

Bacon's Rebellion

"...where we do well know that all our causes will be impartially heard and equally justice administered to all men," as stated by, Nathaniel Bacon. ¹ In 1676 an uprising known as Bacon's Rebellion occurred in Virginia. The immediate cause of this revolt was the dissension between the planters and the Indians. Because Sir William Berkeley, the Governor of Virginia had willingly denied support to the farmers, Bacon assumed leadership of an unauthorized expedition against the Indians. When Bacon learned that Governor Berkeley was rising a force against him, he turned away from the Indians to fight with Berkley. This had now become a serious problem for the governor. When news of this revolt had reached King Charles II, it alarmed him so that he dispatched eleven hundred troops to Virginia, recalled his governor, and appointed a commission to determine the causes of the dissatisfaction. Bacon's Rebellion is considered to be the most important event in the establishment of democracy in colonial America because the right to vote and social equality were denied to the farmers by the local government.

The right to vote is a small but crucial part of the democracy. During the first half of the 17th century the farmers on the plantations in Virginia were not able to exercise their right to vote. The only people that were able to vote during this time were the wealthy men who owned land. Overall the colonists had not been treated fairly. They had been over taxed and denied their voting rights. To them voting meant that the person they elected was the person they felt was responsible enough to motivate them and support them. Unfortunately Governor Sir William Berkeley was not living up to those standards. Berkeley did not care about the farmers. It was obvious that the only thing he cared about was making money. The event that sparked the rebellion occurred when the Indians attacked the farmers. Normally these farmers were expecting to receive help from the governor. They became irritated when the governor did not support them. Through the eyes of the freemen this was seen as a big mistake. Because the governor did not give them the support, they had to take matters into their own hands. After defeating the Indians, the unofficially elected Nathaniel Bacon took charge. When he led his men into town to form an assembly, it would be the first assembly in fifteen years. After the long struggle and hard fought battle these freemen received their gift. They were finally able to appeal a law that denied their right to vote. They were now considered legal voters.

Another important aspect of democracy is social equality. During the 17th century in Virginia, people were either wealthy or poor. The proprietors held the wealth, while the plantation workers in Virginia were poor. In addition the farmers had no rights. The freemen had to be taxed and there was nothing they could do about it. It did not hurt the rich to be taxed because they could afford it. When the lower-class are taxed, technically you are taking away at least three-quarters of their earnings. ² First, half the money they earn is going to the proprietor, then the King of England takes away the other quarter they are left with very little. The problems with a society that has a wide range of classes are certain classes have privileges that other classes do not. For example the rich people were able to communicate with Berkeley. The farmers accused the rich men of controlling the whole colony for their selfish purposes. Rumor had it that Berkeley and his wealthy friends were interested in trade with the Indians. The frontiers men could only take so much. Tired of being the poorest people in the colony, they ultimately rebelled.

Bacon and his followers fought for their right to vote and denounced social inequality in Virginia, by taking matters into their own hands. Bacon's Rebellion has become the most significant episode leading towards democracy in colonial America. The consummations of this revolt were acknowledged by the English as well as the other colonies. Besides influencing governmental procedures in Virginia, recent research suggests it might have affected English domestic and foreign policies as well. One researcher claimed that the concern for representative institutions and the anti-imperialist feeling that existed in Virginia then was

expressed not by the rebels, but by those suppressing the rebellion and that such democratic attitudes increased significantly after, rather than immediately before or during Bacon's Rebellion. 3