

Bacon's Rebellion (1677)

A N O N Y M O U S

The justification for the insurrection in Virginia in 1676 was the failure of the House of Burgesses to properly defend frontier settlers from the Indians. Historians have long debated the validity of this explanation, some seeing instead the political ambition of Nathaniel Bacon and others' class conflict. Bacon actually succeeded in seizing control of the government and calling for a new assembly to reform the province, but he died suddenly late in the year, and the rebellion collapsed. The following account was published in London in 1677 in *Strange News from Virginia*.

Questions to Consider

- What did Bacon and his followers want?
- Why were they so intent on attacking the Indians?
- Why did the movement die with Bacon?

There is no Nation this day under the copes of Heaven can so experimentally speak the sad Effects of men of great Parts being reduc't to necessity, as England; but not to rake up the notorious misdemeanours of the dead, I shall endeavour to prevent the sad effects of so deplorable a Cause, by giving you an account of the remarkable Life and Death of this Gentleman of whom I am about to discourse. And because when a man has once ingag'd himself in an ill action, all men are ready to heap an innumerable aspersions upon him, of which he is no ways guilty, I shall be so just in the History of his Life as not to rob him of those commendations which his Birth and Acquisitions claim as due, and so kind both to Loyalty and the wholsom constituted Laws of our Kingdom, as not to smother any thing which would render him to blame.

This Gentleman who has of late beckoned the attention of all men of understanding who are any ways desirous of Novelty, [or] care what becomes of any part of

the World besides that themselves live in, had the honour to be descended of an Ancient and Honourable Family, his Name Nathanael Bacon, to which to the long known Title of Gentleman, by his long study [at] the Inns of Court he has since added that of Esquire. He was the Son of Mr. Thomas Bacon of an ancient Seat known by the denomination of Freestone-Hall in the County of Suffolk, a Gentleman of known loyalty and ability. His Father as he was able so he was willing to allow this his Son a very Gentile Competency to subsist upon, but he as it proved having a Soul too large for that allowance, could not contain himself within bounds; which his careful Father perceiving, and also that he had a mind to Travel (having seen divers parts of the World before) consented to his inclination of going to Virginia, and accomodated him with a Stock for that purpose, to the value of 1800 lb. Sterling, as I am credibly informed by a Merchant of very good wealth, who is now in this City, and had the fortune to carry him thither.

He began his Voyage thitherwards about Three years since, and lived for about a years space in that Continent in very good repute, his extraordinary parts like a Letter of recommendation rendring him acceptable in all mens company, whilst his considerable

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Concerns in that place were able to bear him out in the best of Society. These Accomplishments of mind and fortune rendred him so remarkable, that the worthy Governour of that Continent thought it requisite to take him into his Privy Council.

That Plantation which he chose to settle in is generally known by the name of Curles, situated in the upper part of James River and the time of his Revolt was not till the beginning of March, 1676. At which time the Susquo-hannan Indians (a known Enemy to that Country) having made an Insurrection, and kild divers of the English, amongst whom it was his fortune to have a Servant slain; in revenge of whose death, and other dammage(s) he received from those turbulent Susquo-hanians, without the Governour's consent he furiously took up Arms against them and was so fortunate as to put them to flight, but not content therewith; the aforesaid Governour hearing of his eager pursuit after the vanquisht Indians, sent out a select Company of Souldiers to command him to desist; but he instead of listning thereunto, persisted in his Revenge, and sent to the Governour to intreat his Commission, that he might more chearfully prosecute his design; which being denyed him by the Messenger he sent for that purpose, he notwithstanding continued to make head with his own Servants, and other English then resident in Curles against them.

In this interim the people of Henrica had returned him Burgess of their County; and he in order thereunto took his own Sloop and came down towards James Town, conducted by thirty odd Souldiers, with part of which he came ashore to Mr. Laurences House, to understand whether he might come in with safety or not, but being discovered by one Parson Clough and also it being perceived that he had lined the Rushes of the said Town with Souldiers, the Governour thereupon ordered an allarm to be beaten through the whole Town, which took so hot, that Bacon thinking himself not secure whilst he remained there within reach of their Fort immediately commanded his men aboard, and tow'd his Sloop up the River; which the Governour perceiving, ordered the Ships which lay at Sandy-point to pursue and take him; and they by the industry of their Commanders succeeded so well in the attempt, that they presently stopt his passage; so that Mr. Bacon finding himself pursued both before and behind, after some capitulations, quietly surrendred himself Prisoner to the Governours Commissioners, to the great satisfaction of all his Friends; which action of his was so obliging to the Governour, that he granted him his liberty immediately upon Paroll, without confining him either to Prison or Chamber, and the next day, after some private discourse passed betwixt the Governour, the Privy Council, and himself, he was amply restored to all his former Honours and Dignities, and a Commission

partly promised him to be General against the Indian Army. But upon further enquiry into his Affairs it was not thought fit to be granted him; whereat his ambitious mind seem'd mightily to be displeas'd; insomuch that he gave out, that it was his intention to sell his whole concerns in Virginia, and to go with his whole Family to live either in Merry-land or the South, because he would avoid (as he said) the scandal of being accounted a factious person there.

But this resolution it seems was but a pretence, for afterwards he headed the same Runnagado English that he formerly found ready to undertake and go sharers with him in any of his Rebellions, and adding to them the assistance of his own Slaves and Servants, headed them so far till they toucht at the Occonegies Town, where he was treated very civilly, and by the Inhabitants informed where some of the Susquohanno's were inforted, whom presently he assails, and after he had vanquished them, slew about seventy of them in their Fort. But as he returned back to the Occoneges, he found they had fortified themselves with divers more Indians than they had at his first arrival. Wherefore he desired Hostages of them for their good behaviour, whilst he and his followers lay within command of their Fort. But those treacherous Indians grown confident by reason of their late recruit, returned him this Answer, That their Guns were the only Hostages he was like to have of them, and if he would have them he must fetch them. Which was no sooner spoke, but the Indians sallied out of the Fort and shot one of his Sentinels, whereupon he charged them so fiercely, that the Fight continued not only all that day, but the next also, till the approach of the Evening, at which time finding his men grow faint for want of Provision, he laid hold of the opportunity, being befriended by a gloomy night, and so made an honourable retreat homewards.

Howbeit we may judge what respect he had gain'd in James-Town by this subsequent transaction. When he was first brought hither it was frequently reported among the Commonalty that he was kept close Prisoner, which report caused the people of that Town, those of Charles-city, Henrico, and New-Kent Counties, being in all about the Number of eight hundred, or a thousand, to rise and march thitherwards in order to his rescue. Whereupon the Governor was forced to desire Mr. Bacon to go himself in Person, and by his open appearance quiet the people.

This being past, Mr. Bacon, about the 25th of June last, dissatisfied that he could not have a Commission granted him to go against the Indians, in the night time departed the Town unknown to any body, and about a week after got together between four and five hundred men of New-Kent County, with whom he marched to James-Town, and drew up in order before the House of

State. And there peremptorily demanded of the Governor, Council and Burgesses (there then collected) a Commission to go against the Indians, which if they should refuse to grant him, he told them that neither he nor ne're a man in his Company would depart from their Doors till he had obtained his request; whereupon to prevent farther danger in so great an exigence, the Council and Burgesses by much intreaty obtain'd him a Commission Signed by the Governor, an Act for one thousand men to be Listed under his command to go against the Indians, to whom the same pay was to be granted as was allowed to them who went against the Fort. But Bacon was not satisfied with this, but afterwards earnestly importuned, and at length obtained of the House, to pass an Act of Indemnity to all Persons who had sided with him, and also Letters of recommendations from the Governor to his Majesty in his behalf; and moreover caused Collonel Claybourn and his Son Captain Claybourn, Lieutenant Collonel West, and Lieutenant Collonel Hill, and many others, to be degraded for ever bearing any Office, whether it were Military or Civil.

Having obtained these large Civilities of the Governor, &c. one would have thought that if the Principles of honesty would not have obliged him to peace and loyalty, those of gratitude should. But, alas, when men have been once flusht or entred with Vice, how hard is it for them to leave it, especially it tends towards ambition or greatness, which is the general lust of a large Soul, and the common error of vast parts, which fix their Eyes so upon the lure of greatness, that they have no time left them to consider by what indirect and unlawful means they must (if ever) attain it.

This certainly was Mr. Bacon's Crime, who after he had once lanced into Rebellion, nay, and upon submission had been pardoned for it, and also restored, as if he had committed no such hainous offence, to his former honour and dignities (which were considerable enough to content any reasonable mind) yet for all this he could not forbear wading into his former misdemeanors, and continued his opposition against that prudent and established Government, ordered by his Majesty of Great Brittain to be duely observed in that Continent.

In fine, he continued (I cannot say properly in the Fields, but) in the Woods with a considerable Army all last Summer, and maintain'd several Brushes with the

Governors Party. Sometime routing them, and burning all before him, to the great damage of many of his Majesties loyal Subjects there resident; sometimes he and his Rebels were beaten by the Governor, &c. and forc't to run for shelter amongst the Woods and Swomps. In which lamentable condition that unhappy Contingent has remain'd for the space of almost a Twelve-month, every one therein that were able being forc't to take up Arms for security of their own lives, and no one reckoning their Goods, Wives, or Children to be their own, since they were so dangerously expos'd to the doubtful Accidents of an uncertain War.

But the indulgent Heavens, who are alone able to compute what measure of punishments are adequate or fit for the sins or transgressions of a Nation, has in its great mercy thought fit to put a stop, at least, if not a total period and conclusion to these Virginian troubles, by the death of this Nat. Bacon, the great Molestor of the quiet of that miserable Nation; so that now we who are here in England, and have any Relations or Correspondence with any of the Inhabitants of that Continent, may by the arrival of the next Ships from that Coast expect to hear that they are freed from all their dangers, quitted of all their fears, and in great hopes and expectation to live quietly under their own Vines, and enjoy the benefit of their commendable labours.

I know it is by some reported that this Mr. Bacon was a very hard drinker, and that he dyed by imbibing, or taking in too much Brandy. But I am informed by those who are Persons of undoubted Reputation, and had the happiness to see the same Letter which gave his Majesty an account of his death, that there was no such thing therein mentioned. He was certainly a Person imbued with great natural parts, which notwithstanding his juvenile extravagances he had adorned with many elaborate acquisitions, and by the help of learning and study knew how to manage them to a Miracle, it being the general vogue of all that knew him, that he usually spoke as much sense in as few words, and delivered that sense as opportunely as any they ever kept company withal. Wherefore as I am my self a Lover of Ingenuity, though an abhorrer of disturbance or Rebellion, I think fit since Providence was pleased to let him dye a Natural death in his Bed, not to asperse him with saying he kill'd himself with drinking.