

Bacon, Nathaniel (c. 1647-26 Oct. 1676), leader of colonial rebellion, was born in Suffolk County, England, the son of Thomas Bacon, a landed proprietor, and Elizabeth Brooke. His tutor, John Ray, with whom he shared a European grand tour, described him as a young gentleman of "very good parts, and a quick wit," but "impatient of labour, and indeed his temper will not admit long study." A dark side was always present in Bacon's background, as is clear from the fact that when he married Elizabeth Duke, daughter of Sir Edward Duke of Benhall, that gentleman was so angered that he disinherited his daughter and never spoke to her again. Bacon and his wife would have one child. After Bacon became involved in a scheme to defraud a neighboring youth, his father packed him off on a tobacco ship to Virginia where his cousin, Nathaniel Bacon, Sr., served as one of the king's councilors of state.

Not long after his arrival in Virginia in the summer of 1674, Bacon was accorded, on 3 March 1675, the extraordinary honor of being placed on the governor's council, the upper house of the Virginia General Assembly, which consisted of the royal governor, the Council, and the House of Burgesses. The governor, [Sir William Berkeley](#), also was Bacon's cousin, by marriage, through Frances Culpeper, the governor's wife. Virginia in the seventeenth century was a raw, distant, troubled place little resembling the stable eighteenth-century plantation society familiar to most Americans. After having survived two massive Indian uprisings (in 1622 and 1644) that had decimated their numbers, and after surviving diseases that killed many during the "seasoning" process immediately after arrival, the remaining English colonists coexisted in an uneasy peace with Virginia's Indian tribes, some friendly and subordinate, others hostile and independent, who lived in proximity to the scattered colonial habitations.

When Indian troubles again erupted in 1675, Bacon, who had acquired a plantation on the "Curles" of the James River, found himself the favorite of those who wished to take precipitous action against what they perceived to be "the Indian enemy," lumping all Indians in a hostility that existed only in their imagination. They accused Governor Berkeley of coddling and favoring the Indians as well as profiting from the Indian trade, all because he had the job of licensing Indian traders (among them Bacon), a function that his critics easily elevated to the wild charge that he was selling out the colony for the sake of filthy lucre. Both Governor Berkeley and young Bacon had attended the English Inns of Court, where lawyers were trained, but they had diametrically opposed points of view on the rights of the Indians who lived in association with, or on the periphery of, the colony. For Bacon, no Indian had any rights that an Englishman need respect; indeed, one of his articles of indictment against Berkeley was that he sought to protect his "darling" Indians against the wrath of the colonists. Berkeley, for his part, sought to emphasize the distinction between the friendly Indians who lived under English control, and were allies or subjects of the English, and the "foreign" or enemy Indians, sometimes from as far away as Iroquoia, who occasionally committed depredations on English outsettlements in the course of their raids on other Indian tribes.

The resulting conflict, known as Bacon's Rebellion, became a see-saw battle between the governor and the rebel in which first one side and then the other achieved the upper hand. Following a disastrous assault by Maryland and northern Virginia militia against a body of peaceful Susquehannocks (mistakenly thought to be guilty of depredations upon an English plantation), the enraged Susquehannocks attacked a number of outlying plantations, killing, among others, one of Bacon's employees. Bacon and his followers marched to the territory of the Occaneechi in southwestern Virginia, ostensibly to search for the Susquehannocks. The friendly Occaneechi welcomed him and promised to attack the Susquehannocks themselves, which in fact they did with great success, whereupon they were treacherously set upon by Bacon's men in an attempt to seize the booty the Occaneechi had taken from the Susquehannocks. Even though Bacon had killed only friendly Indians on this expedition (and, indeed, throughout the entire rebellion), he was received as a hero on his return. Bacon demanded a commission to go out against "the Indians." Berkeley refused. Bacon and his armed followers surrounded the legislators gathered in the June 1676 assembly and extorted, by threats to kill them all, such a commission. With the commission in hand he and his followers proceeded to march out against other friendly Indians, such as "the good Queen of Pamunkey," as the commissioners, sent by King Charles to investigate the rebellion, called her after the war, attesting to her loyalty.

On 30 July 1676, at a conference at Middle Plantation (now Williamsburg), Bacon issued his bombastic "Declaration of the People," in which he claimed to be acting in behalf of the king against the failure of Berkeley to defend the colony from the Indian threat. Because Bacon was also ransacking the estates of men loyal to the governor, he was able to recruit servants and even slaves who sought to profit from the turmoil. Berkeley was able to retake the capital, Jamestown, on 7 September, but Bacon subsequently laid siege to it and drove Berkeley's forces out; on 19 September he ordered the town to be put to the torch, an act of vandalism that even some of his supporters deplored.

While engaged in his martial activities, Bacon contracted a disease that seems to have been dysentery but which was described at the time as "the bloody flux"; as a contemporary account of the rebellion put it, the disease caused an "honest minister" to write poetically that "Bacon is dead, and I am sorry at my hart, that lice and flux should do the hangman's part." Following Bacon's death at Gloucester County, the rebellion fell apart and Berkeley regained control. Concomitantly, a thousand troops arrived from England, having been sent to put down the rebellion, thus creating additional problems for the governor, who had to find ways to house and feed the troops.

One of the most controversial figures in American colonial history, Bacon has been seen by some historians as a hero who anticipated American independence and by others as a rabble-rousing, Indian-hating frontiersman unconcerned about democracy or independence. Despite the failed and fraudulent character of his rebellion, Bacon was gradually taken up into the pantheon of revolutionary fathers, culminating in the twentieth century in the work of [Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker](#), whose *Torchbearer of the Revolution* (1940) asserts this theme. Although not all historians have accepted Wilcomb E. Washburn's interpretation in *The Governor and the Rebel* (1957), his view that Bacon did not express the revolutionary impulse of the eighteenth century has generally been accepted in textbooks.

Bibliography

The papers relating to Nathaniel Bacon and his rebellion are being edited for the Virginia Historical Society. The most important body of such materials is from the papers of Henry Coventry, principal secretary of state for the Southern Colonies, located at Longleat, the estate of the Marquis of Bath in Bath, England. Microfilm copies of this material are in the Library of Congress. Genealogical information on the complicated Bacon family relationships is laid out in Charles Hervey Townshend, "The Bacons of Virginia and Their English Ancestry," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 37 (1883): 189-91; of the eight Nathaniels that Townshend discusses, six were members of Gray's Inn. The historical interpretation of Bacon's Rebellion as a forerunner of the American Revolution was the work of Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker in his *Torchbearer of the Revolution: The Story of Bacon's Rebellion and Its Leader* (1940). Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia* (1957), categorically rejected Wertenbaker's interpretation of Bacon as a political revolutionary and Governor Sir William Berkeley as an oppressive ruler. Washburn's book includes an introductory chapter on the changing historical interpretations of the rebellion. In a separate publication Washburn considered "The Effect of Bacon's Rebellion on Government in England and Virginia," *Contributions from the Museum of History and Technology*, U.S. National Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (1962), bulletin 225, paper 17, pp. 135-52. Stephen Saunders Webb, *1676: The End of American Independence* (1984), attempted to resurrect the Wertenbaker thesis, unsuccessfully in the opinion of Washburn, as noted in his article "Stephen Saunders Webb's Interpretation of Bacon's Rebellion," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 95 (1987): 339-52.

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