



# The Leviathan Poltergeist At Bacon's Rebellion

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The Leviathan Poltergeist at Bacon's Rebellion.

James H. Belcher

A Thesis in the Field of History  
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

May 2023



## Abstract

This thesis examines the historical causes of Bacon's Rebellion by considering Hobbes' perspective on human nature, as detailed in Chapter XIII of his work *Leviathan*, (1651). Specifically incorporating his arguments on the natural state of conflict between individuals who are in competition for survival, "To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have no place." There is perhaps no better illustration of such self-serving interests as those exhibited in the seventeenth century at Jamestown, Virginia during the establishment of the first English colony in North America. Actions led by self-interest among competing factions (colonists, Native peoples, indentured servants, and slaves), ultimately led to dire political, social and economic consequences, which concluded with the burning of the settlement in the fall of 1676. Much has been previously examined and written about the rebellion, with much of the focus on the two primary antagonists, Sir William Berkeley and Nathaniel Bacon, with each bearing varying amounts of culpability and justification for their actions. It is important to step back and take a broader view of the historical events to include those individuals who participated in and encouraged the revolt; their voices should be heard and respected as well. For the rebellion was carried out by hundreds whose reasons for doing so went far beyond the petty feuding of two individuals who were driven by their own ambition and greed. Ultimately, Berkeley and Bacon were caught in a storm of despair and survival,

forced to embark on a course they could neither alter nor control, destined to be casualties of Hobbes' state of war.

# THE LEVIATHAN POLTERGEIST AT BACON'S REBELLION



illustration by Bob Oller

JAMES H. BELCHER

In the author's possession.

## Author's Biographical Sketch

James H. Belcher was born on February 23, 1960, in East Saint Louis, Illinois. He is the son of Albert L. and Jeanine H. Belcher. James grew up in Westfield, New Jersey and graduated from Westfield Senior High School in May of 1978, subsequently earning a BA in Economics from Southern Methodist University in May of 1983. He is a Certified Public Accountant licensed in the states of Texas and Virginia, a chartered Global Management Accountant, a graduate of Oxford University having earned a Certificate of Higher Education in Philosophy in March of 2017, and the Harvard Extension School, completing an ALM in History in May of 2023. James retired from the United States Department of the Treasury in 2019, is a lecturer in history at the college of William & Mary, and lives with his wife Nora in Williamsburg, Virginia.

## Dedication

To my wife Nora for her unyielding kindness and support, who encouraged me to complete this work and become a better person than I otherwise would have been.



## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Rosemarie Wagner for her valuable guidance and feedback, her overall support for this project was remarkable. Not only did she encourage me to consider other perspectives of my argument, but her expertise in Thomas Hobbes was particularly valuable. I am profoundly grateful for all the time and effort she expended on my behalf.

I would also like to thank Mark Summers at the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation for the time and research he provided me regarding Bacon's Rebellion. His ongoing dedication to the work at historic Jamestown is important and invaluable.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library in Williamsburg, Virginia for making the period letters and printed material used in this project digitally available. I especially want to express my gratitude to Harvard University for the opportunity to undertake such a research project as this. Without these individuals and institutions, it would not have been possible for me to complete this work.

## Table of Contents

Author's Biographical Sketch.....	vi
Dedication.....	vii
Acknowledgments.....	viii
Chapter I. Introduction.....	1
Chapter II. The Virginia Company.....	8
Chapter III. Bacon's Rebellion.....	18
Chapter IV. Thomas Hobbes.....	30
Chapter V. A State of War.....	41
Chapter VI. Conclusion.....	51
Bibliography.....	61

## Chapter I.

### Introduction

Beginning in 1607, and unbeknownst to the colonists who stepped on the shores of Virginia in pursuit of opportunity, a state of economic societal and literal war had begun and would continue to rage for years, only to end with devastating consequences. Such conditions often spark the fuse of self-ruin, and there may be no better example in early colonial America than the destruction of Jamestown in 1676; and today where the residual repercussions are currently being exhibited in the U.S. Then, just as now, society placed its emphasis on self-interest, and in doing so, created an atmosphere of unrest and discrimination, leading to vast disparities in wealth; creating a leviathan which could not be controlled. Historical precedent that unfortunately continues to be repeated, ultimately leaving us all to endure yet again, and endless cycle of Hobbesian war.

In the fall of 1676, Nathaniel Bacon led a rebellion against Governor Sir William Berkeley and the British ruling authority at Jamestown. Disputes between the Powatan Tribes and the settlers had continuously erupted, as more immigrants moved into the Tidewater regions of Virginia in search of land and wealth. To mitigate such confrontations, Berkeley remained dedicated to his stated mission of brokering a peaceful coexistence between the settlers and their Native American co-inhabitants (“Naturals”).

Simultaneously however, Bacon encouraged and led many of his fellow colonists in fierce defiance of those efforts, being successful in part, due to growing perceptions of preferential treatment for wealthy plantation owners and prolonged fear of Indigenous

attacks. Matters came to a head on September 19, when Bacon's armed forces stormed into Jamestown and burned it to the ground as Berkeley fled. In the following months, Bacon died of disease and Berkeley's reenforced loyalist's army defeated the fractured rebels, with confrontations formally concluding in the spring of 1677.<sup>1</sup>

Once this seventeenth century revolt (principally against British white males who had trespassed into lands held by Native Americans and the wealthy ruling class of the more populated James-York Peninsula) had ended, although not fully resolved, the relentless demand for land continued and the pursuit for cheap labor correspondingly expanded. Consequently, the unquenched quest for profit and power was disastrously energized,<sup>2</sup> all but ensuring prolonged efforts of promoting and advocating for the systematic annihilation of Indigenous peoples and the confiscation of their lands.

There were other catastrophic white settler colonial practices which can be directly attributed to Jamestown as well. As James Horn (Horn) notes in his book *1619*, (2018), when the first African slaves were brought to the settlement, it quickly became apparent there was a direct correlation between the accumulation of wealth and power and the number of slaves owned.<sup>3</sup> Those first twenty or so unfortunate individuals were, for all intent and purposes, deemed slaves upon their arrival at the shores of Fort Comfort, Virginia, as they were immediately treated as inventoriable property. Initially, they were held in a higher value than their poor white counterparts, since the terms of their servitude was not specified; unlike indentured whites who typically served under

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<sup>1</sup> "Bacon's Rebellion - Historic Jamestowne Part of Colonial National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service)," last modified February 26, 2015, <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/bacons-rebellion.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Sprinkle, "*Loyalists and Baconians: The Participants in Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, 1676-1677*" (PhD diss., The College of William & Mary, Virginia, 1992), 27-28.

<sup>3</sup> James Horn, *1619: Jamestown and the Forging of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 111-112.

fixed term contracts. Thus, their status as slaves became permanent, as Horn suggests, “The absence of terms of service and the much higher valuations placed on Africans strongly suggests they served for life.”<sup>4</sup>

As an example, only one black child had their years of service listed on the 1622 inventory records, which strongly suggests the enslaved status of subsequent generations were passed down as a result of their parents’ standing. Accordingly, Horn argues that while 1619 marks one of the most important years in American history regarding democracy, it also represents the beginning stages of establishing slavery, and the undeniable catastrophic consequences left for future generations, “the corrosive legacy of racial stereotypes that continues to afflict our society today.”<sup>5</sup>

Bacon’s Rebellion remains one of the most misunderstood and perplexing episodes in early American history, with many historians suggesting the rebellion represented the first cries of revolution against British tyranny, serving as a rallying cry for the American Revolution which began nearly one hundred years later. More recently however, many historians have viewed Bacon’s Rebellion as a personal vendetta between two egotistical men who were primarily interested in protecting their financial interests and advancing their own political agendas.<sup>6</sup> My contention is the circumstances and events prior to the rebellion, provide real-life examples of a Hobbesian theory, (which I will expand upon in Chapter IV and V); that illustrates how unencumbered individuals, when forced to fend for themselves, without any agreed-upon rules of engagement or governmental oversight, create an atmosphere of primitive survival, encouraging

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<sup>4</sup> Horn, *1619*, 111.

<sup>5</sup> Horn, *1619*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> “Bacon’s Rebellion - Historic Jamestowne Part of Colonial National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service).”

individual and collectively selfish acts which inevitably lead to social and economic upheaval.

Thomas Hobbes acknowledged human nature and society as it was, not as it could be, his theories on man's state of nature, outline many of the deleterious outcomes of perpetuating self-interest many of which, were implemented in 1607, and exemplify the negative after-effects of promoting a system of discrimination (against those who are less powerful and most vulnerable). Bacon's Rebellion serves as a historical illustration of Hobbes's theories on the natural self-serving tendencies of man and provides us with valuable insight toward understanding the nature of individual perspectives, expectations, and motivations of others, regardless of their predetermined "assigned" social or economic standing.

Hobbes's philosophies "Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, as concerning their Felicity, and Misery"<sup>7</sup> as detailed in Chapter XIII of *Leviathan*, provide additional historical clarity in helping us understand the catastrophic social and economic events leading up to Bacon's Rebellion. This early settler revolution in British North America, was a consequence of The London Company of Virginia (the Company) propaganda, which intentionally promoted a strategy of unregulated capitalism for this Royal Colony, mandating prejudiced proclamations that encouraged and justified an economic and social model premised on the unrelenting pursuit of profit at the expense of others.

By examining the numerous societal and economic challenges that existed prior to Bacon's Rebellion (in conjunction with Hobbes's theories, who was a contemporary and shareholder of the Company), we can begin to further clarify the complicating

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Interpretations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 68-72.

circumstances of establishing this colonial settlement in America. My objective is to expand the existing conjectures regarding the genesis of the rebellion by incorporating Hobbes' hypothesis on man's natural state of war, comparing his foreboding warnings with the self-serving strategies implemented by the Company in 1607 to establish Jamestown. By adopting a doctrine based on the exploitation of others, the British empire set in motion a multitude of social, economic, and racial inequities which led to Bacon's Rebellion almost seventy years after the first settlers arrived.

The second chapter explores the origins of the Company, how the structure was originally chartered, and how the idea of providing individual investors to purchase shares in a for profit enterprise was indeed revolutionary. Previously, those with less financial resources had been precluded from participating in such adventures and if they did, they certainly would have limited say in influencing those who were responsible for overseeing the operations. With the establishment of the corporation, this was no longer the case, as smaller investors could "pool" their block of shares and make their concerns known. Enabling them to have an impact on those in control or be able to influence the course of the enterprise, including the king himself.

The third chapter addresses the origins and events leading up to Bacon's Rebellion, beginning with the first colonists who arrived in the tidewaters of Virginia in 1607, and ending with the burning of Jamestown on the night of September 19, 1676. Exploring the historical perspectives beyond the two primary antagonists, Sir William Berkeley and Nathaniel Bacon; by incorporating an in-depth review of the surrounding economic and societal challenges facing those with vested interests (the Crown, colonists,

Indigenous peoples, indentured servants, slaves, etc.), who were often struggling to simply survive, will provide much needed clarity to these historical events.

Chapter Four contemplates the causes of the discontent and eventual rebellion from the perspective of Thomas Hobbes, specifically those he detailed regarding the fundamental nature of man. “And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their End, (which is principally their owne conservation, and sometimes their delectation only,) endeavour to destroy, or subdue one another.”<sup>8</sup> The culmination of events leading up to Bacon’s rebellion are represented by these philosophical observations and provides us with a historical perspective that can expand our understanding of basic human inclinations toward greed.

The fifth chapter details how Hobbes’s theories on the state of war exemplifies the consequences of engaging in the relentless pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others. By the time Nathaniel Bacon had arrived in Jamestown in 1675, there had already been friction among the settlers (due to a stratified society based on wealth and social standing, closely modeled to the existing practices of England), and indigenous peoples, driven by an uninhibited pursuit of power, economic gain and ultimately survival; inevitable results when individuals act in their own interests, without any social contracts that had previously been negotiated and voluntarily agreed to. Inevitable outcomes which Hobbes carefully detailed in his work *Leviathan*, nearly twenty five years earlier.

The conclusions reached in chapter six are based upon the events and circumstances leading up to Bacon’s Rebellion, incorporating the perspectives of Hobbes

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<sup>8</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 69.



as he expressed in his work *Leviathan*, specifically in chapter thirteen. Concluding that because “Nature hath make men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind; as that though there bee found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or quicker mind than another; yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he.”<sup>9</sup>

Arguing that in those circumstances where any two individuals desire the same things, which they cannot independently enjoy, they will necessarily become enemies. The Company should have considered this fundamental observation of human tendencies, prior to establishing Jamestown in 1607 and again in 1624 when the Crown assumed control. For if they had, it is possible that much of the pain and turmoil caused on the night of September 19, 1676, could have been avoided; providing the United States with an opportunity to rewrite its violent and discriminating history which began over four hundred years ago at Jamestown.

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<sup>9</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 68.

## Chapter II.

### The Virginia Company

Corporations were formally established by Queen Elizabeth I on December 31, 1600, upon granting a charter to a group of London merchants which provided them exclusive trading rights with the East Indies. Thus began the English East Indian Company which operated as a monopoly, since no other British subjects could legally trade in that corner of the world. While this represented a competitive advantage in England, the entity had other market competition from the Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch, all of whom had a presence in India and the surrounding areas. “Many of the hallmarks of the modern corporation were first popularized by the East India Company. For example, the Company was the largest and longest-lasting joint stock company of its day, which means that it raised and pooled capital by selling shares to the public.”<sup>10</sup>

England had ventured into colonization as early as 1583 when they established their first settlement in Newfoundland, largely due to the efforts of Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Humphrey Gilbert (his half-brother). The settlement was abandoned, and Gilbert died at sea, but he had been a significant influence on Raleigh who was determined to establish a colony in America.<sup>11</sup> Raleigh’s colorful exploits and shortcomings at Roanoke Island are well documented, along with his initial encounters with tobacco and potatoes,

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<sup>10</sup> Dave Roos, “How the East India Company Became the World’s Most Powerful Monopoly,” last modified October 23, 2020, <https://www.history.com/news/east-india-company-england-trade>.

<sup>11</sup> J. Taylor Ellyson, Thomas Fortune Ryan, “*The London Company of Virginia; a Brief Account of Its Transactions in Colonizing Virginia*,” accessed on March 15, 2023, <https://archive.org/details/londoncompanyofv00elly>, 7-8.

but there was also an enduring impact. “These efforts resulted from two causes: first, a desire on the part of the English people to extend their commercial enterprises, and second, a desire on the part of Sir Walter Raleigh to prevent further colonization of North America by the Spaniards.”<sup>12</sup>

From the very beginning the principal goal of the Company was to make money. Formally established by King James I in 1606, this corporate entity allowed the Crown to participate in and reap the benefits of colonization, while simultaneously protecting itself against catastrophic losses (entity protections which exist to this day). Similar financial defenses were available to the investors as well, who were also seeking ways to limit their exposure should the enterprise fail. This pursuit for wealth and profits were based on their naive belief North America contained vast natural resources of gold and silver, along with innumerable trading commodities which were there for the taking.

They also perceived ancillary opportunities for opening new markets for English goods, which could provide economic leverage against the Spanish. The calculus for this goal, however, was complicated at best. It relied on the belief the Native inhabitants could be converted by the English Protestants prior to the Spanish attempts, assumptions which proved to be flawed in both instances. Nevertheless, upon weighing such risks against the seemingly endless gains, the Company finalized their business decision to establish a settlement at Jamestown, Virginia in 1607.<sup>13</sup> King James the I issued a royal charter to “adventurers” (referring to investors and settlers) in the Company, a joint-stock structure “to make habitation, plantation, and to deduce a colony of sundry of our people

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<sup>12</sup> J. Taylor Ellyson, Thomas Fortune Ryan, “*The London Company of Virginia; a Brief Account of Its Transactions in Colonizing Virginia*,” 12.

<sup>13</sup> Brendan Wolfe, “Virginia Company of London – Encyclopedia Virginia,” December 7, 2020, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/virginia-company-of-london/>.

into that part of America commonly called Virginia, and other parts and territories in America, either appertaining unto us, or which are not now actually possessed by any christian prince or people, situate, lying, and being all along the sea coasts...”<sup>14</sup>

The concept of a joint-stock company was straightforward and similar to the corporate structures of today. A group of investors pool their financial resources to fund an enterprise in hopes of it being successful, and if it is, those vested parties share proportionately in the profits. The benefit to the Crown was self-evident, in 1606 being heavily in debt due to civil wars, there was little money to expend on speculative projects. In addition, King James was fully aware that France and Spain had already settled significant portions of the North American coast and would recognize the political risk should England decide to participate.<sup>15</sup>

This was especially critical for the relations with Spain, whom the king was trying desperately to placate. By allowing the Company to take the lead in colonization, King James had plausible deniability should there be any significant international crisis. In short, the Crown would participate in any profits with little or no financial obligation, which as it eventually turned out were significant. This strategy eventually permitted Queen Elizabeth and subsequently King James to realize the financial benefits of colonization without incurring significant costs.<sup>16</sup>

It is important to simultaneously consider the importance of the London merchant class and their growing influence during this time. This is not to imply they were the only influence, but when the English Crown made the decision to limit their political and

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<sup>14</sup> James I, “First Charter of Virginia (1606) – Encyclopedia Virginia,” 57, accessed March 15, 2023, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/first-charter-of-virginia-1606/>.

<sup>15</sup> Wolfe, “Virginia Company.”

<sup>16</sup> Wolfe, “Virginia Company.”

financial exposure, the idea of expanding the empire and national interests predictably fell to those who could be incentivized to take calculated risks in pursuit of unlimited gains.<sup>17</sup> Such risks not only involved the innumerable obvious challenges facing those willing to establish a foothold on a new continent, but in understanding there were other countries from Europe, who not only had the same intentions, they were already settled in the surrounding areas. In addition to the Spanish, the French had made in-roads into Quebec and along the St. Lawrence, while the Dutch established a significant presence in the Hudson valley. Regardless, those who committed to participating in the speculative ventures of the Company, represented the first efforts towards English colonization in America.<sup>18</sup>

Fundamentally, the concept called for the shareholders to be entitled to pursue courses which were in their own interest and those of the king, but only to the extent they were successful. Originally, the ruling body of Jamestown was created in accordance with the charter granted by the king, which called for a royal council (who resided in England and consisted of thirteen members) to assume overall responsibility for the venture. Within the settlement itself, there were to be another thirteen men who (upon authorization of the royal council) could elect their own acting president for a term not to exceed one year. This structure created a complex relationship between the Crown, the shareholders, and the colonists, since it encouraged the individual pursuit of wealth while at the same time, required any course of action be fundamentally premised on national interest.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Wesley F. Craven, *The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century 1607-1689* (Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 60-61.

<sup>18</sup> Craven, *The Southern Colonies*, 61.

<sup>19</sup> Craven, *The Southern Colonies*, 63.

Effective communication between these governmental bodies was difficult to coordinate from the beginning. While the notion of having a Virginia Council, who could voice the needs and concerns of the colonists to the royal council in England was admirable, from a logistical perspective it was fundamentally flawed. Given the varying interests, priorities, and opinions of the colonists it was nearly impossible to choose thirteen individuals who could adequately represent the constituency. In addition, conflicts with the multitude of Indigenous peoples proved to be problematic, once the Native peoples recognized the English strategy of colonial settlement and empire expansion was nothing more than an invasion of their sovereignty, in an unending pursuit of their tribal wealth and land.<sup>20</sup>

However, there remained significant advantages for the investors of a joint-stock company, since the structure allowed losses to be spread over a larger group of shareholders. In addition, those larger number of participants had the ability to “pool” their votes and by doing so, could place sustained pressure on the Crown to provide resources in support of the settlement, (leaving the Crown with little opportunity to renege on their financial obligations).<sup>21</sup> This created an atmosphere of self-promotion which was coupled with an economic policy driven by the need to increase wealth, creating a vicious cycle of promoting profits, by reducing costs, which expectedly increased societal and financial risks.

Over the next eighteen years, the Company with the approval of the Crown, created revised charters allowing for an expanded participatory form of oversight, which incentivized increased financial opportunities for some but economic discrimination and

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<sup>20</sup> Craven, *The Southern Colonies*, 63.

<sup>21</sup> Wolfe, “Virginia Company.”

hardship for many more, as those in power were typically wealthy with self-serving interests. Once it was determined there was no readily available supply of precious materials (gold, silver, etc.), or available passages to the east, the draw for those willing to wager their lives on the potential for riches quickly dwindled.

In addition, there were continuous challenges on other fronts during these early times. Disease, starvation, threatening worries of conflicts with Native peoples, governmental management failures and rivalries, and growing fractional interests (in Virginia and London), placed additional pressures on those settlers who were simply trying to survive.<sup>22</sup> The Company did try to address such foreboding matters by revising their initial charter (of 1606) into a second (1609). This new royal charter (which was issued on May 23), is significant as it divested the King of certain powers and permitted the investors to elect their treasurer to lead the Company (although any appointment remained subject to the king's veto and would require an oath to remain loyal to the king's interest). The charter also authorized the Company to sell stock and pay dividends, (which were usually paid with land due to limited cash on hand) and provide investors the opportunity to participate in the Company's governance.

This particular aspect was significant, as the invitation to invest was marketed to an expanded portion of England's population, not just to those who occupied higher social status or military privilege as was the practice of the time.<sup>23</sup> The rationale for such an approach was driven primarily by economic reality and not altruistic intentions. During this time there were two nearly simultaneous catastrophic events. The first involved a period at Jamestown known as the "Starving Time," where securing the bare

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<sup>22</sup> Wolfe, "Virginia Company."

<sup>23</sup> Wolfe, "Virginia Company."

necessities of existence (food and water) became a day-to-day struggle, and the second was the lost ship (the Sea Venture) whose manifest consisted of much needed settlers and supplies. Resulting with only sixty of the five hundred colonists surviving the winter of 1609, and Jamestown would have likely ended in ruin had relief not arrived in May of 1610.<sup>24</sup>

Similar to the previous charters, the third charter King James granted to the Company in 1612 addressed governance and financial shortcomings. In an effort to encourage additional investors, the colony laws permitted the shareholders to fully participate in the Jamestown General Assembly, which was a drastic change from the rigid rules of social hierarchy in England. Indicative of the ongoing cash flow limitations of the Company, the charter also permitted a lottery in hopes of raising supplemental operational capital. Although both efforts were partially successful, they never generated enough funding to sustain the total expenditure of the Company for maintaining Jamestown.

Another setback for the lottery was the continuous accusations of dishonesty; with many individuals complaining they were never paid or cheated, with the net result those in the lower economic strata were convinced they were never given a chance to improve their standing. “In the House of Commons on February 24, 1621, Sir Lionel Cranfield spoke for many: “I am of the Company of Virginia, but I hear these lotteries do beggar [impoverished] every country they come into. Let Virginia lose rather than England.” The king banned the lotteries soon after.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “Starving Time in Jamestown Summary - Colonists Starvation Period,” accessed March 15, 2023, <https://totallyhistory.com/starving-time-in-jamestown/>.

<sup>25</sup> Wolfe, “Virginia Company.”



The charter of 1618, as had the previous three charters, again attempted to address the ongoing obstacles of cash-flow and governance. By now it was clear the lottery could only subsidize the expenses for Jamestown to a lesser extent, which forced the Company to find alternative ways to encourage more investors. The course they chose was to promote the one commodity they had readily available, land. As a result, they relied on the headright system which enabled the Company to provide fifty acres of land to each person who either paid their way or any other persons way to the settlement. In doing so, the settler agreed to pay the Company a user fee for each fifty-acre grant for fifty years.<sup>26</sup>

Retrospectively, this belief seems fundamentally defective since they had no viable legal position for making such assertions, and while they may have believed uninhabited land was there for the taking, it became quickly evident the Native peoples passionately believed otherwise. The Company also attempted to reduce their costs of maintaining the government by enticing its Virginia officers with land, along with tenants, indentured servants and slaves who could work their plantations; believing such an approach would be more attractive than imposing taxes.<sup>27</sup>

Despite all of these stratagems, land incentives, and promises of financial reward, the Company continued to experience difficulties convincing the English citizenry that Virginia was a suitable place to reside. There were too many tales of starvation, martial law, disease, and hardship to risk their lives, even with the potential for economic gain. To placate those apprehensions, the Company established a Council of State and General assembly, with the former to be appointed and the latter elected by the colonists.

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<sup>26</sup> Wolfe, "Virginia Company."

<sup>27</sup> Wolfe, "Virginia Company."

Calculating those willing to take risks for economic gain at Jamestown would be more inclined if they had some say in how the settlement was to be governed.

Despite these governmental reforms and the settlements transition into growing the profitable commodity tobacco, the enterprise was unable to survive. Towards the end, three factions fought to control the Company. The first was led by Sir Thomas Smythe, who represented wealthy merchants, an educated man of means and business affairs, he would eventually recognize the dissolution of the Company was necessary. The Second was led by Lord Robert Rich who believed the Virginia colony could be best used as a protective port for English ships who regularly preyed on Spanish vessels in the Caribbean. Lastly there was Sir Edwin Sandys who represented the less powerful investors, who himself had participated believing there were immediate prospects of profit. However, Sandys had the political disadvantage of prolonged tension between himself, Smythe and the Crown.<sup>28</sup>

In 1622, Sandys renegotiated contracts for the Company which effectively functioned as a monopoly for himself and a select group of other investors, since they had assured themselves larger portions of profits. Such self-promoting actions, along with other nagging obstacles, eventually raised questions about the financial sustainability of the enterprise, including its ability to continue as a going concern. This coupled with the Powatan attack on March 22, 1622, where 347 colonists were killed (almost a quarter of the colonial Virginia population) brought fatal scrutiny from the Crown. Such loss of English lives at the hands of the Powatan, combined with those who died of disease

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<sup>28</sup> J. Taylor Ellyson, Thomas Fortune Ryan, *The London Company of Virginia; a Brief Account of Its Transactions in Colonizing Virginia*.

(nearly 2,500), placed pressure on the king to act, which he did in March of 1624, revoking the Company charter and taking control of the Virginia Colony.<sup>29</sup>

By this time, it became clear there were serious governmental, societal, and economic complications facing the settlement, far beyond the pursuit of profit and returns on investment. Jamestown had been established on unstable footing from conception, resulting with rival factions (be they Native peoples, indentured servants, slaves or colonists) with each being forced to develop survival strategies based on self-interest. Ultimately forcing such intertwined complications into a critical mass which inescapably led to rebellion.

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<sup>29</sup> Wolfe, "Virginia Company."

### Chapter III.

#### Bacon's Rebellion

The Jamestown settlement was an extremely dangerous and difficult undertaking, not only from a practical and logistical context, but also because it required planning and preparing for the unknown. Many of the initial and ongoing strategies for establishing and promoting the colony were based on hearsay, innuendo, and third hand information; certainly not the ideal formula for promoting such a monumental undertaking. Suffice to say, those involved made decisions under the circumstances that existed and made attempts to correct their course when opportunities or situations required. To appreciate the consequences of Bacon's Rebellion, it is critical to fully comprehend its beginning.

The settlement in Jamestown, Virginia was conceptualized in June of 1606, under the authority of King James I and in accordance with the terms of the charter granted. The goal was to establish an economically profitable English settlement near the shores of the Chesapeake region of North America. Company records indicate Sir Thomas Gates (Deputy and eventual Acting Governor of Virginia) was given four principal objectives by the Company leaders prior to his departure for Jamestown in 1610. First, he was to discover a viable route to the south seas or valuable mines, secondly, he was to engage in trading with the Powhatan, third he was to receive tribute from those same tribes, and lastly, he was to pursue the production of natural commodities.<sup>30</sup> While the first priority

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<sup>30</sup> Horn, *1619*, 23-24.

became problematic quickly upon surveying the immediate geographic area, the remaining were at least theoretically possible.

In 1609, Sir Edwin Sandys coordinated the reorganization of Jamestown, which transferred control from the king to a Company governor. Sandys was the son and namesake of Archbishop of York, educated at Oxford, an author and parliamentarian, who eventually became one of the original founders of the Company. Principally known for his work *A Relation of the State of Religion* (1605), he was a powerful and outspoken critic of King James I. Sandys favored the “idea of a commonwealth”<sup>31</sup> for Jamestown, creating a revolutionary precedent for granting land ownership to individuals (as opposed to the Company).<sup>32</sup> Sandys intended for the colonists to live in harmony with the Powhatan Natives, but those ideals quickly devolved into self-preservation for the settlers after the Powhatan massacre in 1622. An attack which was likely in response to territorial disputes and conflicting relationships with other Native tribes.<sup>33</sup>

In 1619, Governor Sir George Yeardley, who owned a plantation, became governor of Virginia, and earned the dubious distinction of being one of the first slaveholders in colonial America. He instilled major reforms, having been instructed by the Company to establish “a laudable form of government by Magistracy and just Laws...for the happy guiding and governing of the people.”<sup>34</sup> The result of these efforts came to be known as the “Great Charter” and was designed to restrain the arbitrary rule

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<sup>31</sup> Horn, *1619*, 44.

<sup>32</sup> Horn, *1619*, 44.

<sup>33</sup> Theodore K. Rabb, “Sandys, Sir Edwin (1561–1629) – Encyclopedia Virginia,” accessed March 4, 2022, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/sandys-sir-edwin-1561-1629/>.

<sup>34</sup> Horn, *1619*, with contributions by Samuel M. Bemiss, *The Three Charters of the Virginia Company of London...1606-1621* (Williamsburg, VA: 1957), 1, 51, 86-87; Philip L. Barbour, ed, 43.

of prior Jamestown ruling authorities, choosing instead to establish a government based on the rule of law.

One of the primary objectives was to confirm individual land grants (for land they typically did not own) as well as those of the Company, in a coordinated effort to protect private property, which was vital to ensuring confidence in those evaluating the investment opportunities at Jamestown.<sup>35</sup> The two other critical innovations were the creation of the General Assembly and the Council of State, with the latter being the most influential as it was intended to preside in partnership with the governor.<sup>36</sup>

This idea of establishing a “Common-wealth” originated in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, representing a dedicated effort to form a godly society based on equity; designed to ensure the common good of the participating individuals.<sup>37</sup> With an emphasis on selecting wise and noble rulers (consisting of a monarchy and aristocracy), who would incorporate a democracy under the tenets of Christian morality, prosperity, and social well-being. Such schools of thought were in accordance with Renaissance humanist ideas, advocated by intellectuals of the time who believed rational approaches toward establishing government, (including social and economic organization), would encourage the improvement of societies and the overall human condition.<sup>38</sup>

Jamestown represented the perfect opportunity for employing such ideals, and when this progressive concept and corporate structure was finally implemented, thousands of poor white people were encouraged to leave England and own land for themselves, providing them with economic opportunities they could never have imagined

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<sup>35</sup> Horn, *1619*, 60-61.

<sup>36</sup> Horn, *1619*, 65.

<sup>37</sup> Horn, *1619*, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Horn, *1619*, 5.

at home.<sup>39</sup> This approach also had the strategic benefit of “relocating” those “wretched” British citizens who were unemployed, in dire poverty, and in need of continuous governmental assistance. Individuals who, if they remained, would continue to place increasing financial burden on the wealthy aristocracy, many of whom having benefited from their elevated place in England’s social hierarchy by mere happenstance.<sup>40</sup>

Governor Sir William Berkeley, born in 1605 was seventy years old when the conflict with Nathaniel Bacon began in 1676, a veteran of the English Civil Wars and a favorite of King Charles I. He was educated at Oxford and regarded as a scholar and playwright by his contemporaries (with one of his works being performed for the king and queen).<sup>41</sup> In 1641, Berkeley was named governor and captain general of Virginia, where he grew tobacco in addition to performing his governmental duties. During his first term, he exhibited a willingness to share power and stature with the Jamestown General Assembly, but such efforts ended with the execution of the king in January of 1649. Berkeley’s second term at Jamestown coincided with the rule of King Charles II, but this term was less successful as he failed to diversify the tobacco-based economy and was unable to fully convince the settlers he could protect them from attacks by the Native Americans.<sup>42</sup>

Nathaniel Bacon, Jr was born in 1647 at Suffolk, England and was the only son of wealthy landowners (Thomas and Elizabeth Brooke Bacon). Educated at Cambridge he earned the reputation of an instigator and antagonist when he married Elizabeth, in direct

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<sup>39</sup> Horn, *1619*, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Horn, *1619*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> Warren Billings, “Berkeley, Sir William (1605–1677) – Encyclopedia Virginia,” accessed March 4, 2022, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/berkeley-sir-william-1605-1677/>.

<sup>42</sup> “Bacon’s Rebellion - Historic Jamestowne Part of Colonial National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service).”

defiance of her father Sir Edward Duke who then disinherited her.<sup>43</sup> It was at this point his father, sent him off to Virginia with £1,800 (making him one of the wealthiest colonists at the time) to begin his life anew.<sup>44</sup> Ironically, when Bacon first arrived at Jamestown, Berkeley treated his cousin (via his second wife) generously, granting him a substantial land grant and a seat on the council in 1675.<sup>45</sup>

Bacon's Rebellion represents the culmination of social, political, and economic disasters which were conceived and driven by an atmosphere of wide-spread dissent among the Jamestown colonists. Competing interests with Indigenous tribes, declining tobacco prices, and increased restrictions on accessing English markets and goods had taken a toll on the Virginians. In addition, they had been forced to endure droughts, hurricanes, and near starvation to establish a foothold on Chesapeake Bay.

The English too had their share of woes during this time, due to recent naval losses with the Dutch and the vast amounts of debt they had incurred.<sup>46</sup> These complications, coupled with their daily struggle for mere existence, caused the settlers to become deeply discouraged, ultimately concluding they should focus their efforts on themselves, and if necessary, at the expense of anyone standing in opposition. It was during this critical juncture Jamestown devolved into Hobbes dreaded state of "Warre."

Interestingly, interpretations of the surrounding circumstances causing the rebellion to have experienced an evolution, with recent historians revisiting and

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<sup>43</sup> Brent Tarter, "Bacon, Nathaniel (1647–1676) – Encyclopedia Virginia," assessed March 25, 2022, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/bacon-nathaniel-1647-1676/>.

<sup>44</sup> Brent Tarter, "Bacon, Nathaniel (1647–1676) – Encyclopedia Virginia." n.d. <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/bacon-nathaniel-1647-1676/>.

<sup>45</sup> "Bacon's Rebellion - Historic Jamestowne Part of Colonial National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service)."

<sup>46</sup> "Bacon's Rebellion - Historic Jamestowne Part of Colonial National Historical Park (U.S. National Park Service)."



expanding the known facts surrounding this early revolution in American history. With many concluding the earlier views of Bacon as a hero of self-rule and advocate of independence from British royalty simply not plausible, based on review of the records. Arguing instead that Bacon and Berkeley were only interested in benefiting themselves and the small circle of privileged individuals surrounding them.

Accordingly, it is important to expand our understanding of the underlying causes of the rebellion and how those circumstances influenced and guided those who participated. Such an analysis should include an empathetic perspective of the extreme philosophical, social, and economic obstacles placed upon these early settlers. By doing so, it quickly becomes apparent the self-inflicted damage and lasting repercussions of the rebellion are far more critical to the history of colonial America than the two individuals that merely coordinated them.

Shortly after Bacon's Rebellion, the consensus was that Bacon had been in the wrong and Governor Berkeley had played the role of the hero. A 1731 poem by Ebenezer Cooke called Bacon "A Man respected by the Mob/As a fit Fool to do their Jobb," while William Keith, in his 1738 *History of the British Plantations in America*, wondered why anyone would rebel "against so good a Governor."<sup>47</sup> Not until the American Revolution did Bacon's Rebellion begin to take on a new perspective among colonists. They readily embraced comparisons to the signing of the Declaration of Independence with Nathaniel Bacon's military rise against a royal colony and its Governor almost one hundred years

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<sup>47</sup> James Rice, *Tales from a Revolution*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 203.

earlier. He had morphed into “the author, and George Washington, the finisher,” of America’s revolutionary ideals.”<sup>48</sup>

Although Bacon unexpectedly died on October 26, 1676, with the rebellion falling apart a month later, Virginia aristocracy was shaken by the idea that indentured white and black servants could so swiftly form a rebel militia; and belief spread quickly in the region that it could happen again. Therefore, Virginia lawmakers began the lengthy process of legislating distinctions between “white” and “black” inhabitants. By permanently enslaving Africans and providing poor white indentured servants limited rights and status, they intended to permanently separate the two groups from ever joining forces again.<sup>49</sup> As Historian Ira Berlin explains, “Now what is interesting about this is that we normally say that slavery and freedom are opposite things—that they are diametrically opposed. But what we see here in Virginia in the late 17th century, around Bacon's Rebellion, is that freedom and slavery are created at the same moment.”<sup>50</sup>

When the Virginian aristocrats pursued implementing these legislative doctrines, the practice of slavery became energized in the south. Several historians of Bacon’s Rebellion elected to perpetuate the glorified myth of the revolt, ignoring the historical context and prevailing injustices of the time. Choosing instead to craft a grandiose tale of freedom’s fight against tyranny which was simply not true nor capable of being justified. Such historical perspectives dominated the south, the effects of which are still being reconciled today.

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<sup>48</sup> Rice, *Tales from a Revolution*, 203.

<sup>49</sup> “Inventing Black and White,” Facing History and Ourselves, last updated on August 11, 2017, <https://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-2/inventing-black-and-white>.

<sup>50</sup> Ira Berlin, “Race: The Power of an Illusion,” accessed on March 15, 2023, <https://www.racepowerofanillusion.org/interviews/interview-ira-berlin-2002>.

As an example, Thomas Wertenbaker, in *Torchbearer of the Revolution: The Story of Bacon's Rebellion and Its Leader* (1940), went as far as writing,

But Nathaniel Bacon was almost a stranger to America and to the people who were to hail him as their hero, when a century before Lexington and Concord he protested against the repressive measures of the mother country, took up arms against the royal governor, drove him from his capital, defeated his troops and stood ready to give battle to the redcoats sent over to suppress him.<sup>51</sup>

Detailed review of the historical facts do not justify such laudatory expressions. It is far more likely Bacon was driven by self-interest, with little regard for democratic ideals or social equality. Prompting subsequent historian James D. Rice to devastatingly concluded “Small wonder then, that a modern historian has called *Torchbearer of the Revolution* “one of the worst books on Virginia that a reputable scholarly historian ever published.”<sup>52</sup>

With his book, *The Governor and the Rebel*, Wilcomb E. Washburn (1972), made an extensive review of the original source documents, working with records in the United States as well as those housed in the United Kingdom. As a young graduate student at Harvard University in the 1950's, Washburn was troubled with Wertenbaker's interpretation of the rebellion, including its causes. Ultimately concluding the real reason that Bacon and his fellow rebels conspired against Berkeley was the latter's approach toward dealing with the indigenous people, preferring mutual cooperation in lieu of total annihilation.<sup>53</sup> “The record of the June Assembly proves that the real grievances against Governor Berkeley was not that he refused to defend the country from the Indians - a

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas Wertenbaker, *Torchbearer of the Revolution*, (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1965), 3.

<sup>52</sup> Rice, *Tales from a Revolution*, 204.

<sup>53</sup> Rice, *Tales from a Revolution*, 205.

ridiculous charge against the conqueror of Opechancanough - but that he refused to authorize the slaughter and dispossession of the innocent as well as the “guilty.”<sup>54</sup>

Brent Tarter, in his work “Bacon's Rebellion, the Grievances of the People, and the Political Culture of Seventeenth-Century Virginia” (2011), suggests previous historians failed to consider the individual grievances of the colonists. Choosing instead to rely on the conclusions of the three examining commissioners sent by the king, who condemned what they perceived as Berkeley’s heavy-handed attempts to suppress the rebellion, believing the grievances simply served as further evidence supporting the overall opinions of the commission. As Tarter argues, “Most historians of Bacon’s Rebellion have overlooked or neglected the county grievances. Some may have taken at face value the commissioners statement that the county grievances contained no explanation for the rebellion and therefore did not regard the documents as important or read them as carefully.”<sup>55</sup>

Tarter focuses his efforts on two themes, which are based upon his review of written grievances: “one was about how high the taxes were without benefiting the people at large; and the other was that the manner of taxation appeared to benefit the people of property – the tobacco planters- at the expense of people who owned little or no land or raised little or no tobacco but were required to pay high taxes in tobacco anyway.”<sup>56</sup> Tarter takes exception with Washburn by suggesting he approached the rebellion from a perspective beginning in 1657, largely limiting the causes to the frictions

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<sup>54</sup> Wilcomb Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1972), 163.

<sup>55</sup> Brent Tarter, “Bacon’s Rebellion, the Grievances of the People, and the Political Culture of Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*, 119, no. 1 (2011), 2, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40047267>.

<sup>56</sup> Tarter, “Bacon’s Rebellion, the Grievances of the People, and the Political Culture of Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” 9.

between the colonist and Indigenous peoples. Failing to adequately consider the “grievances” lodged years earlier of those who subsequently participated in the rebellion.<sup>57</sup>

“Bacon’s Rebellion in Indian Country” (2014), by James D. Rice, insists the story of the rebellion should be expanded by geography and include the Indigenous people who lived in those regions. Understanding the surrounding circumstances in 1676 where significantly influenced by events beyond Virginia and the British colonists who lived in Jamestown. “The origins of and working solutions to the problem exposed by Bacon’s Rebellion were forged as much in Indian country as they were within the heart of Virginia.”<sup>58</sup> In addition, the complexities of the struggles between England and France for control of eastern North America, not only negatively impacted the Five Nations, but many other tribes living along the Susquehanna River.<sup>59</sup>

Rice’s book, *Tales from a Revolution: Bacon’s Rebellion and the Transformation of Early America* (2012), focuses on the two most well-known protagonists, Governor Sir William Berkeley and Nathaniel Bacon. Rice focuses on the opposing views of these headstrong leaders, specifically the governing of the settlement and more importantly, the approach needed to engage and control the Native inhabitants. Berkeley and Bacon made every effort to control their fates, only to be inevitably swept up by a world which was rapidly evolving on all fronts (social, economic, etc.). A distinction which Rice succinctly expresses, “As events unfold, one of the rebels is warned that danger awaits if he

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<sup>57</sup> Tarter, “Bacon’s Rebellion, the Grievances of the People, and the Political Culture of Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” 1

<sup>58</sup> James D. Rice, “Bacon’s Rebellion in Indian Country,” *Journal of American History* 101, no. 3 (December 2014), 750, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jau651>.

<sup>59</sup> “Bacon’s Rebellion in Indian Country,” 750.

continues. But it's too late to turn back. "I am in over Shoes," he replies, "I will be in over Boots."<sup>60</sup>

Isaac A. Reed in his article, "Charismatic Performance: A Study of Bacon's Rebellion" (2013) makes an in-depth analysis of Nathaniel Bacon. Believing Bacon was able to create an air of invincibility based on his public acts and displays. As Reed states, "Charismatic performance, I argue, provide one route to sovereignty, and thus to political domination and the legitimate use of physical violence;"<sup>61</sup> emphasizing a critical moment at Jamestown, "However, the key standoff at the courthouse resulted in a single material signifier – the war commission – being transferred to Bacon and his men, and carried out to the next anti-Indian campaign." At that moment, Reed suggests, Berkeley provided Bacon (and the 500 men he brought with him) with the validity he needed to solidify and expand his sphere of influence.<sup>62</sup>

Horn, argues in his book *1619*, that year is the birth of democracy in British North America, for when the Company, led by Sir Edwin Sandys, adopted the "idea of a commonwealth," there was a seismic "shift from a society based on Company control of the land to a society founded on individual ownership."<sup>63</sup> In 1609, he helped the reorganization of Jamestown, which transferred control from the king to a Company governor, which established the General Assembly and when this progressive concept and corresponding legal doctrine were implemented, the emergence of the elite gentry class began to take shape in the tidewater area of Virginia.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Rice, *Tales from a Revolution*, " xiii.

<sup>61</sup> Isaac Ariail Reed, "Charismatic Performance: A Study of Bacon's Rebellion," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 1, no. 2 (2013): 254, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ajcs.2013.2>.

<sup>62</sup> Reed, "Charismatic Performance: A Study of Bacon's Rebellion," 282.

<sup>63</sup> Horn, *1619*, 44.

<sup>64</sup> Horn, *1619*, 61-63.

Despite these scholarly works regarding Bacon's Rebellion, there remains an opportunity to expand the understanding of the economic, social, and political circumstances surrounding the rebellion by focusing beyond Bacon and Berkeley. Jamestown entered a dreaded state of war long before the spring of 1676, and it engulfed everyone who stood in its way (be they British, Africans, colonists, or Indigenous peoples); whether they welcomed it or not. Thomas Hobbes (himself a shareholder of the London Company) was familiar with the lofty concepts of a commonwealth and the benefits it could theoretically provide.

He also understood human nature at its core and the devastation which could result should this royal colony eventually degrade into such a horrific state. It is critical to broaden the comprehension of Bacon's Rebellion by considering it from an aggregate and not micro perspective. What ultimately happened on that fall night in 1676, was the culmination of tragic events and surrounding circumstances which need to be further explored. The following chapter supplies a new lens with which to view and analyze these events using the theory of Thomas Hobbes.

## Chapter IV.

### Thomas Hobbes

Typical for many born in the late sixteenth century, Hobbes was forced to endure harsh conditions from the very beginning. Born on April 5, 1588, his mother (whose name has never been known) gave birth prematurely, fully aware the Spanish Armada was sailing up the English Channel. At that point, as Hobbes noted in his biography “my mother gave birth to twins; myself and fear.”<sup>65</sup> However the true source of his misfortune may have been the abandonment by his father, who was an Anglican minister and forced to flee their home in Malmesbury (Westport), England after he engaged in a fight with a fellow vicar. Subsequently, Hobbes’ mother was left alone to tend to him, along with his older brother and younger sister. Fortunately for Thomas, he was eventually sent to the care of his wealthy uncle Francis.<sup>66</sup>

With the assistance of his uncle, Hobbes studied Aristotelian philosophy at Oxford University, beginning in 1601, attempting to reconcile the technical, and abstract theories of ancient philosophers; he did this by incorporating the prevailing language, scientific, and philosophical knowledge of his time. His detailed explanation of materialism suggests that only physical objects exist; and every mental action is a feature of a unique physical object.<sup>67</sup> Upon graduating in 1608, Lord Cavendish hired Hobbes to

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<sup>65</sup> Laurie M. Johnson Bagby, *Hobbes’s Leviathan*, (London: Continuum Publishing Group, 2007), 1.

<sup>66</sup> Bagby, *Hobbes’s Leviathan*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Stewart Duncan, “Thomas Hobbes (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)” modified February 12, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes/>, 15.



tutor his son William.<sup>68</sup> It was during this time he became intricately connected to the Cavendish family, especially William (the future Earl of Devonshire) whom he tutored while serving as a travel guide during their frequent European excursions. Even after William's death in 1629, Hobbes continued to work for the family serving as a secretary and financial advisor.<sup>69</sup>

Such dedication and commitment to service did not go unnoticed and in June of 1622, the minutes of the Virginia Company of London contained the following entry: "It pleased the Right Honoble the Lord Cauendish to passe ouer one of his shares of land in Virginia vnto Mr. Hobbes weh beinge allowed of by the Auditors was also approued and ratified by the Court."<sup>70</sup> Hobbes attended many of the Company meetings, but never attended without Cavendish, and while there are references to Indigenous Americans in *Leviathan*, there is limited information as to how much Jamestown directly or indirectly influenced him or his philosophical conclusions.<sup>71</sup>

What has been documented, is that prior to the English Civil Wars in 1642-46 and 1648-51, which resulted with the King being executed and a republic declared, Hobbes left England for France (1640-51). During this time, he gained a reputation for being a scholarly writer on law, mathematics, and a translator of the classics, becoming famous for his works on disputes regarding religious questions and his writings on morality and politics. Civil wars in combination with the threat of anarchy are fundamental to understanding Hobbes. While Plato and Aristotle believed ignorance prevents man from

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<sup>68</sup> Noel Malcolm, "Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company," *The Historical Journal* 24, no. 2 (1981): 297, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2638788>.

<sup>69</sup> Laureen Bagby, *Hobbes's Leviathan*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Malcolm, "Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company," 298.

<sup>71</sup> Malcolm, "Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company," 297 and 319.

being good and shunning evil, Hobbes does not believe in such exactitudes as absolute or objective morality.<sup>72</sup> Instead, he reasons moral judgements are subjective and reached through voluntary acquiescence, and the prioritization of such values in each society.

Twenty-five years prior to Bacon's rebellion, Thomas Hobbes in his work *Leviathan* (1651), examined the potential for such societal complexities when he wrote of his theories on man's state of nature and war. In his earlier years, Hobbes experienced the horrific conditions of the English Civil War and concluded that unless an equitable and mutually agreeable form of government was created, England would deteriorate into a dreaded state of nature. Where individuals would be reduced to mere existence and use whatever force they deemed necessary to take what they needed. As Hobbes famously concluded, "And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutal and short."<sup>73</sup> These observations are more than a pessimistic view of human instinct and a theoretic justification for sovereign rule; they promote a pragmatic model for establishing peaceful social coexistence, grounded on an economic theory of promoting market efficiencies.

Hobbes justified a structured society to reduce the risks of stressing self-preservation and to discourage a state of nature, a situation he believed one should make every effort to avoid. For in such a state, there are no natural allegiances, no punishments, and no concept of individual property ownership. There would be no moral absolutes, only those judged to a relative subjective value or to a particular frame of reference (such as those exhibited by a generic culture, religion, or state). Hobbes had difficulty understanding those who attempted to suggest reason alone could promote a man to

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<sup>72</sup> Bagby, *Hobbes's Leviathan: A Reader's Guide*, 14-17.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Interpretations*, ed. Richard E Flathman, and David Johnston (New York; London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 70.

virtue. For him, the idea of such lofty ideals is far too optimistic, even when viewed with a religious inference, believing we are all fundamentally untrusting, willing to take advantage of others for our own protection and gain when we believe it is necessary. As Hobbes emphasized, “Let him therefore consider with himselfe, when taking a journey, he armes himselfe, and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his doores; when even in his house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there bee Laws, and publike Officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall bee done to him.”<sup>74</sup>

To establish this pragmatic community, Hobbes suggested a structure foundationally based on social contracts, where individuals surrender their natural “rights to all things” and voluntarily agree to limit certain privileges, retaining only their ultimate right to protect their lives.<sup>75</sup> Such agreements would be premised on laws, freely made, encompassing the weight of moral responsibility, thereby creating an implied duty among the contracting individuals. There are additional practical, economically efficient, and equitable benefits as well, to implementing and establishing a structured State. By engaging and negotiating with societal members, securing mutual agreement, including the rule of law, one should not only increase their chances for survival by establishing a structure of peaceful coexistence, but also significantly enhance their common societal aspirations and economic opportunities.<sup>76</sup>

The consequences for doing otherwise were exhibited early on at Jamestown and should have been anticipated and addressed by the Company. By purposefully choosing

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<sup>74</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 71.

<sup>75</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 73.

<sup>76</sup> Garrath Williams, “Hobbes, Thomas: Moral and Political Philosophy | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy,” accessed March 15, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/hobmoral/>.

to establish a legal framework based on profitability at the expense of others, the Company quickly transformed Jamestown into Hobbes state of nature and war, thus perpetuating the ongoing contradictions between the ideals of equality and freedom versus those of slavery, and Indigenous extermination. As an example, in 1619 (just twelve years after the first colonists arrived), the first African slaves were brought to Jamestown, and it quickly became apparent there was a direct correlation between the accumulation of wealth (and relative influence) and the number of slaves one owned. In addition, as Horn notes, the Company entered into a deplorable agreement with London authorities “to transport to Virginia hundreds of poor children who would serve as field-workers and domestic servants and who would otherwise have petered the streets and public places of the city.”<sup>77</sup>

For over three hundred and fifty years, there has been varying scholarly research and analysis performed and painstakingly written on Thomas Hobbes, more specifically on his work *Leviathan*. The focus for many of these works address the state of nature, sovereign rule, social contracts, property rights, etc. I focus my argument on Hobbes’ thoughts regarding the natural condition of humankind (as written in Chapter XIII of *Leviathan*), specifically, his warning concerning the inevitable consequences of a society devolving into his dreaded state of nature. The principles themselves are the primary merit of Hobbes scholarship in my work, and not the philosophical journey he made to conclude them.

With his article, “Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company” (2021), Noel Malcolm compares and contrasts Sir Edwin Sandys’ view of individual natural rights

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<sup>77</sup> Horn, *1619*, 135.

with that of Hobbes. As an example, Sandys advocates any dealing or negotiations with the Indigenous peoples should be based on mutual respect and equity, while Hobbes believed that the sovereign had complete authority to take lives or land as they deemed necessary. Since the fundamental objectives of the Company (ultimately based upon the authority of the king) were to establish the colony and secure lands, “The simplest argument was the colonists held their land by right of conquest. This appears to have been the official view of James I, as expressed in parliament by Secretary Calver in 1621.”<sup>78</sup> Malcolm notes however, Hobbes’s relationship with the Company may have caused him some intellectual consternation. As an example, Hobbes criticized and demeaned the social makeup of Native American tribes in *Leviathan*, (upon which he formulated his position they could be conquered and their resources taken) only to be subsequently informed from those in Jamestown those same tribal communities exhibited many of the societal aspects of his coveted commonwealth, which was diametrically opposed to what he had previously written on the subject.<sup>79</sup>

“Hobbes, Donne and the Virginia Company: Terra Nullius and ‘The Bulimia of Dominion’” (2015), by Patricia Springborg, explains how the Virginia Company invoked the idea of “unclaimed land” to execute their royal mandate, which instructed them to colonize America. After the Jamestown Massacre of 1622, invoking the concept of *terra nullius* (nobody’s land) became the predominant legal basis for seizing land from Native Americans. Springborg outlines this legal distinction as John Donne described it on November 13, 1622, “In the law of Nature and Nations, A Land neuer inhabited by any,

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<sup>78</sup> Malcolm, “Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company,” 303.

<sup>79</sup> Malcolm, “Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company,” 297–321.

or utterly derelicted, and immemorially abandoned by the form Inhabitants, becomes theirs that will possesse it.”<sup>80</sup>

Nicholas Rice, with “Theorising the ‘State of Nature’: Colonial Logics in Hobbes and Locke” (2021), addresses colonization of the Americas by the Spanish, French, English and Dutch; a process which had begun in the early sixteenth century. Each of these countries engaged in the process of forceful acquisition, which was typically premised on violence, which Hobbes and John Locke considered consistent with the ‘state of nature.’ With Hobbes specifically, Rice concludes, “Given a ‘state of nature’ unrestrained by notions of justice, practices of enslavement and projects of extermination are permitted by the conclusion that “every [sovereign] has a right to everything; even to one another’s body.”<sup>81</sup>

Such scholarship regarding Hobbes and his relationship with the Virginia Company is interesting and illuminating, although somewhat vague and inconclusive (due to an insufficient source of primary records). I believe Hobbes’s direct dealings with the Company were limited due (in no small part) to his close relationship with Sir William Cavendish, who became his benefactor and an investor in the Company and may have purposefully or inadvertently discouraged his former tutor from being opinionated in his personal matters of business.

In any event, there is little direct evidence that conclusively suggests Hobbes had significant influence on the Company policies or their adopted courses of action. It is

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<sup>80</sup> Patricia Springborg, "Hobbes, Donne and the Virginia Company: Terra Nullius and “The Bulimia of Dominionium,” *History of Political Thought* XXXVI, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 113, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26226965>.

<sup>81</sup> Nicholas Rice, “Theorising the ‘State of Nature’: Colonial Logics in Hobbes and Locke,” *The Yale Historical Review*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.yalehistoricalreview.org/theorising-the-state-of-nature-colonial-logics-in-hobbes-and-locke/>.

however, clear he held prejudiced opinions regarding Native Americans and their social structures. Which were likely based on secondhand information and intuitive speculation, all of which were filtered through his familiarity with England's practice of social hierarchy at the time.<sup>82</sup> My efforts will focus primarily on how Hobbes' theories on basic human nature can help to clarify and illuminate the causes leading up to Bacon's Rebellion.

Hobbes argued it is best if the individuals of a society voluntarily agree to obey a sovereign, but only if that authority can provide peace and security. He suggests all human actions are influenced by forces external to an individual's will. We are naturally prone to errors, subject to undue influence; often relying on faulty reasoning, erroneous religious interpretation, or by the disingenuous persuasion of others. Considering these human conditions, Hobbes believes social agreements are the most practical way to achieve peaceful coexistence.

Hobbes infers an unpredictable environment would encourage individuals to make attempts of force on others (for ulterior motives), with those targeted individuals being forced into defending themselves by repelling such efforts. These aggressive actions would expectedly lead to a continuous state of war, due to this unstable atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty. It may not consist of actual fighting, but as Hobbes states, there would be a "known disposition thereto, during which there is no assurance to the contrary."<sup>83</sup> With this and similar statements, he points out that given

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<sup>82</sup> Malcolm, "Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company," 297–321.

<sup>83</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70.

this state of nature, and without a structured form of rule there would be a continual state of war; caused by competition, diffidence, and glory.<sup>84</sup>

Competition with others is foundational to the struggle for survival, expending efforts in securing food, shelter, land, and given our natural competitiveness; the pursuit of these items would eventually require men to use violence. Hobbes observes human beings naturally inclined toward self-interest, including an insatiable need for gain, glory and reputation. Suggesting individuals are desirous to have others recognize their superiority. While Hobbes recognizes these traits are not admirable, he believes they are critically embedded obstacles to securing mutual agreement and long-lasting peace.<sup>85</sup>

The second characteristic, diffidence, considers the possibility that despite one having not yet faced direct conflict, they may in the immediate future. Faced with this inevitability, the critical decision is whether to wait for an attack or to make a preemptive strike. The benefit of initiating aggression on one's adversary is they could be weak, and therefore be inclined to submit. Upon doing so, they would surrender all their resources, which would add to the attacking party's strength. Simultaneously however, there is the risk the adversary will make similar calculations and take the same approach. Given these immense choices involving life and death, mutual distrust is often created, leaving the prudent action of attacking one's adversary as quickly as possible. Such exercises are known as the Hobbesian trap, where two adversaries are moved closer and closer to a preemptive strike due to the bilateral fear of imminent attack.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70

<sup>85</sup> Bagby, *Hobbes's Leviathan*, 30.

<sup>86</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70.



Thirdly, Hobbes addresses the quest for glory or enhanced reputation, including those with a prevalence for self-promotion, who may attack because they seek an enhanced reputation (along with the competitive advantages) of having others submit. These individuals tend to overestimate their own strategic or physical abilities and are incapable of checking their inherent aggressions. By acknowledging these types of individuals, the notion of anticipating such actions (and the distrusting of others) is only reinforced.<sup>87</sup>

Due to these inherent risks of societal and economic collapse and destruction, Hobbes advocates these conditions should be avoided at all costs, except to the extent they jeopardize one's self-preservation. To leave the state of war, we need to leave the state of nature. If no one person is so vastly superior they can effortlessly deter others from going on the attack, we need to establish a mutually agreed upon set of laws and a head of state or sovereign, who is empowered to enforce orderly rule.

Although these arrangements can be viewed as limiting one's freedom, the primary purpose is to provide a haven and ward off the terrible state of nature. Only by creating restrictive covenants or social contracts, can individuals significantly increase their chances for a peaceful coexistence and enjoy the benefits; an environment we should rationally seek.<sup>88</sup> Hobbes concedes however, that even if we were to employ such strategies, the best we can hope for is a peaceful life of coexistence with others, not a complete state of cooperation and harmony.

Hobbes theories "Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, as concerning their Felicity, and Misery" as detailed in *Leviathan*, provide insightful historical clarity toward

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<sup>87</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70.

<sup>88</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 72-78.

helping us understand the catastrophic social and economic events that led up to Bacon's Rebellion.<sup>89</sup> Was this early settler revolution in British North America, an inevitable consequence of The London Company's propaganda, which intentionally promoted a strategy of unregulated capitalism on this Royal Colony, mandating self-serving proclamations that encouraged and justified an economic and social doctrine premised on the unrelenting pursuit of profit at the expense of others? It is important to fully explore this episode in early American history, its causes, and effects since they provide us with the genesis for many similar challenges confronting the United States today.

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<sup>89</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 68-72.

Chapter V.  
A State of War

Hobbes argued that no one person is so superior to another that he can insulate himself from destruction by the hand of another. “For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself.”<sup>90</sup> A warning which could have served Berkeley well during his second term as governor at Jamestown. King Charles I, appointed Berkeley Governor of Virginia in 1642, and as Robert Walsh noted subsequently in 1705 he was regarded in England as “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.”<sup>91</sup> Yet there had been continuing underlying tensions between the inhabitants at Jamestown and their governor, which were due largely to the residual consequences of poor governmental oversight, mismanagement, discrimination, and self-dealing.

There had been significant societal upheavals, and perhaps the most perilous involved the colonists continuous attempts toward reconciling the ever-growing complexities and potential dangers of coexisting with the Indigenous peoples. It is difficult to comprehend retrospectively just how excruciating the voyage from England to Virginia was, given the never-ending threat of deadly disease, drowning, and the harsh

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<sup>90</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 68.

<sup>91</sup> Robert Beverley, *The History & Present State Of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 57.

realization upon arrival that the struggles had only just begun. The English, from the beginning had taken the perspective the Natives were “savages” and could not or would not recognize any legal claim for the land they occupied. Equally alienating, the English believed they had a moral obligation to convert the Indigenous inhabitants to Christianity, “From the beginning, the English assumed a proprietary attitude, viewing the Indians as either ‘noble savages’ or soulless heathens in need of removal. For their part, the tribes generally did not respond well to the colonists’ relentless efforts to bring them to Christ, and they viewed with alarm the continued encroachment.”<sup>92</sup>

These religious suppositions had been advanced for years, at least as early as 1622 when John Donne, the chaplain for King James had preached a sermon to members of the Company on the colonial doctrine of *terra nullius*. A concept which argued there was a right and duty to populate “unclaimed lands and expand the promulgations of Christianity. From these self-righteous beginnings terra nullius had a long career as the pretext for the dispossession of native peoples in North America, Australia, and the Middle East.”<sup>93</sup>

The English not only dismissed any concept of native sovereignty, but they also actively exploited and participated in the slave trade of Indigenous peoples. Upon arriving in Jamestown in 1674, Bacon received an Indian trade license from his cousin Governor Berkeley, which economically benefited both of them. When the rebellion collapsed in the fall of 1676, royal commissioners were brought in to investigate the causes and to inventory the estate of Bacon. According to their findings, “In a column

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<sup>92</sup> Ron Soodalter, “Tidewater Terror,” *The Quarterly Journal of Military*, no. 27 (Autumn 2014): 49, <https://www.historynet.com/tidewater-wars-1622/?f>.

<sup>93</sup> Springborg, “Hobbes, Donne, And The Virginia Company,” 113-114.

separate from the servants, the commissioners listed seven Indian slaves ranging in age from as old as forty to as young as one year.”<sup>94</sup>

Hobbes’ perspective regarding Indigenous peoples and their understandings of land ownership and self-rule appears to justify such actions, since he argues that because they do not have a sovereign of ultimate authority or any accompanying government or societal rules of coexistence (which would be predicated on voluntary compliance). As a consequence, they have limited claims or rights or, as Springborg notes, “The constant warfare and internecine strife in which he saw the Virginian Native American engaged would, in any event, be evidence enough that they had not made the transition to civil society, which he nevertheless holds out for them in the future.”<sup>95</sup>

Believing so added to Hobbes’ justification for colonizing America, along with expanding the message of Christianity, and conveniently providing the rationalization for those willing to relocate from England in the hope of bettering themselves and their future generations. An argument which has been made since the beginning of time, by those more powerful who are looking to enrich themselves and justify the wrongs they have and are preparing to commit against those less fortunate.

The settlers at Jamestown were forced to contend with other obstacles as well, first, there were ongoing economic pressures which resulted in lower prices for tobacco, due primarily to increased supply and an English Act which required the colonists to deal exclusively with the Crown. By doing so, the colonists were limited to purchasing goods

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<sup>94</sup> C.S. Everett, *Indian Slavery in Colonial America* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 84.

<sup>95</sup> Springborg, “Hobbes, Donne, And The Virginia Company,” 130-131.

which originated from English ports, with the same holding true for the sale of their tobacco; they were required to deal with English merchants and no one else.<sup>96</sup>

There had been counter-measuring attempts made by the colonists to correct these economic hardships by suspending the growing of tobacco in an effort to raise prices, for up to a year, but there were inconsistent responses from Maryland and North Carolina which made any coordinated response hopeless and pricing strategies doomed for failure. In the end, the Virginians were forced to deal with the English merchants for the supplies and merchandise they desired without the benefit of economic competition, resulting with their being over charged for sub-par products which barely sustained them.<sup>97</sup>

Secondly, there were significant issues involving royal land grants and the negative impact they would impose on those who had occupied and improved the very same acreage. These actions created consternation for those colonists who had questionable title to the land they occupied yet could clearly demonstrate they had incurred significant cost and effort in improving the property. “King Charles the Second, to gratifie some Nobles about him, made Two great Grants out of the Country. 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 Encouragement of several Charters granted by his Royal Ancestors to that Colony.”<sup>98</sup> Such impacted individuals dutifully sent agents to England to express their grievances, but requests were typically ignored.

To make matters worse, a poll tax was passed at the first general assembly in 1619, which appears to be for no other purpose than to compensate the legislative

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<sup>96</sup> Beverley, *The History & Present State of Virginia*, 55-56.

<sup>97</sup> Beverley, *The History & Present State of Virginia*, 55-56.

<sup>98</sup> Beverley, *The History & Present State of Virginia*, 57.

speaker, clerk, and sergeant of arms. Such legislation impacted the poor disproportionately as they were barely able to eke out an existence before the tax was enacted, and any suggestion implementing a progressive tax had never been seriously considered.<sup>99</sup> There were severe trade duties as well that essentially had the same affect, having been imposed on plantations with the only perceived intent being to provide a respectable income for the Collector, Comptroller, and remaining administrative officials.<sup>100</sup>

The colonists faced a multitude of other concerns besides land grants, taxes and the redistribution of wealth to select government officials. After the Dutch had successfully invaded the Chesapeake Bay in 1665-1667 and captured a multitude of English Ships, the Jamestown assembly determined to construct a series of forts. However, when the Dutch again sailed into Chesapeake in 1672, the forts had been in a state of severe neglect and provided little protection. For the colonists, all of these negative results reinforced their growing belief the monies they paid for governmental oversight and administration proved to be of little benefit to them, as they were neither protected from those negatively impacting their commercial enterprises or those challenging their legal status as owners of the land they occupied since they arrived.<sup>101</sup>

Unfortunately for Governor Berkeley and the citizenry around him, the Jamestown governing body had been premised on a hierarchy similar to the ruling structure of England, where those in power could perpetuate their social and financial standing upon being appointed by the uncontested authority of the governor.

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<sup>99</sup> Beverley, *The History & Present State of Virginia*, 58.

<sup>100</sup> Beverley, *The History & Present State of Virginia*, 58.

<sup>101</sup> Craven, *The Southern Colonies*, 375-376.

Additionally, such nepotism and governmental mismanagement was far more observable at Jamestown than England; since the community was much smaller, the population more geographically consolidated, and those engaged in self-promoting and financial gain more observable. Especially so, given those men in power typically enjoyed more opportunity for wealth than others, since they could benefit from lucrative appointments (such as sheriff) and possessed the ability to take advantage of those less fortunate.<sup>102</sup>

Circumstances which did not go unnoticed: “The poverty of the Country is such,” declared Bacon, “that all the power and sway is got into the hands of the rich, who by extortious advantages, having the common people in their debt, have always curbed and oppressed them in all manner of ways.” He saw little hope of redress when the appeal must be made “to the very persons our complaints do accuse.”<sup>103</sup> Even if we were to accept the overall economic pressures at Jamestown were not due entirely to the selfish acts of the wealthy or biased actions of the government, it seems reasonable there were many who believed such controlling factors were responsible for their situation, and by seeing themselves as victims became convinced, they had little power or influence to prevent them from continuing.

These entrenched beliefs, societal perspectives, along with the strategies for either promoting or combating such doctrine (depending on individual needs and aspirations) positioned each interest against the other. Since there were no previously agreed upon rules of cooperation or engagement, each party quickly descended into a posture of self-interest that naturally caused rivals, conflicts, and ulterior motives. The Company, from inception, had been predicated on venture capital principals, where potential investors

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<sup>102</sup> Craven, *The Southern Colonies*, 377.

<sup>103</sup> Craven, *The Southern Colonies*, 377.



were lured into risking their financial resources for the promise of vast wealth and economic opportunity. A strategy which forces individuals to focus their efforts on self-promotion, preservation and survival at all costs.

For others who were not privileged, the choice to locate to Jamestown was made for them since they had no plausible expectation of owning land or achieving social status in England; they understood their best chances for economic improvement were far greater at Jamestown and the surrounding areas. As a result, the wealthy continuously benefited by sending individuals in their place, by agreeing to pay the way for those who would work their land; along with the promise those same individuals might have a chance to work other land for themselves; which in most instances never came to fruition.

The Company, fully aware of this leverage, continuously sought ways to convince those with little opportunity in England to settle in Jamestown; often utilizing deceptive practices to achieve their goals. As an example, consider the early colonists who, soon after their arrival, having been exposed to the harsh realities of settler life, began to think of their commitment to Virginia as a limited engagement. “Without home comforts, the company’s planters looked on the colony as a place of short stay rather than a permanent residence, and so directed their labours toward short-term profits to the neglect not only of the ‘Staple Com[m]oddities, but even the verie necessities of Mans liffe’.”<sup>104</sup>

In an attempt to discourage such behavior and in the interest of raising much needed capital to ensure returns for their investors, the Company in the summer of 1621 (led by Sir Edwin Sandys), conceived of a for profit plan premised on sending potential

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<sup>104</sup> Jennifer Potter, *The Jamestown Brides, The Battered Wives of the New World* (London, Atlantic Books, 2019), 118.

brides to Virginia. “The intention was that the stock raised from individual investors would pay for the brides’ clothing and transport to Virginia, estimated at £8 each in the original subscription but later raised to £12 per woman. Adventurers would reap their profit by ‘charging’ the men who married them in the colony’s prevailing currency of tobacco – initially 120 pounds in weight of tobacco for each bride but raised to 150 pounds by the time the Warwick departed for Jamestown because of the great shrinkage and other losses upon the tobacco from Virginia.”<sup>105</sup>

Payment required the finest tobacco, which translated into a handsome profit for the investors of £10 per bride, a transaction which also provided the additional benefit of further obligating those individuals into permanently staying in the settlement. This is yet another example of how profits were the primary concern and not the treatment of the individual or any negative impact on society as a whole. Although one could at least argue the brides at least were comparatively more fortunate as they at least theoretically had the ability to choose their husbands. <sup>106</sup> Such are the sterile calculations and biased machinations of those individuals or entities whose primary concern is self-interest and the pursuit of profit regardless of the cost.

Adding to the consternations were the ever-increasing conflicts with the Indigenous peoples as the demand for their land and resources escalated. To be sure, there were atrocities committed on both sides, such as the Native attack at Jamestown on the morning of March 22, 1622. Mary Rowlandson, the wife of a minister from Massachusetts described the scene from her house before being captured. “the fire increasing, and coming along behind us roaring, and the Indians gaping before us with

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<sup>105</sup> Potter, *The Jamestown Brides*, 120.

<sup>106</sup> Potter, *The Jamestown Brides*, 307.

their guns, spears, and hatchets to devour us. A wounded man begged for his life, promising money, but the Indians bashed out his brains, stripped him naked and split open his bowels.”<sup>107</sup>

In response to these acts, the English extracted their revenge by poisoning the wine they used to lure the Natives to negotiate terms of ending the hostilities. Today, you can find a memorial to Dr. Pott (who is believed to have concocted the poisonous mixture) in the small church at Jamestown which was erected by the Medical Society of Virginia in 1950. And despite the Company’s praise of him for his expertise in poisons, “Virginia treasurer George Sandys described him as a ‘pitiful counselor’ and a ‘cipher’ who enjoyed the company of his inferiors ‘while his good liquor lasted.’ ”<sup>108</sup> Subsequently the Council at Jamestown denied the event ever took place, choosing instead to blame the entire affair on rumors which were the inevitable consequences of infighting.<sup>109</sup> It is important to note, these horrors occurred just fifteen years after the first English settlers landed in Virginia.

Thomas Hobbes argues in chapter XIII of *Leviathan*, those living in a state of nature are by necessity living in a state of war against all others; a status which forces them to prioritize their very survival against the interests of all others. The basis for these conclusions are his experiences during the English Civil war, where he came to understand that without a common authority to keep each party in awe, a state of war would be unavoidable. In such a world, each individual would be aware that any other would be willing to fight, not necessarily actual fighting (although that is certainly

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<sup>107</sup> Potter, *The Jamestown Brides*, 286.

<sup>108</sup> Potter, *The Jamestown Brides*, 295.

<sup>109</sup> Potter, *The Jamestown Brides*, 295.

possible), but a state where there is no security of life and property, and all are existing in a state of constant fear. In addition, there would be substantial reductions of productivity, as all efforts would be focused on personal gain without any resources allocated to the betterment of society as a whole; severely limiting any coordinated opportunities for pursuing long-term economic gain.<sup>110</sup>

Such was the status quo at Jamestown before the rebellion in 1676, as each individual was forced into protecting their own interests, making decisions in which they had little regard for others or concern as to how they might impact the settlement as a whole. Conditions which Hobbes predicted would create chaos nearly twenty-five years earlier in *Leviathan* and ones which the Company should have been aware of. Pursuing wealth became the objective and woe to anyone who stood in their way, be they man, woman, English or Native. There was no centralized or representative government at the settlement, only wealthy individuals who ruled as oligarchs, forcing their own personal agendas at the expense of the less fortunate.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Gregory S. Kavka, "Hobbes War of All against all," *Ethics* 93, no. 2 (Jan.1983): 191-310, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2380421>.

<sup>111</sup> Brent Tarter, *The Grandees of Government* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2013), 58.

## Chapter VI.

### Conclusion

The events leading up to Bacon's Rebellion are varied and complex, and as is often the case with societal catastrophes, difficult to summarize or understand in a few sentences or writings. When the Company first contemplated the idea of establishing a colony for profit, they did so by incorporating the accepted social and economic practices of England at the time. The documentary evidence suggests that in Jamestown, such attitudes persisted, as the laws and community practices implemented were predicated on acknowledging and accepting a societal hierarchy.

Throughout the seventeenth century, white male gentlemen who were born into a higher social standing acted and expressed themselves contemptuously to those whom they considered their inferior. At the same time, those individuals on the lower echelons of that same hierarchy came to believe they had reason to resent those at the top. As a result, those at the summit of society became fearful and distrusted of those people below them, leaving both parties in constant conflict with each other.<sup>112</sup> With such prevailing attitudes established early on at the settlement, it is little wonder that a state of war ensued in which every individual was against every other and nothing in the pursuit of one's needs (predicated on survival) could be deemed unjust.<sup>113</sup>

At the same time, there continued to be an ongoing history of factional fighting involving territorial disputes and power struggles between the Indigenous tribes in North America long before the settlement came into existence. There were also social and

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<sup>112</sup> Tarter, *The Grandees of Government*, 79.

<sup>113</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 71.

financial complexities surrounding slavery (as practiced by both Natives and Europeans). Although little has been documented regarding such practices among Indigenous peoples, it did exist, typically done by the long established custom of taking war captives. However, by the time of Bacon's Rebellion, the justification for the slave trade had migrated toward more of a European perspective, which rationalized the enterprise as an excuse for expanding their labor base and economic prowess.<sup>114</sup>

Yet certain aspects remained independent, as Bossy writes: "Britons viewed slaves as property and their primary reason for enslaving others was economic. Though they drew on the idea of a "just war" to validate enslavement, in fact the people they enslaved were rarely enemies taken in war."<sup>115</sup> However, for the Indigenous people, enslaving others carried more of a practical and ritualistic need which was based on revenge.<sup>116</sup> By taking captives in the course of war and invasions, "southeastern Indians sought to restore cosmological and social balance, maintain population levels, and undermine the strength of adversaries."<sup>117</sup>

It would have been of little surprise to anyone at the time, who journeyed from Canada to Argentina, that they would have encountered slaves in every province; or that the practice was accepted throughout much of the hemisphere. In fact, protests to end involuntary servitude were virtually unknown until late in the seventeenth century, and even then, there were few movements to end racial exploitation, even gradually until the latter part of the eighteenth century.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Denise I. Bossy, *Indian Slavery in Colonial America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 208.

<sup>115</sup> Bossy, *Indian Slavery in Colonial America*, 208.

<sup>116</sup> Bossy, *Indian Slavery in Colonial America*, 209.

<sup>117</sup> Bossy, *Indian Slavery in Colonial America*, 209.

<sup>118</sup> David B. Davis, "Re-Examining the Problem of Slavery," *American Antiquarian Society* (October 2008): 252-253, <https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/45147497.pdf>.

Yet, the underlying rationalization for such atrocities and many others can be illuminated by considering Hobbes and his theories in man's natural tendencies toward a state of nature and war. While his interpretations of certain racial and societal natural predispositions continue to be debated, his fundamental concepts of man's unmitigated self-interest, which require an authority to absolutely control order to escape total anarchy are not. Bacon's Rebellion provides us with a front-row view of just how accurate his philosophical observations are and of how quickly they can become fatally problematic. Each participating individual, whether by choice or force, be they Native, indentured servants, slaves, colonists, or even Berkeley or Bacon themselves, eventually became agitators or victims, and sometimes both. All of which, when combined with the overwhelming difficulties of establishing a colony (for the purpose of profit) in a land where they were not welcomed, suggests the entire enterprise was likely doomed to failure from the start.

Berkeley had governed the colony for nearly thirty-four years, with the first twenty-six being relatively successful; at least from the English perspective. "In the decades between the meeting of the first General Assembly in 1619 and the outbreak of Bacon's Rebellion, Virginia changed remarkably. It became the English king's first royal colony in 1625. Its population increased several times over and spread through much of the land on both sides of Chesapeake Bay and along the rivers as far west and north as the tides flowed."<sup>119</sup> Yet there had been harsh struggles and by the fall of 1676, it had been a dry summer, ruining corn crops, which were needed for food along with tobacco which was intended for export. Berkeley now in his seventies wrote at the time of his despair,

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<sup>119</sup> Brent Tarter, *The Grandees of Government*, 58.

“How miserable that man is that Governs a People where six parts of seaven at least are Poore Endebted Discontented and Armed.”<sup>120</sup>

Bacon too had faced his share of headwinds during this time as well and in 1677 a pamphlet recounting his death was published, and although the historical accuracy is subject to debate, the conclusions reached regarding the contemporaneous perceptions of Bacon are revealing,

Having obtained these large Civilities of the Governor, etc., one would have thought that if the Principles of honesty would not have obliged him to peace and loyalty, those of gratitude should. But, alas, when men have been once flushed or entered with Vice, how hard it is for them to leave it, especially if it tends toward ambition or greatness, which is the general lust of a large Soul, and the common error of vast parts, which fix their Eyes so upon the lure of greatness, that they have no time left them to consider by what indirect and unlawful means they must (if ever) attain it.<sup>121</sup>

Such period observation supports Hobbes argument that if two men desire the same things, they cannot equally enjoy them, they must inevitably become enemies and consequently destroy or subdue one another.<sup>122</sup> This was certainly the case between Berkeley and Bacon.

However, as Hobbes suggested twenty-five years earlier, there were pragmatic, socially equitable and economically profitable alternatives for establishing the settlement at Jamestown. By preemptively engaging and negotiating with the societal members of the settlement, securing mutual agreement, including the rule of law, and one stable

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<sup>120</sup> Howard Zinn, *A Peoples History of the United State: 1492-Present* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 40.

<sup>121</sup> Unknown, “Strange news from Virginia: being a full and true account of the life and death of Nathanael Bacon, Esquire, who was the only cause and original of all the late troubles in that country: with a full relation of all the accidents which have happened in the late war there between the Christians and Indians,” *Printed for Williams Harris*, 1677, 1-8.

<sup>122</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 69.



source of sovereign, political authority, then those involved would not only have increased their chances for peaceful coexistence, but also significantly enhanced their overall social and economic opportunities as well. Hobbes advocated for a foundation of reciprocal agreement that results in an absolute authority which provides stability for all. This would also, in Hobbes's view, have facilitated stable rules of engagement and open market efficiencies, promoting greater cooperation and stability between the colonists (at all income and social levels) and the Native peoples. Had such strategies been pursued, the issues surrounding indentured and involuntary servitude may have been restricted or even outlawed, upon realizing such long-term social and economic injustices would eventually create uncontrollable instability for the inhabitants.

Doing otherwise invited chaos, and any pretense of peaceful coexistence and benefit of economic efficiencies were lost, defeating the stated principal purpose of the Company which was the pursuit of financial return for shareholders. As Hobbes accurately notes,

In such a condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain and consequently no Culture on Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea, no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and recovering such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth, no account of Time; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death.<sup>123</sup>

A culture driven by the pure instincts of survival with no care or concern for others has limited opportunity for creating a functioning culture based on equity and mutual respect, resulting in an enterprise with little chance for sustained longevity. Such a destructive environment is driven by an atmosphere of anticipatory violence, for once it starts, it

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<sup>123</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70.

rapidly escalates as each party reasonably expects such violence to be taken against them, with the result being an accelerated trajectory of mutual destruction.<sup>124</sup>

This is not to suggest there can be no temporary alliances of convenience with those of similar beliefs, circumstances, or causes. As an example, there were select trading relationships between the settlers and the Indigenous peoples, and such cooperation has been argued by some historians to challenge Hobbes fundamental conclusions regarding war of all against all. Noting his inferences are too restricting as there are instances where even in a state of nature, there can be competitive advantages of pursuing alliances.

Such suppositions are premised on game theory involving the intricacies of the Prisoner's Dilemma.<sup>125</sup> Or as Gregory Kavka explains, "Noncooperation seems to be the rational move for each player, for it is a *dominant* move. That is, whatever move the other player makes, one fares better if one does not cooperate than one would have fared if one had cooperated."<sup>126</sup> Interestingly however, under the terms of the dilemma, each individual is actually far worse off than they would have been had they acted in cooperation with each other. Suggesting Hobbes did not adequately consider the possibility of mutual cooperation between individuals without sovereign rule or agreed upon social contracts. Such nuanced circumstances are not particularly relevant at Jamestown, since as previously noted, while there were sporadic cooperating parties, at least in the short-term, they did not have much of an impact on the overall resulting consequences of the rebellion. Suffice to say the vast majority of those involved were

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<sup>124</sup> Gregory S. Kavka, "War of All against All," 309.

<sup>125</sup> Gregory S. Kavka, "War of All against All," 299.

<sup>126</sup> Gregory S. Kavka, "War of All against All," 300.

acting in their own interests, and only aligned with others when such actions provided them individually with a short-term strategic advantage toward achieving their own selfish goals.

Hobbes' idea of an authoritarian ruled population, enjoying the benefits (both social and economic) of peaceful coexistence, is made more probable by establishing mutually agreed upon social contracts. In voluntarily accepting defined "rules of engagement," the lives of the individual and their society are enhanced by the rule of law and provide a framework for promoting overall welfare. Laws which protect citizens (against criminal and civil injustice), ensure peace, encourage market efficiencies, and provide nonviolent forums for those instances where disagreements arise.

Such a system provides an environment where individuals (representing all of the varying and competing factions) can prosper based on individual enterprise, without fear. This is only possible where governing rules and bodies are in place, and all can be ensured that no one can deviate from agreed upon law and social order without consequence. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Hobbes particular theories on human nature, "free will" is only practical to the extent it can be upheld and does not violate the freedom for others. From the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to Bacon's Rebellion in 1676, such forums were typically limited to those in power, often restricting access to the majority of colonists who believed they had legitimate grievances; resulting with those same individuals feeling alienated and left to fend for themselves.

Hobbes is unable to comprehend those who argue reason alone can promote a man to virtue, naturally driven by an inherent desire to cooperate with his fellow human beings. Instead, he suggests a more practical approach by arguing for an environment

which encourages peaceful coexistence and societal efficiencies, providing a structured outlet for our natural competitiveness: reducing the risks for conflict and mutual destruction.

The events leading up to and including the burning of Jamestown are important because they provide real-life confirmation of Hobbes' theories on the natural state of man. The founding of the settlement was driven by self-promotion and the pursuit of profit, with little foresight allocated to weighing the consequences for those who made the dangerous decision to pursue opportunity in North America. Individuals, who were victims of propaganda and their own social and economic circumstances in England, with no realistic opportunity for bettering their lives or those of future generations without accepting the risk of exploitation. Ironically, they were left to survive at the settlement under circumstances which often proved to be much harsher than those they left behind.

Unfortunately, those same adventurous souls brought more than their own personal hardships, they traveled with the ambition of expanding settler colonialism, which would lead to devastating consequences for those Indigenous or indentured peoples who stood in their way. And what was to be far worse, the accepted precedent of exploiting those who were forced to provide such opportunities for others, creating a moral and legal justification for taking what one wanted. Hobbes is correct, "To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place."<sup>127</sup> Once the strategy of self-determination, regardless of the consequences took hold, there was no turning back.

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<sup>127</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 71.

Nearly 100 years after Bacon's Rebellion, "Empire of liberty," was written in a letter by Thomas Jefferson to George Rogers Clark on December 25, 1780, "we shall form to the American union a barrier against the dangerous extension of the British Province of Canada and add to the Empire of liberty an extension and fertile Country thereby converting dangerous Enemies into valuable friends."<sup>128</sup> Who were those dangerous enemies? How would they be converted? The foundation for this ideology is premised on Hobbes' fundamental understanding of man, which suggests for those in power, the ends always justifies the means.

Charting such a course, which began in Jamestown in 1607, all but ensured the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and likely encouraged the expansion of slavery and perpetuated discrimination, creating devastating repercussions which continue to fester in the United States. To fully appreciate the societal and economic trials and turbulations which resulted in Bacon's Rebellion, one should carefully heed Hobbes teachings on the instinctive nature of man.

Doing so not only provides historical perspective to the challenges and complexities encountered at the first permanent English settlement in North America, but it also exemplifies the validity of Hobbes' harsh observation made over three hundred and seventy years ago, "Hereby it is manifest, that during this time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre."<sup>129</sup> The time to end such self-serving declarations is long overdue and it is

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<sup>128</sup> Jefferson, Thomas, "Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Lewis Rogers Cark, December 25, 1780," Assessed December 13, 2019. <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-04-02-0295>.

<sup>129</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 70.

imperative that we now pursue a course of mutual consideration and cooperation among all members of society, forever reversing the maximum that “might makes right.”

While one could reasonably argue a society fundamentally founded on self-interest, best exemplifies the shortest distance between efficiency and profits, the question remains at what price? For when money becomes the focus of the measure, individuals often act selfishly without considering the effect they are having on their society as a whole; and once a few select individuals attain power and wealth, they rarely surrender it voluntarily for the benefit of others. Advocating otherwise enables the Leviathan currently lying in wait at Jamestown to rise again and haunt us down to the last generation; a fate Berkeley and Bacon would likely not inflict upon their worst enemies.

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