



## The English Colonies

### BIOGRAPHY READING

#### *Nathaniel Bacon*

*Nathaniel Bacon is best known for leading an attack in 1676 against American Indian tribes that he wanted to punish. He believed they had invaded the colony of Virginia. Known as Bacon's Rebellion, the uprising also was meant as a criticism of Sir William Berkeley, the governor of Virginia. Bacon resented Berkeley's failure to protect the colony from the American Indians who threatened to take it over.*

Nathaniel Bacon was born in 1647 in Suffolk, England. He attended Cambridge University, and studied law at Gray's Inn. He immigrated to America in 1673 to escape the wrath of his father-in-law, who disliked Bacon so much that he disinherited his daughter for marrying him. Bacon also left England to escape further scandal after he was found to be involved in a plan to defraud a neighbor of his inheritance. Bacon and his wife settled along the James River in Virginia, where Bacon became a prosperous young planter. His success was largely due to financial assistance from his father.

Sir William Berkeley, the governor of Virginia and Bacon's cousin by marriage, appointed Bacon to his council. Bacon soon became angry with Berkeley, who was granting political favors to friends and was generally incompetent. Bacon also accused Berkeley of doing nothing to stop American Indians from attacking plantations in the area. Berkeley replied that Virginians on the western edge of the colony were killing American Indians in order to acquire more land.

Bacon became so enraged at Berkeley's failure to control the attacks by American Indians that he led an expedition against them.

In doing so, Bacon gained the support of a number of Virginian plantation owners. Encouraged by his success in the expedition, Bacon butted heads several times with Berkeley over the issue of keeping American Indians at bay. Bacon's expeditions met with moderate success, although Berkeley was a formidable opponent for a brief time.

After the successful expedition against the American Indians, Bacon and his followers forced Berkeley to call an assembly, hoping to initiate political reforms. Bacon was to serve as a member of the assembly but upon his arrival, Berkeley had him arrested. Bacon was released soon afterward, gathered his supporters, and marched on Jamestown.

After failing in his attempts to oppose Bacon, Berkeley fled Jamestown. Berkeley later returned, calling Bacon and his followers rebels and traitors, and a skirmish ensued. Fearing that he could not defend it against attack, Bacon set fire to Jamestown, burning down most of it. Bacon then claimed control of the colony.

At the height of his power in 1676, Bacon died suddenly from the effects of malaria. Without Bacon at the helm, the rebellion against Berkeley and his supporters fell apart. A few months after Bacon's death, Berkeley hanged more than 20 of his opponents. King Charles II strongly disapproved of Berkeley's methods, however, and Berkeley was forced to return to England.

Nathaniel Bacon is credited with having successfully put an end to the attacks by neighboring American Indian tribes on the Virginia colonies. Bacon's Rebellion and the issues surrounding it also drew attention to the needs of the colonists and, therefore, paved the way for future reforms in the colonies.

**■ UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Under what circumstances did Nathaniel Bacon come to America?

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2. Over what major issue did Bacon and Sir William Berkeley become fierce opponents?

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3. Why did Bacon set fire to Jamestown? What is your reaction to this decision?

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4. Why do you think the rebellion fell apart after Bacon died?

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### ACTIVITY

Pretend that you are a newspaper reporter during the time of Bacon's Rebellion. Write a story about the conflict between Bacon and Berkeley. Be specific about the issues on which they disagreed. Invent quotations from the two men to support their accusations against one another. Add these quotations to the story to make it more lively.