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# COLONIAL AMERICA

A Very Short Introduction

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In 1675 war erupted between the settlers on the Potomac and the Susquehannocks, an Iroquoian-speaking people who dwelled to their north. The settlers demanded permission from the governor

to exterminate all the natives on the frontier, no matter how peaceable. Used to governing with a high hand, Berkeley refused to concede his command over Indian policy to frontier leaders. He preferred a defensive strategy that built an expensive system of new forts, which outraged settlers as a waste of money and which added to their taxes while further enriching the governor and his cronies with construction contracts.

The disgruntled Virginians turned to an ambitious and charismatic newcomer, a twenty-nine-year-old gentleman named Nathaniel Bacon. To popular acclaim, Bacon led indiscriminate attacks on the Indians in open defiance of the governor. Because friendly Algonkians were closer and easier to catch, they died in greater numbers than did the more elusive Susquehannocks. Declared a traitor by Berkeley in early 1676, Bacon marched his armed followers to Jamestown to attack the governor.

In part, "Bacon's Rebellion" represented a division within the planter elite, a split between a cabal allied with the royal governor and a rival set of ambitious but frustrated planters who resented their relative lack of patronage from Berkeley. But in order to prevail, the rebel leaders needed to recruit armed support among the common people by pledging redress for their grievances. Bacon promised immediate freedom to servants who deserted Berkeley's supporters to join the rebellion. He also encouraged the poor to plunder the plantations of Berkeley's friends, and Bacon implied that he would lower taxes and provide better lands to the freedmen.

In September 1676, Bacon's men drove the governor and his supporters out of Jamestown and across Chesapeake Bay to refuge on the Eastern Shore. To discourage their return, Bacon burned Jamestown to the ground. A month later, however, Bacon suddenly died of dysentery, leaving his movement leaderless and divided. Returning to the Western Shore, Berkeley routed the rebels and

then hung twenty-three of them. The violence disturbed the king, who blamed Berkeley for disrupting the tobacco trade that generated so much Crown revenue. The king sent a small army to restore order and to sack Berkeley, who returned to England in disgrace.

In Bacon's Rebellion and the Crown intervention, the great planters received a double scare; internal rebellion had been bad enough, but external interference was worse. Fearing a future assertion of Crown power, the great planters felt compelled to appease the common planters. The assembly dramatically reduced the poll tax, the most burdensome levy borne by the poor planter. At the turn of the century, cross-class relations also improved as European demand increased the price of tobacco and, thus, the income of all planters. The assemblymen also embraced Bacon's policy of aggressive westward expansion to provide farms for the growing population of common planters. To maintain their political ascendancy, the great planters needed to lead, rather than oppose, wars against the Indians. Frontier wars led poor whites to see a better future in the dispossession of Indians rather than in rebellion against their planter elite.

Relations between the common whites and the great planters also improved as the numbers of indentured servants dwindled. English emigration to the Chesapeake declined from 18,000 during the 1660s to 13,000 during the 1680s. Economic growth in England pushed up real wages at the same time that bad economic news from the Chesapeake discouraged potential emigrants. Better able to feed, clothe, and house themselves in England, more poor folk decided to stay home. During the 1680s and 1690s, those who did emigrate preferred other, newer colonies—Jamaica, Carolina, and Pennsylvania—that offered the sort of frontier opportunities that had dissipated in the Chesapeake.

As English servants became scarcer and more expensive, African slaves became a better investment for the Chesapeake planters.

It also helped that slave traders began to visit the Chesapeake in swelling numbers, increasing the supply to meet the growing demand. The slave numbers surged from a mere 300 in 1650 to 13,000 by 1700, when Africans comprised 13 percent of the Chesapeake population. During the early eighteenth century, their numbers and proportion continued to grow, reaching 150,000 people (40 percent of the total) by 1750.

The planters shifted from servants to slaves for economic reasons, but that change incidentally improved their security against another rebellion by angry freedmen. During the 1670s, a host of new freedmen had entered a society of diminishing opportunity. Frustrated and armed, they had rebelled in 1676. Thereafter, fewer servants meant fewer new freedmen who might become frustrated and rebel. Bacon's Rebellion did not cause the switch from servants to slaves, but that shift did diminish the motives for poor white rebellion. Instead, the great planters increasingly dreaded an uprising by their slaves. To intimidate and guard the slaves, the masters needed a militia drawn from the common farmers. No longer a threat to the social order, the common whites instead defended it against slave rebellion.