

## **The Right to Violence: Customary Rights, Moral Economy and Ethnic Conflict in Seventeenth-Century Virginia**

### **Project Description**

During the spring and summer of 1676, screams of torture and shouts of rebellion filled the air of England's oldest and seemingly most stable colony in North America. Over the next six months an army made up of servants, slaves, and poor Virginians attempted, according to their leader Nathaniel Bacon to, "ruine and extirpate all Indians in Generall." In his drive to clear the backcountry of those he referred to as "Robbers and Theeves and Invaders of his Majesties Right and our Interest and Estates," Bacon gave no quarter. He reportedly tortured and killed prisoners as well as combatants. According to one account, Bacon indiscriminately "fell upon the Indians and killed some of them who were our best Friends." Nevertheless, Bacon and his followers encountered what might seem to many an unexpected adversary in their attempt to eradicate the Native American population of Virginia. The aristocratic leaders of the colony led by the Royal Governor, Sir William Berkeley branded Bacon and his followers as rebels, and attempted to apprehend him before he could achieve his genocidal aims. The ensuing four months of warfare between loyalist and rebel Virginians known as Bacon's Rebellion remained a particularly terrifying and potent memory for Virginians into the era of the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

Ninety-eight years after this violent class conflict, western Virginians once again armed themselves for war against the colony's Indigenous people. This time however, Lord Dunmore, the last Royal Governor of Virginia, not only allowed westerners to violently wrest land from native people, but also actively encouraged it. Obviously, something had changed since Bacon's Rebellion. The right of Virginians of all classes to appropriate Indian land via the use of force seemed unquestioned by the time of Lord Dunmore's War in 1774.<sup>2</sup>

The question of what brought about this change in Virginia constitutes the central historical problem this dissertation proposes to solve. I assert that the answer to the question of what changed in Virginian attitudes regarding who could and could not employ violence against Native Americans rests not in the period between Bacon's Rebellion and Lord Dunmore's War, but rather in the seventeenth century. Specifically, I contend that Bacon's Rebellion represents the culmination of a process by which plebeian and middling Virginians successfully claimed a freeborn right to displace Native Americans with violence if necessary. Additionally, this process began not in Virginia, but in England. Therefore, I propose to trace the development of this process

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Bacon, "Manifesto Concerning the Present Troubles in Virginia," in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 1 (1894), pp. 55-58; Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Governor and the Rebel: A History of Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1957), pp. 43; "Commissioners' Narrative," in *Narratives of the Insurrections, 1675-1690* ed. Charles McLean Andrews (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1915), pp. 112.

<sup>2</sup> Ruben Gold Thwaites and Louise Phelps Kellogg, *A Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin State Historical Society, 1905).ix-xxviii.

from its earliest roots in seventeenth century altercations over customary rights in England, to its culmination in Bacon's Rebellion in 1676.

The defense of one's rights constituted a powerful reason for resorting to violence in both England and Virginia, and this project asserts that the presence of Indigenous people in Virginia injected a new element into the Thompsonian matrix. Patricians, middling planters and plebeians now struggled to impose their own conceptions of the role of Indians in the future of the colony on one another. Patricians attempted to integrate Indians into the lower orders of Virginia society. Plebeians resisted these attempts with violence. They then used that violence to obtain Western Indian lands, which they saw as the vehicle for their own social advancement. In the midst of this struggle, Virginia's native inhabitants employed various strategies to maintain their lives, land and rights. These four elements, Patricians, middling planters, plebeians, and Indians combating one another for social position, land, resources, and survival created a new social matrix endemic to Virginia that predisposed the colony to nearly a century of violence. In addition to its well-established role in moving Virginia toward African slavery, Bacon's Rebellion eventually united the social classes of late seventeenth-century Virginia against Indians.

In part, the idea for this dissertation springs from my desire to apply the social theory of E. P. Thompson to new historiographical territory. Though this project leans heavily on his theory and work, my conception of moral economy differs from Thompson's in ways that strict students of the Thompsonian school will not fail to notice. While Thompson's moral economy often centered upon hunger and access to bread at "fair" prices, my study applies the moral economy concept to violence and land acquisition. While not strictly within the Thompsonian mold, my expanded definition of moral economy rests upon the work of Gary Nash in regard to colonial cities before the American Revolution, and upon the theory of James Scott. This project seeks to demonstrate that in the case of early Virginians a predisposition to violence based in the Moral Economy system existed prior to the colony itself. In other words, it arrived on the first boats. However, interactions with Indigenous Peoples altered Virginian attitudes toward violence. At first, the presence of Indians only exacerbated the violent confrontations between patricians and plebeians. In addition to its well-established role in moving Virginia toward African slavery, Bacon's Rebellion eventually united the social classes of early Virginia against Indians.

Recently, I spent three days at the Rockefeller Library and the Swem Library in Williamsburg. While there, I began the process of sifting through the nearly seventy different sources I have thus far identified at those two libraries. In January, I traveled to England to consult sources at the National Archives, and other repositories. I am now proposing one trip to Virginia and another to the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. An intense week of research in Virginia, and another in California combined with my other research trips will provide me with the necessary sources to complete my project by my target date of May 2007.