

This Day in History... September 19, 1676

Jamestown Burns During Bacon's Rebellion

On September 19, 1676, Nathaniel Bacon led an irate group of followers into Jamestown and burned nearly all the buildings to the ground.



Jamestown was founded 69 years before the rebellion.

In the mid-1670s, European settlements in Virginia grew, coming into conflict with the Native Americans already residing there. Many of the colonists wanted the government to force the natives out of Virginia. Among them was Nathaniel Bacon, who also took issue with Virginia's Governor William Berkeley. Bacon felt snubbed after not receiving a political appointment or being allowed to trade with the Native Americans. Following a massacre of Susquehannock chieftains who had meant with the Virginia militia with promises of their safety, their people retaliated, killing 60 of the European settlers in Maryland and 36 in Virginia. Governor Berkeley chose to fight them defensively, with plans to build eight forts along the frontier. Upset that the governor was unwilling to go on the offensive and drive the Native Americans out of their homelands in Virginia entirely, several hundred settlers met and elected Bacon as their leader. This essentially began the rebellion.

Though governor Berkeley warned against it, the rebels set out on a mission and massacred much of the Susquehannock tribe. After returning to Jamestown, Bacon demanded a commission to lead a militia against the Native Americans. Berkeley initially refused, but after Bacon and his followers threatened the burgesses (elected representatives), they granted his commission.



Bacon's rebellion and the burning of Jamestown are considered precursors to the American Revolution.

Bacon and his army then drafted and issued the Declaration of the People of Virginia, criticizing Berkeley for unfair taxes, appointing friends to prominent positions, and failing to protect citizens from attacks. After attacking the friendly Pamunkey tribe, Bacon and his men moved toward Jamestown. Berkeley abandoned the town and avoided being captured. Bacon knew he couldn't hold the capital city or let Berkeley take it back, so he decided to burn it to the ground. Bacon's men ran between buildings with burning brands and

torched homes, the statehouse, warehouses, taverns, and even the church. Berkeley and his loyalists who'd escaped watched the glow of their home burning from downstream.

With Jamestown destroyed, Bacon went back to attacking Native American tribes. However, about a month after the burning, he died suddenly from typhus and dysentery. Though a new leader rose to take Bacon's place, the rebels slowly disbanded. Berkeley launched successful attacks to quiet any further uprising from Bacon's followers. But he was later removed from his role as governor by King Charles II to consolidate power and prevent another rebellion.

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