jamestown. They burned the colonial capital to the ground on September 19, 1676. Outnumbered, Berkeley retreated across the river.^[6] Before an English naval squadron could arrive to aid Berkeley and his forces, Bacon died from dysentery on October 26, 1676.^{[7] [8]} John Ingram took over leadership of the rebellion, but many followers drifted away. The Rebellion didn't last long after that. Berkeley launched a series of successful amphibious attacks across the Chesapeake Bay and defeated the rebels. His forces defeated the small pockets of insurgents spread across the Tidewater. Thomas Grantham, a Captain of a ship cruising the York River, used cunning and force to disarm the rebels. He tricked his way into the garrison of the rebellion, and promised to pardon everyone involved once they got back onto the ship. However, once they were safely ensconced in the hold, he trained the ship's guns on them, and disarmed the rebellion. Through various other tactics, the other rebel garrisons were likewise overcome.^[9]

The 70-year-old governor Berkeley returned to the burned capital and a looted home at the end of January 1677.^[10] His wife described Green Spring in a letter to her cousin:

"It looked like one of those the boys pull down at Shrovetide, & was almost as much to repair as if it had been new to build, and no sign that ever there had been a fence around it..."^[11]

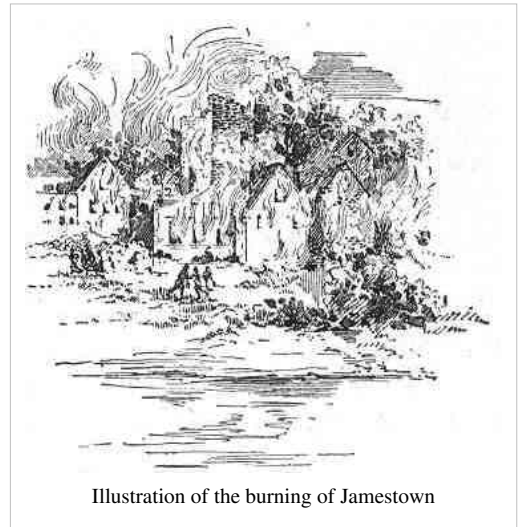


Illustration of the burning of Jamestown

Effects

Governor Berkeley returned to power. He seized the property of several rebels for the colony and executed 23 men by hanging,^[12] including the then-governor of Virginia, William Drummond.^[13] After an investigative committee returned its report to King Charles II, Berkeley was relieved of the governorship, and recalled to England.

Charles II was reported to have commented, "That old fool has put to death more people in that naked country than I did here for the murder of my father."^[14] No record of the king's comments have been found; the origin of the story appears to have been colonial myth that arose at least 30 years after the events.^[15]

Indentured servants both black and white joined the frontier rebellion. Seeing them united in a cause alarmed the ruling class. Historians believe the rebellion hastened the hardening of racial lines associated with slavery, as a way for planters and the colony to control some of the poor.^[16]

Footnotes

- [1] "Bacon's Rebellion" (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1p274.html>), *Africans in America, Part 1*, PBS, accessed 25 Mar 2009
- [2] "Green Spring Plantation" (<http://www.nps.gov/jame/historyculture/green-spring-plantation.htm>). *Historic Jamestowne, National Park Service*. . Retrieved 2008-25-30.
- [3] John Berry, Francis Moryson, and Herbert Jefferys, "A True Narrative of the Rise, Progress and Cessation of the Late Rebellion in Virginia, Most Humbly an Impartially Recorded by His Majesties Commissioners, Appointed to inquire into the Affairs of the Said Colony", Ed. by Charles Andrews, in *Narrative of the Insurrections 1675 to 1690*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), pp. 111-113.
- [4] *The literatures of colonial America*. Blackwell Publishing. 2001. pp. 225. ISBN 9780631211259.
- [5] John Berry, Francis Moryson, and Herbert Jefferys, "A True Narrative of the Rise, Progress and Cessation of the Late Rebellion in Virginia, Most Humbly an Impartially Recorded by His Majesties Commissioners, Appointed to inquire into the Affairs of the Said Colony." Ed. by Charles Andrews, in *Narrative of the Insurrections 1675 to 1690*, (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1915), 116.
- [6] *A history of the United States*. Macmillan. 1908. pp. 88.
- [7] Bragdon Kathleen J., *The Columbia Guide to American Indians of the Northeast*, Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 112.
- [8] *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675-1690*, ed. Charles McLean Andrews, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915, p. 139.
- [9] Zinn, Howard (1997). [www.thenewpress.com *A People's History Of The United States*]. New York, NY: The New York Press. pp. 281. ISBN 1-56584-724-5. www.thenewpress.com.
- [10] "Green Spring Plantation" (<http://www.nps.gov/jame/historyculture/green-spring-plantation.htm>). *Historic Jamestowne*. . Retrieved 2008-25-30.
- [11] Waldrup, Carole Chandler, *Colonial Women: 23 Europeans Who Helped Build a Nation*, McFarland, 1999, p. 86.
- [12] Geiter, Mary K., William Arthur Speck, *Colonial America: From Jamestown to Yorktown*, Macmillan, 2002, p. 63
- [13] Tyler, Lyon G., *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography*, Lewis historical publishing company, 1915, Vol. I p. 226
- [14] Fiske, John, *Old Virginia and Her Neighbours*, Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1902, p. 110,
- [15] Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel*, p. 139
- [16] Cooper, William J, *Liberty and Slavery: Southern Politics to 1860*, Univ of South Carolina Press, 2001, p. 9.

Further reading

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Article Sources and Contributors

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