WHO WERE THE COLONISTS?

A HUNDRED YEARS BEFORE THE AMERICAN Revolution, a rebellion broke out in Virginia. Angry colonists set Jamestown, their capital, on fire. The governor fled the burning town, and England shipped a thousand soldiers across the Atlantic, hoping to keep control of the forty thousand colonists.

This was Bacon's Rebellion. It was not a war of American colonists against the British. Instead, Bacon's Rebellion was an uprising of angry, poor colonists against two groups they saw as their enemies. One was the Indians. The other was the colonists' own rich and privileged leaders.

Bacon's Rebellion brought together groups from the lower classes. White frontiersmen started the uprising because they were angry

(left)
Nathaniel Bacon and his followers burning Jamestown, Virginia, 1676.

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about the way the colony was being run. Then white servants and black slaves joined the rebellion. They were angry, too—mostly about the huge gap between rich and poor in Virginia.

Nathaniel Bacon and the Rebellion

BACON'S REBELLION STARTED WITH TROUBLE on Virginia's western frontier. By the 1670s rich landowners controlled most of eastern Virginia. As a result, many ordinary people felt that they were pushed toward the frontier. Life was more dangerous there. The settlers had problems with Native Americans. They wanted the colony's leaders to fight the Indians, but the politicians and big landowners who ran the colony wouldn't fight—maybe because they were using some of the Indians as spies and allies against the others.

The frontiersmen felt that the colonial government had let them down. They were angry, and they weren't the only ones. Times were hard. Many Virginians scraped out a living in poverty or

worked as servants in terrible conditions. In 1676, these unhappy Virginians found a leader in Nathaniel Bacon.

A British government report explained how Bacon appealed to his followers:

> He seduced the Vulgar and most ignorant people to believe . . . that their whole hearts and hopes were now set on Bacon. Next he charges the Governour as negligent [neglectful] and wicked, treacherous and incapable, the Lawes and Taxes as unjust and oppressive. . . .

Bacon owned a good bit of land. He probably cared more about fighting Indians than about helping the poor. Still, the common people of Virginia felt that he was on their side. They elected Bacon to the colonial government, called the House of Burgesses. Bacon was ready to send armed militias, or armed groups of citizens, to fight the Indians. These militias would act outside government control. This alarmed William Berkeley, the governor of the colony. Berkeley called Bacon a rebel and had him captured.

After two thousand of Bacon's supporters marched into Jamestown, the governor let Bacon go, in return for an apology. But as soon as Bacon

was free, he gathered his militia and began raiding the Indians. The rebellion was under way.

Bacon gave his reasons for the rebellion in a paper called "Declaration of the People." It blended the frontiersmen's hatred of the Indians with the common people's anger toward the rich. Bacon accused the Berkeley government of wrongdoing, including unfair taxes and not protecting the western farmers from the Indians.

A few months later, Bacon fell sick and died at the age of twenty-nine. The rebellion didn't last long after that. A ship armed with thirty guns cruised the York River, one of the main waterways of the colony, to restore order. Its captain, Thomas Grantham, used force and tricks to disarm the last rebel bands. At the rebellion's main stronghold, Grantham found four hundred armed whites and blacks— freemen, servants, and slaves. He promised to pardon them and to free the servants and slaves. Instead, he turned his boat's guns on the rebels and took their weapons. Then he returned the servants and slaves to their masters. Eventually, twenty-three rebel leaders were hanged.

Bacon's Rebellion came about because of a chain of oppression in Virginia. The Indians had

their lands seized by white frontiersmen. The frontiersmen were taxed and controlled by the rich upper classes in Jamestown. And the whole colony, rich and poor, was being used by England. The colonists grew tobacco to sell to England, but the English set the price. Each year, the king of England made a large profit from the Virginia colony.

Most people in Virginia had supported the rebellion. One member of Governor Berkeley's council said that the rebels wanted to take the colony out of the king's hands and into their own. Another said that the Indian problem was the original cause of Bacon's Rebellion, but that poor people had joined because they wanted to seize and share the wealth of the rich. Who were these rebels?

The Underclass

THE SERVANTS WHO JOINED BACON'S Rebellion were part of a large underclass of miserably poor whites. They came to the North American colonies from English and European

cities whose governments wanted to get rid of them. In England, for example, changes in land laws had driven many farmers into poverty and homelessness in the cities. New laws were passed to punish the poor, imprison them in workhouses, or send them out of the country. So some of the poor were forced to leave their homes for America. Others were drawn to America by hope—or by promises and lies about the good lives they would have there.

Many poor people bound for America became indentured servants. They signed an agreement called an indenture that said that they would repay the cost of their journey to America by working for a master for five or seven years. Often they were imprisoned after signing the indenture, so that they couldn't run away before their ship sailed.

The voyage to America from England or Europe lasted from eight to twelve weeks. If the weather was bad, the trip could take even longer, and passengers could run out of food. Poor people crossing the ocean to work as servants in the American colonies were crammed into crowded, dirty quarters. Not all of them survived the journey. Gottlieb Mittelberger, a musician who sailed

from Germany to America around 1750, wrote about the terrible trip:

> During the journey the ship is full of pitiful signs of distress—smells, fumes, horrors, vomiting, various kinds of sea-sickness, fever, dysentery, headaches, heat, constipation, boils, scurvy, cancer, mouth-rot. . . . Add to that shortage of food, hunger, thirst, frost, heat, dampness, fear, misery, vexation, and lamentation as well as other troubles. . . . On board our ship, on a day on which we had a great storm, a woman about to give birth and unable to deliver under the circumstances, was pushed through one of the portholes into the sea. . . .

Once they arrived in America, indentured servants were bought and sold like slaves. On March 28, 1771, the *Virginia Gazette* reported: "Just arrived . . . the Ship Justitia, with about one Hundred Healthy Servants, Men Women & Boys. . . . The Sale will commence on Tuesday the 2nd of April."

More than half the colonists who came to North America came as servants. They were mostly English in the seventeenth century, Irish and German in the eighteenth century. Many of them found that life in the American colonies was worse than they had imagined.

Beatings and whippings were common. Servant women were raped. Masters had other means of control. Strangers had to show papers to prove that they were freemen, not runaway servants. The colonial governments agreed among themselves that servants who escaped from one colony to another must be returned. (This later became part of the U.S. Constitution.)

Masters lived in fear of servants' rebellions. After Bacon's Rebellion, English soldiers stayed in Virginia to guard against future trouble. One report at the time said, "Virginia is at present poor and more populous than ever." The writer added that many people were afraid of an uprising by servants who needed basic necessities, such as clothes.

Escape was easier than rebellion. Historian Richard Morris, who wrote a book called *Government and Labor in Early America*, studied colonial newspapers and found many reports of white servants running away, sometimes in groups. Other servants went on strike and refused to work. In 1663, a Maryland master complained to the court that his servants would not do "their ordinary labor." The servants said

that they were too weak to work, because the master fed them only beans and bread. The court ordered the servants to receive thirty lashes with a whip.

More and more, as servants ran away or finished their indentures, slaves replaced them. What happened to the servants after they became free? Cheerful stories tell of former servants who rose to wealth, owned land, and became important people. But in his book *Colonists in Bondage,* historian Abbot Smith reported that almost none of the wealthy, important men in the colonies had been indentured servants, and only a few of them were descended from servants.

Rich and Poor

CLASS LINES HARDENED DURING THE colonial period. The difference between rich and poor grew sharper. At the very beginning of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1630, Governor John Winthrop showed the thinking of colonial
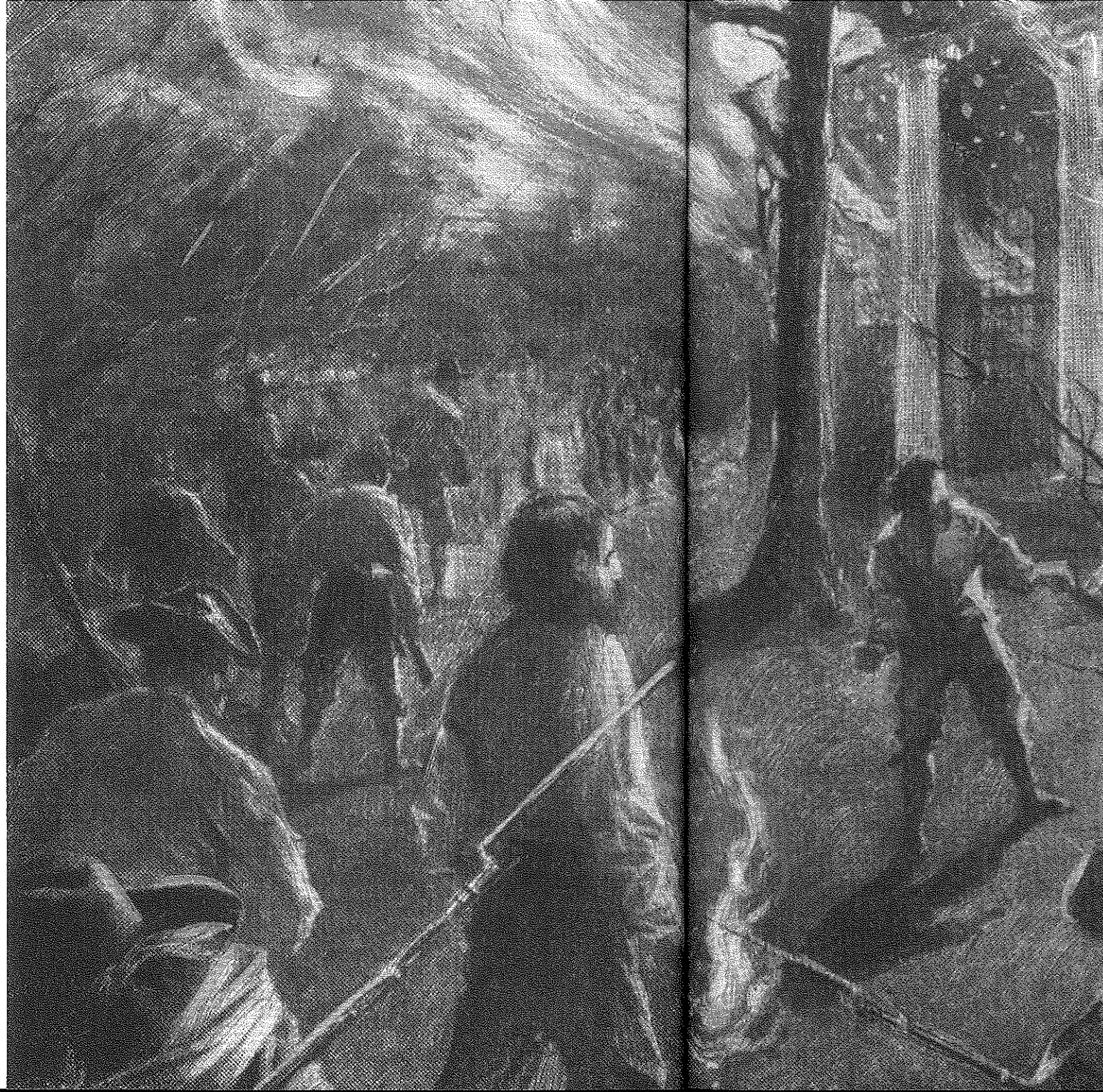
(*detail*)
Nathaniel Bacon
and his followers
burning Jamestown,
Virginia, 1676.

leaders when he said that "in all times some must be rich, some poore." The leaders of the colonies were men of money and status. They wanted society in North America to mirror England, where a small number of people controlled the best land and much of the wealth.

The colonies grew fast in the eighteenth century. Between 1700 and 1760, their population rose from one-quarter of a million people to more than a million and a half. Agriculture, shipping, and trading grew. Small factories developed. Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston doubled and tripled in size.

Through all that growth, the upper class got most of the benefit and held most of the political power. For example, in Boston in 1770, the top 1 percent of property owners had 44 percent of the wealth.

Rich colonial merchants built mansions. People of the upper classes had their portraits painted and traveled in coaches or in chairs carried by servants or slaves. Meanwhile, the poor struggled to stay alive, to keep from freezing in cold weather. And their numbers kept rising. By the 1730s, people demanded institutions to hold

the "many Beggarly people daily suffered to wander about the Streets."

The cities built poorhouses for old people, widows, cripples, and orphans, and also for unemployed people and new immigrants. The poorhouses quickly became overcrowded. A Philadelphia citizen wrote in 1748, "It is remarkable what an increase of the number of Beggars there is about town this winter." Nine years later, Boston officials spoke of "a great number of Poor" who found it hard to feed their families.

Traditional histories of the colonies make it seem that the colonists were united in the struggle against England, their outside enemy. But there was much conflict within the colonies. Slave and free, servant and master, tenant and landlord, poor and rich—disorder broke out along these lines of tension.

In 1713, Boston suffered a severe food shortage. In spite of the city's hunger, a wealthy merchant named Andrew Belcher shipped grain to the Caribbean islands, because the profit was greater there. A mob of two hundred people rioted, broke into Belcher's warehouses looking for food, and shot the lieutenant governor of the colony when he

tried to stop them. Later, another Boston mob beat up the sheriff and surrounded the governor's house to protest impressment, or forced service in the navy. In 1747, poor Bostonians felt that Thomas Hutchinson, a rich merchant and official, had discriminated against them. His house mysteriously burned, while a crowd watched and cheered.

In New Jersey in the 1740s and 1750s, poor farmers clashed with rich landowners. Both groups claimed they owned the land, and the farmers rioted when the landowners demanded rent. During this time, England fought several wars that brought wealth to a few colonial shipbuilders and merchants. But to the mass of colonists, England's wars brought high taxes, unemployment, and poverty—and more anger against the rich and powerful.

How to Rule

BY THE 1760S, THE WEALTHY ELITE that controlled the British colonies in North America had three big fears: Indian hostility, the

danger of slave revolts, and the growing class anger of poor whites. What if these three groups should join together?

Bacon's Rebellion had shown the colonial leaders that it was risky to ignore the Indians, because that infuriated the white people living near the frontier. Better to make war on the Indians and gain the support of the whites. By turning the poor against the Indians, authorities might head off possible class conflict between poor and rich.

Could blacks join the Indians against the whites? This was a real threat. In the Carolinas in the 1750s, twenty-five thousand whites were outnumbered by forty thousand black slaves and sixty thousand Native Americans. Authorities decided to turn blacks and Indians against each other. They bribed Indians to return runaway slaves, and they also made it illegal for free blacks to travel in Indian country. Indian villages did shelter hundreds of runaway slaves, but blacks and Indians never united on a large scale.

The greatest fear of wealthy southern planters was that black slaves and poor whites would combine in another uprising like Bacon's