

Anonymous, *Bacon's Epitaph, made by his man*, presumably written soon after Bacon's death, found in a manuscript collection known as The Burwell Collection

Bacon's Rebellion of 1676

in Robert Beverley, *The History and Present State of Virginia*, 1705

Bacon's Rebellion appears at first sight to be a simple uprising of backwoods farmers against the ruling class of rich planters in Virginia, and indeed, the author of this account labels it a "civil war," but it was more layered than that. The leaders of the rebellion, primarily Nathaniel Bacon, were well-to-do men themselves who were excluded from the powered elite led by Governor William Berkeley (among them Robert Beverley, the father of the author of this account). In addition, they were excluded from the lucrative Indian trade monopolized by Berkeley's friends. Using the very real grievances of the common farmers — falling tobacco profits, rising taxes, reduced opportunities to buy their own farms, harsh shipping regulations imposed by England, and finally, the outbreak of war between the backwoods farmers and the Susquehannock Indians (with whom Berkeley wanted to maintain trade) — Bacon led the farmers in armed rebellion. Jamestown was occupied and burned; tidewater plantations were attacked and plundered. When Bacon died suddenly of dysentery, the rebellion ended. Governor Berkeley hanged twenty-three of the rebellion's leaders.

Berkeley himself had foreseen the vulnerability of the disenfranchised farmers to a call for rebellion. "A large part of the people are so desperately poor," he wrote in 1673, "that they may reasonably be expected upon any small advantage of the enemy [the Dutch of New Netherland, who had attacked Virginia in 1667 and 1673] to revolt to them in hopes of bettering their condition by sharing the plunder of the colony with them."¹

The Occasion of this Rebellion is not easy to be discovered: But 'tis certain here were many Things that concurr'd towards it. For it cannot be imagined, that upon the Instigation of two or three Traders only, who aim'd at a Monopoly of the *Indian Trade*, as some pretend to say, the

whole Country would have fallen into so much Distraction; in which People did not only hazard their Necks by Rebellion, but endeavor'd to ruin a Governor, whom they all entirely loved, and had unanimously chosen, a Gentleman who had devoted his whole Life and Estate to the Service of the Country and against whom in Thirty Five Years Experience there had never been one single Complaint. Neither can it be supposed that upon so slight Grounds they would make Choice of a Leader they hardly knew, to oppose a Gentleman that had been so long and so deservedly the Darling of the People. So that in all Probability there was something else in the Wind, without which the Body of the Country [would have] never been engaged in that Insurrection.

Four Things may be reckon'd to have been the main Ingredients towards this intestine [internal] Commotion, *viz.*

First, The extreme low Price of Tobacco, and the ill Usage of the Planters in the Exchange of Goods for it, which the Country, with all their earnest Endeavors, could not remedy.

Secondly, The splitting the Colony into Proprieties, contrary to the original Charters; and the extravagant Taxes they were forced to undergo to relieve themselves from those Grants.

Thirdly, The heavy Restraints and Burdens laid upon their Trade by Act of Parliament in *England*.

Fourthly, The Disturbance given by the *Indians*.

Of all which I beg leave to speak in their Order.

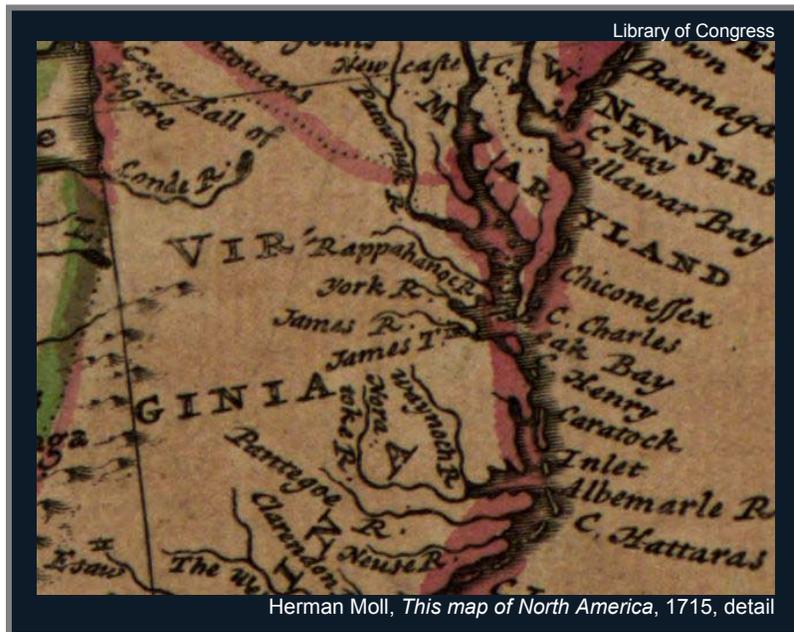
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¹ Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settlement of North America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 146-150.

First, Of the low Price of Tobacco, and the Disappointment of all Sort of Remedy, I have spoken sufficiently before.²

Secondly, Of splitting the Country into Proprieties. King *Charles* the Second, to gratify some Nobles about him, made two great Grants out of that Country [Carolina]. These Grants were not of the uncultivated Wood-Land only, but also of Plantations, which for many Years had been seated and improv'd, under the Encouragement of several Charters granted by his Royal Ancestors to that Colony. Those Grants were distinguished by the Names of the Northern and Southern Grants of *Virginia*, and the same Men were concern'd in both. They were kept dormant some Years after they were made, and in the Year 1674 begun to be put in Execution. As soon as ever the Country came to know this, they remonstrated against them; and the Assembly drew up an humble Address to his Majesty, complaining of the said Grants, as derogatory to the previous Charters and Privileges granted to that Colony, by his Majesty and his Royal Progenitors. . . .

Thirdly, Upon the Back of all these Misfortunes came out the Act of 25 *Car. II.* for better securing the Plantation Trade. By this Act several Duties were laid on the Trade from one Plantation to another. This was a new Hardship, and the rather, because the Revenue arising by this Act was not applied to the Use of the Plantation wherein it was raised: But given clear away; nay, in that Country it seem'd to be of no other Use but to burden the Trade or create a good Income to the Officers; for the Collector had Half, the Comptroller a Quarter, and the remaining Quarter was subdivided into Salaries, till it was lost. . . .



Herman Moll, *This map of North America*, 1715, detail

[**Fourthly,**] These were the Afflictions that Country labor'd under when the fourth Accident happen'd, viz. The Disturbance offer'd by the *Indians* to the Frontiers.

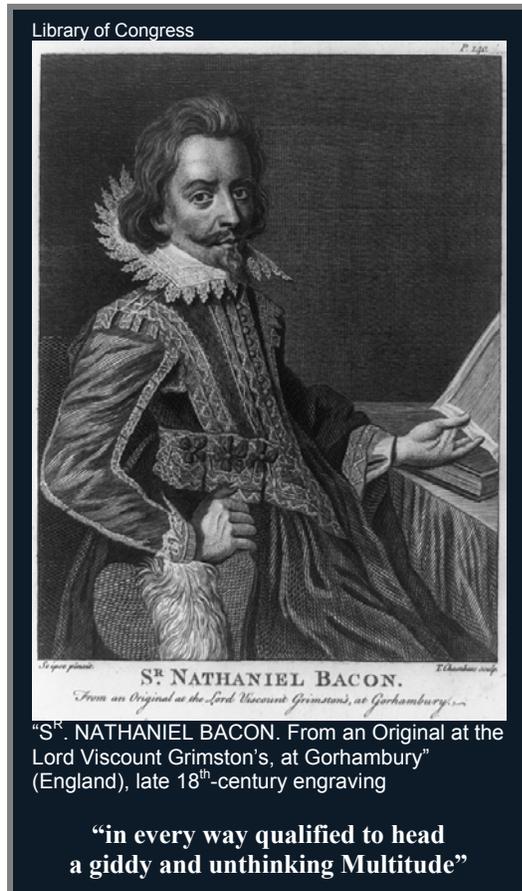
This was occasion'd [caused], First, By the *Indians* on the Head of the [Chesapeake] Bay. Secondly, By the *Indians* on their own Frontiers.

First, The *Indians* at the Head of the Bay drove a constant Trade with the *Dutch* in *Monadas*, now call'd *New-York*; and to carry on this, they used to come every Year by the Frontiers of *Virginia*, to hunt and purchase Skins and Furs of the *Indians* to the Southward. This Trade was carried on peaceably while the *Dutch* held *Monadas*; and the *Indians* used to call on the *English* in *Virginia* on their Return, to whom they would sell Part of their Furs, and with the rest go on to *Monadas*. But after the *English* came to possess that Place [in 1664] and understood the Advantages the *Virginians* made by the Trade of their *Indians*, they inspired them with such a Hatred to the Inhabitants of *Virginia* that, instead of coming

² On Jamestown in 1621: "The people began to grow numerous, Thirteen Hundred settling there that Year; which was the Occasion of making so much Tobacco, as to overstock the Market. Wherefore his Majesty, out of Pity to the Country, sent his Commands, That they should not suffer [allow] their Planters to make above One Hundred Pounds of Tobacco per Man; for the Market was so low, that he cou'd not afford to give 'em above Three Shillings the Pound for it. He advised them to turn their spare Time towards providing Corn and Stock, and towards the Making of Potash, or other Manufactures." [Beverly, *The History and Present State of Virginia*, 1705, ed. Louis B. Wright, pp. 49-50]

peaceably to trade with them, as they had done for several Years before, they afterwards never came but only to commit Robberies and Murders upon the People.

Secondly, The *Indians* upon their own Frontiers were likewise inspir'd with ill Thoughts of 'em. For their *Indian* Merchants had lost a considerable Branch of their Trade they knew not how; and apprehended the Consequences of [Governor] Sir *William Berkeley's* intended Discoveries, which were espoused by the Assembly, might take away the remaining Part of their Profit. This made them very troublesome to the Neighbor *Indians*; who on their Part, observing an unusual Uneasiness in the *English*, and being terrified by their rough Usage, immediately suspected some wicked Design against their Lives and so fled to their remoter Habitations. This confirm'd the *English* in the Belief that they had been the Murderers, till at last they provoked them to be so in earnest.



"S^r. NATHANIEL BACON. From an Original at the Lord Viscount Grimston's, at Gorchambury" (England), late 18th-century engraving

"in every way qualified to head a giddy and unthinking Multitude"

This Addition of Mischief to Minds already full of Discontent made People ready to vent all their Resentment against the poor *Indians*. There was nothing to be got by Tobacco; neither could they turn any other Manufacture to Advantage; so that most of the poorer Sort were willing to quit their unprofitable Employments, and go Voluntiers [volunteers] against the *Indians*.

At first they flock'd together tumultuously, running in Troops from one Plantation to another without a Head; till at last the seditious Humor [temperament] of Colonel *Nath. Bacon* led him to be of the Party. This Gentleman had been brought up at one of the Inns of Court in *England* and had a moderate Fortune. He was young, bold, active, of an inviting Aspect, and powerful Elocution. In a Word, he was every way qualified to head a giddy and unthinking Multitude. Before he had been three Years in the Country, he was, for his extraordinary Qualifications, made one of the Council, and in great Honor and Esteem among the People. For this reason he no sooner gave Countenance to this riotous Mob, but they all presently fixed their Eyes upon him for their General, and accordingly made their Addresses to him. As soon as he found this, he harangued them publicly. He aggravated the *Indian* Mischiefs, complaining that they were occasion'd for Want of a due Regulation of their Trade. He recounted particularly the other Grievances and Pressures they lay under; and pretended that he accepted of their Command with no other

Intention but to do them and the Country Service, in which he was willing to encounter the greatest Difficulties and Dangers. He farther assured them he would never lay down his Arms till he had revenged their Sufferings upon the *Indians* and redressed all their other Grievances.

By these Insinuations he wrought his Men into so perfect an Unanimity that they were one and all at his Devotion. He took care to exasperate them to the utmost by representing all their Misfortunes. After he had begun to muster them, he dispatch'd a Messenger to the Governor, by whom he aggravated the Mischiefs done by the *Indians*, and desired a Commission of General to go out against them. This Gentleman was in so great Esteem at that time with the Council that the Governor did not think fit to give him a flat Refusal: But sent him Word he would consult the Council and return him a farther Answer.

In the meantime, *Bacon* was expeditious in his Preparations, and having all things in Readiness, began his March depending on the Authority the People had given him. He would not lose so much Time as to stay

for his Commission; but dispatched several Messengers to the Governor to hasten it. On the other hand, the Governor, instead of a Commission, sent positive Orders to him to disperse his Men and come down in Person to him, upon Pain of being declared a Rebel.

This unexpected Order was a great Surprise to *Bacon* and not a little Trouble to his Men. However, he was resolved to prosecute his first Intentions, depending upon his Strength and Interest with the People. Nevertheless, he intended to wait upon the Governor, but not altogether defenseless. Pursuant to this Resolution, he took about Forty of his Men down with him in a Sloop to *James-Town*, where the Governor was with his Council.

Matters did not succeed there to Mr. *Bacon*'s Satisfaction; wherefore he express'd himself a little too freely. For which being suspended from the Council, he went away again in a Huff with his Sloop and Followers. The Governor fill'd a Long-Boat with Men and pursued the Sloop so close that Colonel *Bacon* removed into his Boat to make more Haste. But the Governor had sent up by Land to the Ships at *Sandy-Point*, where he was stopp'd and sent down again. Upon his Return he was kindly received by the Governor who, knowing he had gone a Step beyond his Instructions in having suspended him, was glad to admit him again of the Council; after which he hoped all things might be pacified.

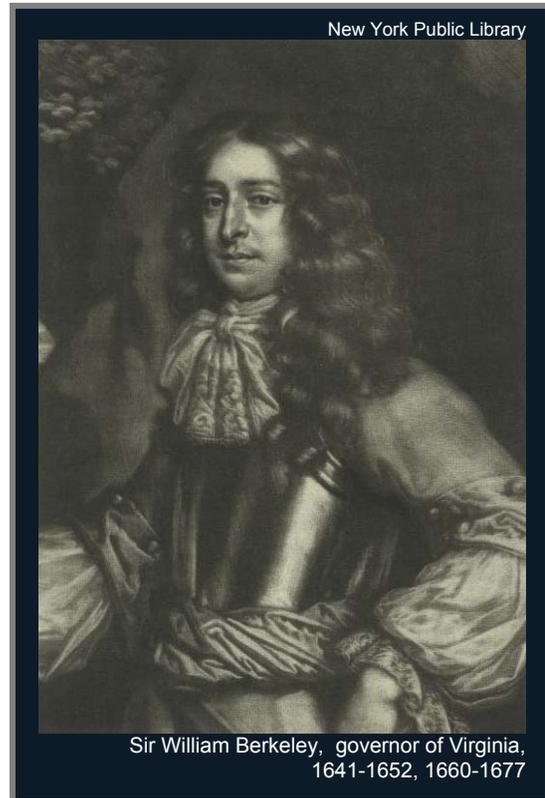
Notwithstanding this, Col. *Bacon* still insisted upon a Commission to be General of the Voluntiers and to go out against the *Indians*; from which the Governor endeavor'd to dissuade him, but to no Purpose, because he had some secret Project in View. He had the Luck to be countenanced in his Importunities by the News of fresh Murder and Robberies committed by the *Indians*.

However, not being able to accomplish his Ends by fair Means, he stole privately out of Town; and having put himself at the Head of six hundred Voluntiers, marched directly to *James-Town*, where the Assembly was then fitting. He presented himself before the Assembly and drew up his Men in Battalia before the House wherein they sat. He urged to them his Preparations and alleged that, if the Commission had not been delayed so long, the War against the *Indians* might have been finish'd.

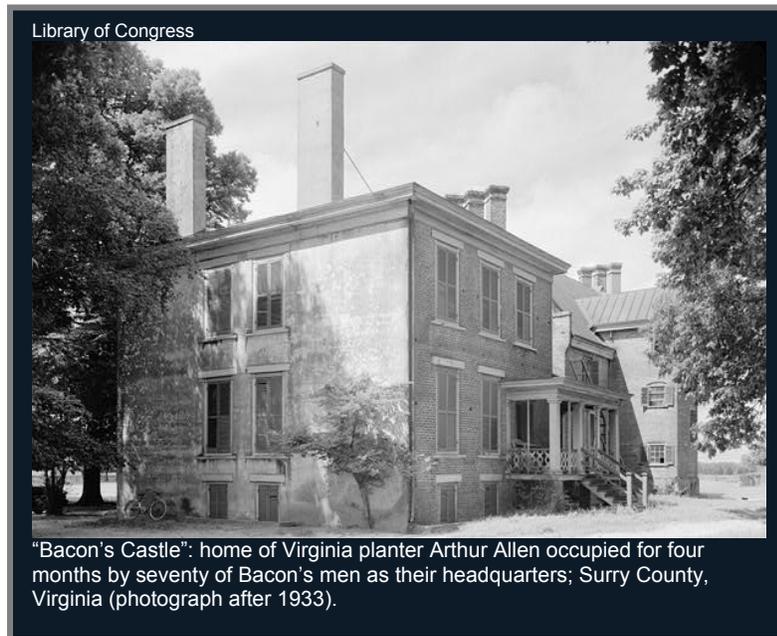
The Governor resented this insolent Usage worst of all, and now obstinately refused to grant him any thing, offering his naked Breast against the presented Arms of his Followers. But the Assembly, fearing the fatal Consequence of provoking a discontented Multitude ready arm'd, who had the Governor, Council, and Assembly entirely in their Power, address'd the Governor to grant *Bacon* his Request. They prepar'd themselves the Commission, constituting him General of the Forces of *Virginia*, and brought it to the Governor to be sign'd.

With much Reluctancy his Excellency sign'd it and thereby put the Power of War and Peace into *Bacon*'s Hands. Upon this he march'd away immediately, having gained his End, which was in effect a Power to secure a Monopoly of the *Indian* Trade to himself and his Friends.

As soon as General *Bacon* had march'd to such a convenient Distance from *James-Town*, that the Assembly thought they might deliberate with Safety, the Governor, by their Advice, issued a Proclamation of Rebellion against him, commanding his Followers to surrender him and forthwith disperse themselves. Not contented with this, he likewise gave Orders at the same time for raising the Militia of the Country against him.



The People being much exasperated, and General *Bacon* by his Address and Eloquence having gain'd an absolute Dominion over their Hearts, they unanimously resolved that not a Hair of his Head shou'd fall to the Ground, much less that they shou'd surrender him as a Rebel. Therefore they kept to their Arms, and



instead of proceeding against the *Indians*, they march'd back to *James-Town*; directing their Fury against such of their Friends and Countrymen as should dare to oppose them.

The Governor, seeing this, fled over the Bay to *Accomack*, whither he hoped the Infection of *Bacon's* Conspiracy had not reach'd. But there, instead of People's receiving him with open Arms, in Remembrance of the former Services he had done them; they began to make Terms with him for Redress of their Grievances, and for the Ease and Liberty of Trade. Thus Sir *William*, who had been almost the Idol of the People, was, by reason of the loyal Part he acted, abandon'd by

all, except some few who went over to him from the Western Shore in Sloops and Boats.³ So that it was some time before he could make head against *Bacon*: But he left him to range through the country at Discretion.

General *Bacon* at first held a Convention of such of the chief Gentlemen of the Country as would come to him, especially of those about *Middle-Plantations*,⁴ who were near at Hand. At this Convention they made a Declaration to justify his unlawful Proceedings and obliged People to take an Oath of Obedience to him as their General. Then, by their Advice, on Pretense of the Governor's Abdication, he call'd an Assembly, by Writs signed by himself, and four others of the Council.

The Oath was Word-for-Word as follows.

Whereas the Country hath raised an Army against our common Enemy the *Indians*, and the same under the Command of General *Bacon*, being upon the Point to march forth against the said common Enemy, hath been diverted, and necessitated to move to the suppressing of Forces, by evil disposed Persons raised against the said General *Bacon*, purposely to foment and stir up Civil War among us, to the Ruin of this his Majesty's Country.

And, *Whereas* it is notoriously manifest, that Sir *William Berkeley*, Knight, Governor of the Country, assisted, counselled and abetted by those evil disposed Persons aforesaid, hath not only commanded, fomented and stirr'd up the People to the said Civil War; but failing therein, hath withdrawn himself, to the great Astonishment of the People, and the Unsettlement of the Country.

And, *Whereas* the said Army, raised by the Country for the Causes aforesaid, remain full of Dissatisfaction in the Middle of the Country, expecting Attempts from the said Governor and the evil Councilors aforesaid. And since no proper Means have been found out for the Settlement of the Distractions, and preventing the horrid Outrages and Murders daily committed in many Places of the Country by the barbarous Enemy; It hath been thought fit by the said General, to call unto him all such sober and discreet Gentlemen, as the present Circumstances of the Country will admit, to the *Middle-Plantation*, to consult and advise of re-establishing the Peace of the Country. So we the said Gentlemen, being this 3d of *August*, 1676,

³ "among which one Major *Robert Beverley* was the most active and successful Commander." [completion of sentence in 2d. ed., 1722]

⁴ *Middle-Plantations*: early name for the site chosen for the town of *Williamsburg*. [Beverley, 1705; ed., Louis B. Wright, note, p. 352]

accordingly met, do advise, resolve, declare and conclude, and for our selves do swear in manner following.

First, That we will at all Times join with the said General Bacon and his Army, against the common Enemy in all Points whatsoever.

Secondly, That whereas certain Persons have lately contrived and design'd the raising Forces against the said General, and the Army under his Command, thereby to beget a Civil War; We will endeavor the Discovery and Apprehending of all and every of those evil disposed Persons, and them secure, until farther Order from the General.

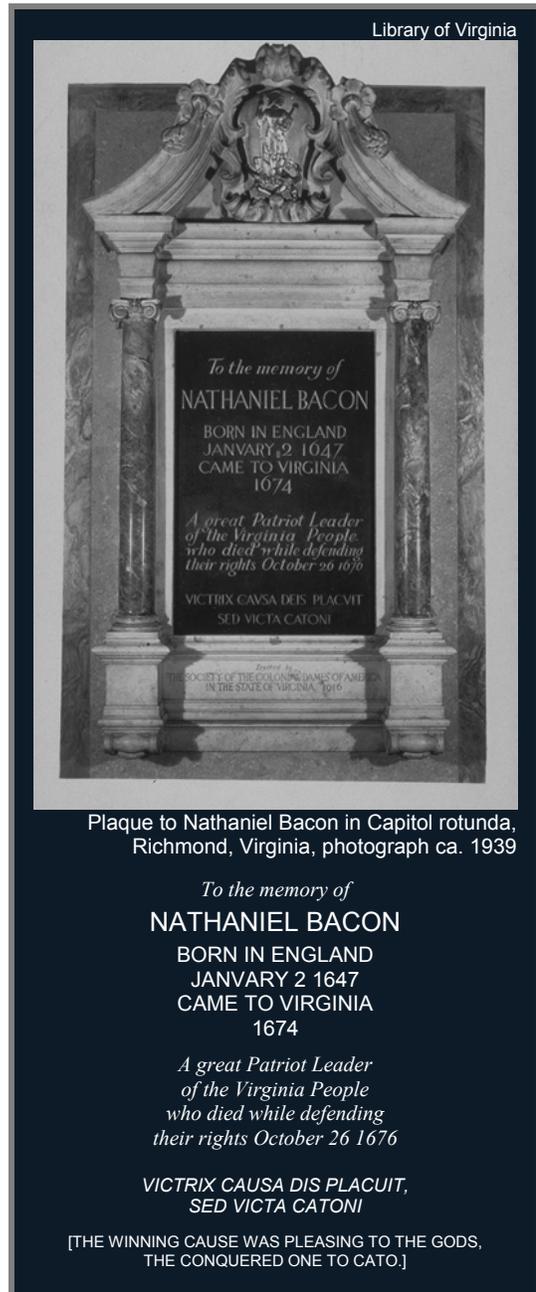
Thirdly, And whereas it is credibly reported, that the Governor hath inform'd the King's Majesty, that the said General, and the People of the Country in Arms under his Command, their Aiders and Abettors, are rebellious, and removed from their Allegiance; and that upon such like Information, he the said Governor hath advised and petition'd the King to send Forces to reduce them; We do farther declare and believe in our Consciences, That it consists with the Welfare of this Country, and with our Allegiance to his most Sacred Majesty, that we the Inhabitants of *Virginia*, to the utmost of our Power, do oppose and suppress all Forces whatsoever of that Nature, until such time as the King be fully inform'd of the State of the Case, by such Person or Persons, as shall be sent from the said *Nathaniel Bacon*, in the Behalf of the People; and the Determination thereof be remitted hither. And we do swear, That we will him the said General, and the Army under his Command, aid and assist accordingly.

By this Time the Governor had got together a small Party to side with him. These he furnished with Sloops, Arms, and Ammunition,⁵ in order to cross the Bay and oppose the Malcontents. By this means there happen'd some Skirmishes, in which several were kill'd, and others taken Prisoners. Thus they were going on by a Civil War to destroy one another and lay waste their Infant Country; when it pleased God, after some Months Confusion, to put an End to their Misfortunes, as well as to *Bacon's* Designs, by his natural Death.

He died at Dr. *Green's* in *Gloucester* County: But where he was bury'd was never yet discover'd; tho' afterward there was great Enquiry made, with Design to expose his Bones to public Infamy.

In the meanwhile, those Disorders occasioned a general Neglect of Husbandry [farming], and a great Destruction of the Stocks [of Cattle]; so that People had a dreadful Prospect of Want and Famine. But the Malcontents being thus disunited by the Loss of their General, in whom they all confided; they began to squabble among themselves; and every Man's Business was how to make the best Terms he could for himself.

⁵ "under Command of Major *Robert Beverley*" [phrase added in 2d. ed., 1722]



Lieutenant-General *Ingram* (whose true Name was *Johnson*) and Major-General *Walklate* surrender'd on Condition of Pardon for themselves and their Followers; tho' they were both forced to submit to an Incapacity of bearing Office in that Country for the future.

Peace being thus restored, Sir *William Berkeley* returned to his former Seat of Government, and every Man to his several Habitation. . . .

When this Storm, occasion'd by *Bacon*, was blown over, and all things quiet again, Sir *William Berkeley* called an Assembly for settling the Affairs of the Country and for making Reparation to such as had been oppressed. After which a Regiment of Soldiers arrived from *England*, which were sent to suppress the Insurrection: But they coming after the Business was over, had no Occasion to exercise their Courage. However, they were kept on Foot there about three Years after, and in the Lord *Cole-pepper's* Time paid off, and disbanded. . . .

The Confusion occasion'd by the Civil War, and the Advantage the *Indians* made of it in butchering the *English* upon all their Frontiers, caused such a Desolation and put the Country so far back, that to this Day [1704], they had seated [settled] very little beyond the Boundaries that were then inhabited. At that Time *James-Town* was again burnt down to the Ground by *Richard Lawrence*, one of *Bacon's* Captains, who, when his own Men that abhor'd such Barbarity refused to obey his Command, he himself became the Executioner and fired the Houses with his own Hands.

This unhappy Town did never after arrive at the Perfection it then had: And now it is almost deserted by the wild Project of Governor *Nicholson*, who procured that the Assembly and General Court should be removed from thence to *Williamsburgh*, an inland Place about seven Miles from it.

⁵ "his man": referring to the man who tended his body.

