

Bacon's Rebellion and Respect

- **Compelling Question**
 - How can being respectful of others help advance freedom?
- **Virtue:** Respect
- **Definition** – Respect is civility flowing from personal humility.
- **Lesson Overview**
 - In this lesson, students will learn about how Nathaniel Bacon demanded respect for the rights of colonists in Virginia in the 1670s. They will learn how they too can demand respect for their own rights.
- **Objectives**
 - Students will analyze Nathaniel Bacon's demand for respect in Bacon's Rebellion.
 - Students will understand how they can be respectful of others' rights and demand respect for their own rights.
- **Background**
 - Sir William Berkeley was the royal governor of the English colony of Virginia from 1641 to 1652. During the time of the English Civil War, parliamentary forces sailed to Virginia to depose Governor Berkeley for supporting the royalist forces. He was out of power during the reign of Oliver Cromwell and restored to the governorship in 1660 when Charles II was restored to the throne. He continued to serve in office until 1677 and was recalled as a result of the tumult related to Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.

Governor Berkeley and the Virginia government instituted some unpopular policies such as revoking universal male suffrage and instituting property requirements to vote, giving land grants to fellow wealthy politicians, and preventing the colonists from moving onto Indian lands because of fear of conflict. Berkeley was especially fearful of war with the Indians because Metacom's (or King Philip's) War was raging in New England between colonists and Native Americans.

In September 1675, a trade dispute between some colonists and Indians near the Potomac River led to several deaths. Tensions escalated, and in the months that followed, colonial militia numbering in the hundreds engaged in several indiscriminate slaughters of hostile and friendly Native Americans. Meanwhile, the Native Americans launched several raids along the frontier and killed dozens. Berkeley tried to maintain order but failed, especially since his policies caused an uprising of the people led by Nathaniel Bacon. Bacon was a wealthy planter but sided with the common people against the governor in order to win greater respect for their rights. Virginians (along with other colonists) were developing a strong American identity and an autonomous, individualist spirit of liberty. They would no longer suffer government abuse of their rights.

- **Vocabulary**

- Parliamentary
- Depose
- Royalist
- Tumult
- Revoking
- Suffrage
- Militia
- Indiscriminate
- Hostile
- Autonomous
- Treacherous
- Interregnum
- Tenure
- Doled
- Negligent
- Reprisal
- Ire
- Drought
- Rebel
- Pardoned
- Commissioned
- Legislators
- Confronted
- Bidding
- Duel
- Ostensibly
- Dispossessed
- Corrupt
- Encamped
- Provisions
- Commandeered
- Siege
- Morale
- Ignominiously
- Typhus
- Dysentery
- Ringleaders
- Dispatched
- Pacify

- **Introduce Text**

- Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**

- As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
 - What challenges are you facing?
 - What fears or concerns might you have?
 - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

- **Observation Questions**

- Who was Nathaniel Bacon? What was his role in Bacon’s Rebellion?
- Why did Bacon fight against the government’s disrespect for the colonists’ rights?
- What actions did Bacon take to show the government that they could not trample on the rights of Virginians?

- **Discussion Questions**

- Discuss the following questions with your students.
 - What is the historical context of the narrative?
 - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
 - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
 - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
 - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
 - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
 - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
 - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

- **Additional Resources**

- Rice, James D. *Tales from a Revolution: Bacon's Rebellion and the Transformation of Early America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Washburn, Wilcomb E. *The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1957.

Handout A: Bacon's Rebellion and Respect

Background

Sir William Berkeley was the royal governor of the English colony of Virginia from 1641 to 1652. During the time of the English Civil War, parliamentary forces sailed to Virginia to depose Governor Berkeley for supporting the royalist forces. He was out of power during the reign of Oliver Cromwell and restored to the governorship in 1660 when Charles II was restored to the throne. He continued to serve in office until 1677 and was recalled as a result of the tumult related to Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.

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Narrative

In the late winter of 1674, a young Englishman named Nathaniel Bacon boarded a ship bound for Virginia in the American colonies. It was a treacherous voyage that lasted months during which storms pounded the ship and made the passengers seasick. The wealthy young gentleman in his twenties had a fortune of some 1,800 English pounds. He was a smart man, having attended Cambridge University. When he finally landed in Virginia, his contacts, including the governor's wife, helped him get established. He purchased 1,200 acres of property and built a plantation near the falls of the James River near present-day Richmond and was seated on the Governor's Council. Bacon was part of the planter elite and an unlikely leader of a rebellion.

After several months in Virginia, Bacon was disturbed by what he discovered about the administration of Governor William Berkeley. He had been governor with a short interregnum for a period of more than twenty years, and the common people of Virginia thought that his lengthy tenure was corrupting him and his administration. Ordinary farmers were suffering because the value of their tobacco exports was declining rapidly, but they were paying increasing taxes. The landless also lost the right to vote when property requirements were added as a voting requirement. Governor Berkeley meanwhile doled out generous land grants for his political supporters. Finally, farmers wanted to expand onto new lands, but Berkeley feared conflict with the Native American tribes and consistently refused to allow white Virginians to go to war for land. Berkeley seemed negligent of his duties to protect the colonists who lived on the frontier as he did nothing when Indians launched raids of reprisal for deaths they suffered at the hands of white militia in the fall of 1675.

Bacon wanted respect for the rights of the common people of Virginia and decided to take matters into his own hands. He raised an army and marched to the frontier in Virginia and North Carolina and killed several Indians. On May 3, 1676, Berkeley sought to stop him and ordered an army of 300 militia to march against Bacon. The people were upset about the governor seemingly leaving the frontier open to attack especially with wars with Native Americans raging in the northern colonies. They feared that Berkeley was "a greater friend to the Indians than to the English." Moreover, a planned series of forts that would significantly raise taxes aroused popular ire (especially during a drought and poor economic conditions that year). Berkeley had a negative view of ordinary Virginians, thinking them a rabble who was "poor, indebted, discontented, and armed." He declared Bacon to be a rebel and ordered new elections. The people loved Nathaniel Bacon and voted him a seat in the Virginia Assembly.

When the assembly convened on June 5, Bacon sailed to Jamestown with fifty armed followers to protect him from the governor. On June 7, Berkeley ordered Bacon arrested and locked up despite his bodyguard. Berkeley had Bacon brought forward in chains and announced, "Now I behold the greatest rebel that ever was in Virginia." Yet, a few days later, Bacon signed a written confession, was brought before the governor, and knelt down before him. Berkeley repeated the words, "God forgive you, I forgive you," three times, pardoned Bacon, and actually restored him to a seat on his council. The governor promised Bacon a commission to fight the Indians but failed to deliver it.

Bacon slipped out of the capital and gathered more than 600 men. On June 23, they marched on Jamestown and threatened the governor and legislators with pistols if they would not give Bacon a commission to defend the frontier. They chanted, "We will have it! We will have it!" while Bacon personally confronted Berkeley and screamed: "I came for a commission, and a commission I will have before I go!" Berkeley dramatically offered his breast to Bacon to fire upon: "Here! Shoot me, before God, fair mark, shoot." Berkeley said he would rather cut off his hands than do Bacon's bidding. The governor marched off, and Bacon withdrew his sword and challenged Berkeley to a duel.

With news of more Indian massacres on the frontier, Bacon led his army to confront the Native Americans and plunged back into the wilderness. While he was away, Berkeley tried to raise the militia, ostensibly to fight the Indians, but many suspected the governor wanted them to march against fellow Virginians and therefore refused to join. A month later, on July 29, 1676 Bacon marched his army back to Middle Plantation (Williamsburg) and caused the governor to flee to the Eastern Shore.

After winning several naval engagements in the Chesapeake Bay, on September 7, Berkeley sailed his fleet up to Jamestown, occupied the capital, and ordered the fort manned. That week, the dispossessed men of Bacon's army occupied the surrounding plantations of the wealthy planters and prepared for an assault on Jamestown. Bacon called on white servants and black slaves to join his army in rebellion against the corrupt governor and his wealthy supporters. On September 13, Bacon's army surrounded the capital and laid a siege in the late summer's humidity. They dug trenches and encamped in the mud and fought off lice and mosquitoes while they lived off the provisions from the commandeered from nearby plantations. Berkeley's defending army sallied out of the fort to break the siege, but it failed miserably and morale collapsed. On September 19, the governor watched helplessly from his ship on the James River as the rebel army then proceeded to torch the capital and burn it down.

A little more than a month later, Bacon ignominiously died of typhus and dysentery from the filthy conditions and his rebellion largely collapsed. The governor pardoned most of the participants but hanged a few of the ringleaders. By this time, Charles II had had enough of the disorder in Virginia. A British force of nearly 1,100 soldiers was dispatched to Virginia to restore order and arrived in mid-February. Moreover, Charles sought to pacify Virginians by removing the cause of their disturbances and ordered Berkeley to return home. The new government patrolled the frontier with greater vigor and calmed tensions with the Indians. It also lowered taxes and within a reasonable time opened up additional lands for settlement to satisfy popular wishes. Nathaniel Bacon respected the rights of his fellow Virginians, fought to ensure that colonists' rights were respected, and led a successful rebellion of fiercely independent colonists in Virginia who demanded their rights and refused to live under a corrupt government.