



Decisions and Choices

## Bacon's Rebellion: Race, Land, and Rebellion in the Colonial South

### Historical Context

In 1676, the Virginia colony erupted in a violent uprising led by Nathaniel Bacon, a young, ambitious member of the colonial elite. Known as Bacon's Rebellion, this event was sparked by mounting tensions over land, class inequality, and colonial leadership, but its long term consequences were even more profound. The rebellion marked a turning point in how colonial leaders navigated power, race, and social control. At its core, the rebellion was driven by disputes over land and Native American relations (most notably the Doeg and the Susquehannock). Many poor white settlers and former indentured servants (majority white and some Black), eager to claim land on the western frontier, were frustrated by Governor William Berkeley's refusal to launch aggressive campaigns against Native American tribes. Berkeley, aiming to preserve trade relationships and prevent full scale war, instead urged restraint. Bacon and his followers, however, accused Berkeley of protecting Native groups and favoring wealthy planters at the expense of struggling frontier settlers. They launched unauthorized attacks on Native communities and eventually burned Jamestown to the ground. Though the rebellion ultimately collapsed after Bacon's death from illness, the decisions made in its aftermath reshaped the colonial South. Alarmed by the temporary alliance between poor whites and enslaved or free Africans who had joined Bacon's cause, the Virginia elite acted decisively. The US government expanded slavery, hardened racial laws, and began to offer poor whites more legal protections and access to land. This shift marked a critical turning point in the codification of race-based slavery as the dominant labor system. Prior to the rebellion, the labor force in Virginia had relied heavily on both white indentured servants and African laborers, often with relatively fluid boundaries between them. But after 1676, colonial leaders deliberately moved away from this model. They institutionalized slavery as a permanent and hereditary condition tied to African ancestry, stripping Black people of rights while promoting whiteness as a privileged legal and social category.

### Connection to Habit

Bacon's Rebellion reveals how individual and collective decisions were shaped by specific historical circumstances and tensions over land, labor, and power in colonial Virginia. After witnessing a rare alliance between poor whites and Black laborers, colonial leaders made a pivotal choice: they hardened racial laws and promoted whiteness as a tool of division. This decision was not just about economics; it was a calculated political move to prevent future cross-racial rebellions by driving a wedge between poor whites and people of African descent. In doing so, they laid the foundation for race-based slavery and a deeply unequal society. Understanding this moment reminds us that the present is built upon decisions made in the past, influenced by fear, opportunity, and power, with consequences that shaped generations.

## Discussion Questions

- What economic, political, and social conditions made Bacon's Rebellion possible in 1676 Virginia?
- Why were poor white settlers and former indentured servants so frustrated with colonial leadership?
- How did Governor Berkeley's decisions reflect the interests of the elite planter class?
- Why did Bacon choose to direct violence toward Native American tribes, including those allied with the colony?
- Why did Virginia's governing body choose to divide poor whites and Black laborers after the rebellion rather than address broader social inequalities?
- How did the decision to expand racial slavery after Bacon's Rebellion benefit the colonial elite?
- How do the decisions made after Bacon's Rebellion still influence American society today, particularly in terms of race and class?
- How might understanding the decisions made during Bacon's Rebellion help us think differently about current discussions around inequality, labor, and protest?

## Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Copies of Historical Context (digital or printed)
- Four Different Colors of Highlighters, Markers, Pens, or Colored Pencils
- Copies of Nathaniel Bacon's Declaration of Grievances (1676)
- Copies of the Bacon's Rebellion Decisions and Choices Analysis Chart

Step 1: Historical Context [10 mins]

Provide students with a copy of the Historical Context and have them annotate (highlight or the following points using different colors):

- Economic hardship (tobacco prices, taxation, land shortages)
- Political tensions between frontier settlers and the colonial elite
- Bacon's personal ambition vs. Berkeley's leadership
- The role of Native American conflict and fears of rebellion

Step 2: Group Text Analysis [20 mins]

Divide students into small groups and give them selected grievances from Bacon's declaration (or allow them to choose 3–5). Instruct them to complete the Bacon's Rebellion Decisions and Choices Analysis Chart

Step 3: Class Discussion [10–15 mins]

Ask each group to share:

- One grievance where Bacon's rebellion was justifiable
- One grievance where Berkeley's decision was understandable given the context
- How do fear, pressure, and ambition shape the choices made by both leaders?

Step 4: Exit Ticket [5 mins]

Use the space at the bottom of the Analysis Chart and have students choose one grievance. Answer: If you were in Berkeley's position at the time, would you have made a different decision if you knew it would lead to a violent rebellion? Why or why not?

# Primary Source

## Nathaniel Bacon's Declaration of Grievances (1676)

1. For having, upon specious pretenses of public works, raised great unjust taxes upon the commonalty for the advancement of private favorites and other sinister ends, but no visible effects in any measure adequate; for not having, during this long time of his government, in any measure advanced this hopeful colony either by fortifications, towns, or trade.
2. For having abused and rendered contemptible the magistrates of justice by advancing to places of judicature scandalous and ignorant favorites.
3. For having wronged his Majesty's prerogative and interest by assuming monopoly of the beaver trade and for having in it unjust gain betrayed and sold his Majesty's country and the lives of his loyal subjects to the barbarous heathen.
4. For having protected, favored, and emboldened the Indians against his Majesty's loyal subjects, never contriving, requiring, or appointing any due or proper means of satisfaction for their many invasions, robberies, and murders committed upon us.
5. For having, when the army of English was just upon the track of those Indians, who now in all places burn, spoil, murder and when we might with ease have destroyed them who then were in open hostility, for then having expressly countermanded and sent back our army by passing his word for the peaceable demeanor of the said Indians, who immediately prosecuted their evil intentions, committing horrid murders and robberies in all places, being protected by the said engagement and word past of him the said Sir William Berkeley, having ruined and laid desolate a great part of his Majesty's country, and have now drawn themselves into such obscure and remote places and are by their success so emboldened and confirmed by their confederacy so strengthened that the cries of blood are in all places, and the terror and consternation of the people so great, are now become not only difficult but a very formidable enemy who might at first with ease have been destroyed.
6. And lately, when, upon the loud outcries of blood, the assembly had, with all care, raised and framed an army for the preventing of further mischief and safeguard of this his Majesty's colony.
7. For having, with only the privacy of some few favorites without acquainting the people, only by the alteration of a figure, forged a commission, by we know not what hand, not only without but even against the consent of the people, for the raising and effecting civil war and destruction, which being happily and without bloodshed prevented; for having the second time attempted the same, thereby calling down our forces from the defense of the frontiers and most weakly exposed places.
8. For the prevention of civil mischief and ruin amongst ourselves while the barbarous enemy in all places did invade, murder, and spoil us, his Majesty's most faithful subjects.

Of this and the aforesaid articles we accuse Sir William Berkeley as guilty of each and every one of the same, and as one who has traitorously attempted, violated, and injured his Majesty's interest here by a loss of a great part of this his colony and many of his faithful loyal subjects by him betrayed and in a barbarous and shameful manner exposed to the incursions and murder of the heathen. And we do further declare these the ensuing persons in this list to have been his wicked and pernicious councilors, confederates, aiders, and assisters against the commonalty in these our civil commotions.

Sir Henry Chichley  
Lieut. Coll. Christopher Wormeley  
William Sherwood  
John Page Clerke  
John Cluffe Clerke  
John West  
Hubert Farrell  
Thomas Reade  
Matthew Kempe  
Joseph Bridger  
John West, Hubert Farrell, Thomas Reade, Math. Kempe

William Claiburne Junior  
Thomas Hawkins  
Phillip Ludwell  
Robert Beverley  
Richard Lee  
Thomas Ballard  
William Cole  
Richard Whitacre  
Nicholas Spencer

And we do further demand that the said Sir William Berkeley with all the persons in this list be forthwith delivered up or surrender themselves within four days after the notice hereof, or otherwise we declare as follows.

## Primary Source

### Nathaniel Bacon's Declaration of Grievances (1676) cont.

That in whatsoever place, house, or ship, any of the said persons shall reside, be hid, or protected, we declare the owners, masters, or inhabitants of the said places to be confederates and traitors to the people and the estates of them is also of all the aforesaid persons to be confiscated. And this we, the commons of Virginia, do declare, desiring a firm union amongst ourselves that we may jointly and with one accord defend ourselves against the common enemy. And let not the faults of the guilty be the reproach of the innocent, or the faults or crimes of the oppressors divide and separate us who have suffered by their oppressions.

These are, therefore, in his Majesty's name, to command you forthwith to seize the persons above mentioned as traitors to the King and country and them to bring to Middle Plantation and there to secure them until further order, and, in case of opposition, if you want any further assistance you are forthwith to demand it in the name of the people in all the counties of Virginia.

Nathaniel Bacon  
General by Consent of the people.  
William Sherwood

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Using Nathaniel Bacon's Declaration of Grievances (1676) complete the decisions and choices chart.

Grievance #	What decision is Bacon criticizing?	Why might Berkeley have made that decision at the time?	What alternative choice could have been made?
1			
2			
3			
4			

5				
6				
7				
8				