

Nathaniel Bacon's – Manifesto

Bacon's Rebellion and Its Aftermath

I. The Baconite Grievances (1677)

Angry former servants, impoverished and resentful, crowded into the untamed Virginia backcountry as the seventeenth century wore on. Governor William Berkeley's unwillingness to protect the hardscrabble planters on the frontier against Indian butcheries gave rise to ugly rumors of graft and helped spark a rebellion led by his wife's kinsman, the well-born Nathaniel Bacon. After the uprising had collapsed, a royal commission sent out from England prepared the following report, which was not friendly to Berkeley. What was the governor's alleged shortcomings? Did they justify Bacon's defiance of his authority?

The unsatisfied people, finding themselves still liable to the Indian cruelties, and the cries of their wives and children growing grievous and intolerable to them, gave out in speeches that they were resolved to plant tobacco rather than pay the tax for maintaining of forts, and that the erecting of them was a great grievance, juggle, and cheat, and of no more use or service to them than another plantation with men at it, and that it was merely a design of the [tidewater] grandees to engross [monopolized] all their tobacco into their own lands.

Thus the sense of this oppression and the dread of a common approaching calamity made the giddy-headed multitude mad, and precipitated them upon that rash overture of running out upon the Indians themselves, at their own voluntary charge and hazard of their lives and fortunes. Only they first by petition humbly craved leave or commission to be led by any commander or commanders as the Governor should please to appoint over them to be their chieftain or general. But instead of granting this petition, the Governor by proclamation, under great penalty, forbade the like petitioning for the future.

This made the people jealous that the Governor for the lucre of the beaver and otter trade, etc., with the Indians, rather sought to protect the Indians than them, since after public proclamation prohibiting all trade with the Indians (they complain), he privately gave commission to some of his friends to truck with the, and that those persons furnished the Indians with powder, shot, etc., so that they were better provided than His Majesty's subjects.

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William Berkley's Response to Bacon's Rebellion

Sir William Berkeley, a polished Oxford graduate, courtier, and playwright, was appointed governor of Virginia in 1642, when only thirty-six years of age. Conciliatory, energetic, and courageous, he served well in his early years as both administrator and military leader. He cultivated flax, cotton, rice, and silk on his own lands, and in one year sent a gift of three hundred pounds of silk to the king. In response to specific questions from London, he prepared the able report from which the following extract is taken. From what economic and social handicaps did Virginia suffer? Which one was the most burdensome? What is significantly revealed of Berkeley's character and outlook?

12. What commodities are there of the production, growth, and manufacture of your plantation [colony]: and particularly, what materials are there already growing, or may be produced for shipping in the same?

Answer: Commodities of the growth of our country we never had any but tobacco, which in this yet is considerable, that it yields His Majesty a great revenue. But of late we have begun to make silk, and so many mulberry trees are planted, and planting, that if we had skillful men from Naples or Sicily to teach us the art of making it perfectly, in less than half an age [generation] we should make as much silk in an year as England did yearly expend three score years since. But now we hear it is grown to a greater excess, and more common and vulgar usage. Now, for shipping, we have admirable masts and very good oaks; but for iron ore I dare not say there is sufficient to keep one iron mill going for seven years.

15. What number of planters, servants, and slaves and how many parishes are there in your plantation?

Answer: We suppose, and I am very sure we do not much miscount, that there is in Virginia above forty thousand persons, men, women, and children, and of which there are two thousand black slaves, six thousand Christian servants [indentured] for a short time. The rest are born in the country or have come in to settle and seat, in bettering their condition in a growing country.

16. What number of English, Scots, or Irish have for these seven years last past come yearly to plant and inhabit within your government; as also what blacks or slaves have been brought in within the said time?

Answer: Yearly, we suppose there comes in, of servants, about fifteen hundred, of which most are English, few Scotch, and fewer Irish, and not above two or three ships of Negroes in seven years.

17. What number of people have yearly died, within your plantation and government, for these seven years last past, both whites and blacks?

Answer: All new plantations are, for an age or two, unhealthy, till they are thoroughly cleared of wood. But unless we had a particular register office for the denoting of all that died, I cannot give a particular answer to this query. Only this I can say, that there is not often unseasoned hands (as we term them) that due now, whereas heretofore not one of five escaped the first year.

23. What course is taken about the instructing of the people, which your government, in the Christian religion; and what provision is there made for the paying of your ministry?

Answer: The same course that is taken in England out of towns: every man, according to his ability, instructing his children. We have forty-eight parishes, and our ministers are well paid, and by my consent should be better if they would pray oftener and preach less. But of all other commodities, so of this, the worst are sent us and we had few that we could boast of, since the persecution in Cromwell's tyranny drove divers worthy men hither. But, I thank God, there are no free schools no printing, and I hope we shall not have these
for a hundred years