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Bacon's Rebellion: America's First Armed Insurrection

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In a confrontation at the Statehouse in Jamestown, Nathaniel Bacon (center) demanded that Gov. William Berkeley (on steps) give him a military commission that would authorize him to attack Native Americans on the frontier. COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Bacon's Rebellion was a conflict that started like a lot of disagreements — with a drunken argument. But this short-lived uprising in 17th century [Colonial America](#) is considered to have had long-term consequences for Colonial settlements, policies toward Native Americans and concepts of race in North America.

The incident took place in Colonial Virginia from 1676 to 1677, and because it was 100 years before the [American Revolution](#), Bacon's Rebellion was once posited as a sort of precursor to overthrowing tyranny. In fact, [Thomas Jefferson](#) considered rebellion leader, Nathaniel Bacon, a patriot.

But contemporary historians view Bacon's Rebellion in light of the conflict between colonists and Native Americans, as well as for the effects it had on the way ideas about race developed in the American Colonies.

Bacon was a relative newcomer to Virginia when he launched the rebellion. So how did he manage to rally enough support to spark a conflict that would change the course of history?

Nathaniel Bacon the Man



Nathaniel Bacon's likeness in stained glass at Preservation Virginia's Bacon's Castle in Surry, Virginia
COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG

Born in Suffolk, England in 1647, Bacon had been packed off to the Virginia colony by his father because he had attempted to defraud a 16-year-old neighbor, according to [James Rice](#), Walter S. Dickson professor and chair, department of history, Tufts University, who says Bacon was considered a "very unpleasant fellow."

This seems to be the general consensus about the historical figure. The [National Park Service website](#) says "Bacon was a troublemaker and schemer whose father sent him to Virginia in the hope that he would mature."

Personality notwithstanding, things got off to an auspicious start for Bacon. He arrived in Virginia in 1675, and thanks to his connections — he was related to Governor William Berkeley by marriage — Bacon received both a land grant and a seat on the Governor's Council, according to the [Virginia Museum of History & Culture](#). However, his arrival coincided with a crisis in Virginian's economic, social and political order in which

he would soon become embroiled.

Trouble in Virginia

Virginia's **tobacco planters** had experienced falling tobacco prices in a colony with economic disparity between the larger landowning planters and small planters, poor immigrants and freed slaves. Most of the locals were not involved in political life and non-landowners could not vote. In addition to these challenges to stability, Virginia colonists had varying opinions about how to manage relations with the native peoples and local tribes.

At the same time, war had erupted between the **Susquehannock Indians** and the colonists, which started with a "petty trading dispute," Rice said in "**Bacon's Rebellion in Indian Country**," a 2014 piece he wrote for Journal of American History. There were two ideas about how to respond.

Gov. Berkeley thought the best course of action would be to wage war against the Susquehannock but remain at peace with other neighboring tribes. Others, including Bacon, disagreed and felt that the conflict presented an opportunity to exterminate all the natives, period.

And it wasn't just Bacon, Rice says. Some of the area's wealthy planters also wanted to go further than the governor's plan of limited warfare. Bacon took control of an encampment of volunteer militiamen to fight the Susquehannock and other tribes.

Who were these militia? It's hard to know, according to Rice. He says there has been a myth that Bacon's rebels comprised poor Western (frontier) planters against rich Eastern planters; that it was an uprising from the bottom up. However, the socioeconomic status of the militia is difficult to pin down, and there is evidence of rich planters from the frontier, like Bacon himself and [William Byrd](#), who was one of the men who recruited him, among them.

The historiography has focused on a civil war between Virginians, and the Indians have been pushed the margins of the story, Rice says. But Bacon's Rebellion was really about fighting the Indians more than a disagreement between poor and rich colonists.



A group of Virginian rebels led by Nathaniel Bacon set fire to Jamestown in a protest against Gov. William Berkeley. Many of the colonists were unhappy with Berkeley's failure to protect them from Native American attacks and burned Jamestown to the ground.

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Bacon's Stance

What is known for sure is that in August 1676, Bacon issued a "[Declaration of Grievances](#)." In it, he took opposition to Berkeley's imposition of unjust taxes, favoritism and failure to

properly promote trade. The grievances also noted the governor's inability to protect colonists from attacks by Indians, **specifically**:

For having, when the army of English was just upon the track of those Indians, who now in all places burn, spoil, murder and when we might with ease have destroyed them who then were in open hostility, for then having expressly countermanded and sent back our army by passing his word for the peaceable demeanor of the said Indians, who immediately prosecuted their evil intentions, committing horrid murders and robberies in all places, being protected by the said engagement and word past of him the said Sir William Berkeley, having ruined and laid desolate a great part of His Majesty's country, and have now drawn themselves into such obscure and remote places and are by their success so emboldened and confirmed by their confederacy so strengthened that the cries of blood are in all places, and the terror and consternation of the people so great, are now become not only difficult but a very formidable enemy who might at first with ease have been destroyed.

Bacon and his militia began to raid, loot and kill, despite Berkeley's refusal to recognize his vigilante group. Once the rebellion got going, it settled into a sort of rhythm, according to Rice. Bacon led his militia against both the Pamunkey and Occaneechee Indians. When

threatened by the governor, he turned back and trained his guns on the governor. This happened several times.

"There was a lot of back and forth," says Rice. "It went on like that for months." In September, the militia captured Jamestown and burned much of it to the ground.

But then suddenly, Bacon died — not in battle, but of sickness — possibly typhus, on Oct. 26, 1676. His body was buried in a secret location to keep the governor from putting it on display, according to Rice.

But Bacon's Rebellion didn't die with him.

"The underlying reasons for the rebellion didn't just disappear because he did," says Rice. However, at that point, the militia, for the most part, stopped fighting the Indians and the conflict became more of a civil war. The Berkeley loyalists were able to achieve final victory by controlling the waterways just a few days before a thousand Redcoats arrived by ship.

It's in these later stages that the majority of the rebel militia was made up of poor planters and enslaved Africans, explains Rice. They had the most to lose if captured and the most to gain if they won.

The Aftermath of Bacon's Rebellion

"Some of the basic issues that had been in play during the rebellion weren't really resolved," says Rice. One question was where unfree labor would come from. The General Assembly did pass laws that made it easier to enslave the native Indians, but the more general question of conquest of the Indians was left up in the air. And a division persisted between more of a "genocidal vision" and the governor's desire to remove native peoples in a slower way.

Some scholars have explored the ways Bacon's Rebellion shifted overall notions of race in the colonies. Bacon **built his militia** with both white and Black indentured servants, and enslaved Black people who joined in exchange for freedom. The power struggle was between Bacon and his rebellion on one side and wealthy planters on the other.

In an **interview with PBS**, historian Ira Berlin explained that before the rebellion, distinctions were made between Blacks and whites, but their lives could be relatively similar. For example, some people of African descent were landowners, while some people of European descent were indentured servants.

After the Rebellion, wealthy white planters were alarmed. To protect their status, they shifted their reliance on indentured servants to favor **more Black slaves**. The rebellion eventually led to the consolidation of the planter class.

As for the relationship between the colonists and the Indians, after England's Glorious Revolution led to a change of power in 1689, new Colonial leaders' ideas about how to deal with native peoples aligned more with those of Bacon and his followers — that is they become more aggressive.

Now That's Interesting

Nathaniel Bacon died of the "bloodie flux" and "lousey disease," inspiring the [17th century jingle](#), "Bacon is Dead I am sorry at my hart That lice and flux should take the hangman's part."

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