

What was Nat Bacon's Rebellion?

As the New England colonists learned at great cost from Metacomb, the "Indian problem" was not a simple matter. Massed confrontations were risky, so new tactics emerged. The colonists found an effective measure in the "scalp bounty," a Dutch innovation in which a fee was paid for Indian scalps. The common conception is of Indians as scalp takers, but it was the colonists who adopted the tactic as a means of Indian control, and it even became a profitable enterprise. In the Bay Colony in 1703, a scalp brought 12 pounds sterling, a price inflated to 100 pounds by 1722. Even in Pennsylvania, the most tolerant and progressive of the colonies, scalps brought a handsome price, and Benjamin Franklin, in a move to avoid a rebellion by the backwoods Paxton Boys in 1763, pushed the Pennsylvania legislature to approve a bounty on Indian scalps.

In 1676, while New England struggled against King Philip, the Indian issue boiled over into something different in Virginia. This overlooked episode, known as Nat Bacon's Rebellion, can be seen as another in a series of wrongs committed against the Indians. But it was also a demonstration of a new anti-authority sentiment in America, a foreshadowing of the Revolutionary spirit.

A cousin to the scientist and philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, Nathaniel Bacon was a young planter and an up-and-coming member of Virginia's ruling elite. At the time, Virginians were fighting sporadic battles with the Susquehannock, the result of treaties broken by the English. When his plantation overseer was killed, Bacon grew angry at what he thought was the docile Indian policy of Virginia's Governor Berkeley. Without the governor's permission, Bacon raised a militia force of 500 men and vented his rage on the Indians. When his little army attacked the peaceful Occaneechee (instead of the more warlike Susquehannock), Bacon became an immediate local hero, especially among the Indian-hating frontier colonists who favored pushing farther west. In his

Declaration of the People, written exactly 100 years before another Virginian wrote another declaration, Bacon criticized the Berkeley administration for levying unfair taxes, placing favorites in high positions, and not protecting the western farmers from Indians. Governor Berkeley branded Bacon a traitor, but granted some of the reforms he demanded, and Bacon was later pardoned, having apologized.

When Bacon felt that the governor had reneged on his pledge to pursue the Indians, the fiery rebel focused his anger toward the colonial government. In the first popular rebellion in colonial America, Bacon led troops of lower-class planters, servants, and some free and slave blacks to Jamestown and burned it. Faced with a true rebellion, Governor Berkeley fled. An English naval squadron was sent to capture Bacon, who died of dysentery before they reached him, and the remnants of his backwoods army were rounded up, with two dozen of them ending up on the gallows.

Nat Bacon's Rebellion was the first of almost twenty minor uprisings against colonial governments, including the Paxton uprising in Pennsylvania mentioned above, Leisler's Rebellion in New York in 1689, and the Regulator Rebellion in South Carolina in 1771. All of these were revolts against the colonial "haves," those wealthy colonists who owned the bulk of America's land and controlled its prosperity, and the "have-nots," often backwoodsmen or lower-class farmers struggling for survival. By adding these bloody outbreaks of popular resentment against the colonial "establishment" to the numerous riots and slave revolts of the pre-Revolutionary period, the picture of colonial gentility is destroyed. Instead we get a clouded image of unsettled grievances waiting to boil over.