

Lesson 3

Famous Rebellions

Several armed rebellions helped shape American development before the Civil War. Three early uprisings (Bacon's, Shays's, and Whiskey Rebellions) were sparked by economic and political grievances against authority that was perceived as arbitrary and distant. Each of the clashes played a transformational role in its era: Bacon's Rebellion helped weaken the indentured servant system; Shays's Rebellion undermined the already dwindling support for the Articles of Confederation; and the Whiskey Rebellion established the authority of the new national government and moved George Washington firmly into the Federalist Party camp. The chart on the next page will help you analyze these rebellions.

As you consider the chart, you may wish to evaluate whether these early dissenters were driven by their inherently rebellious nature, the rugged frontier environment, unfair government actions, or a combination of all these factors.

Nat Turner's revolt differed significantly from the previous rebellions. It epitomized the great nightmare of the antebellum slavocracy—a large-scale slave revolt. The uprising stands alone as the most dramatic and violent slave revolt in U.S. history. The Turner Rebellion also reinforced the South's commitment to slavery and made peaceful manumission almost impossible. Historians have speculated about why there were no other major slave uprisings. How would you explain this lack of large-scale slave resistance?

OBJECTIVES

Review the introductory material and the chart "Three Major Rebellions in Early U.S. History" (pages 6 and 7 in the Student Edition). Have your students discuss what these rebellions (other than Nat Turner's) suggest about the American character. Can your students identify any common traits that contributed to the three uprisings?

After the class discussion on rebellions and after reading "Nathaniel Bacon's Manifesto," students will be able to:

1. analyze the causes of Bacon's Rebellion;
2. compare the views of Bacon and governor Berkeley on the causes of the rebellion;
3. evaluate to what extent Bacon's Rebellion was a defense of colonial rights against insensitive British policies;
4. explain how the rebellion was viewed as a clash between the haves and the have-nots in Virginia.

ADDITIONAL COMPONENTS

- **Core Chart Worksheet** (Activity Booklet, p. 4; Teacher Resources Website)
- **Primary Source Handout** (Activity Booklet, p. 5; Teacher Resource Website)
- **Document Source Worksheet** (Student Resource Website)

Directions: Analyze the chart on famous rebellions, and then answer the following questions.

- The most significant result of Nat Turner's rebellion was
 - the South's intensified commitment to slavery
 - Abraham Lincoln's decision to emancipate the slaves
 - the formation of the American Colonization Society
 - the emancipation of most of the slaves in Virginia
- Which of the following individuals would favor the actions taken by the national government during the Whiskey Rebellion?
 - a backcountry farmer who supported the Articles of Confederation
 - a states' rights supporter who feared a strong central government
 - a Quaker who opposed the use of force
 - a supporter of law and order
- The common element of Bacon's, Shays's, and the Whiskey Rebellion was that
 - all resulted in changes in the economic conditions that caused them
 - all occurred before the American Revolution
 - all were challenges to perceived unfairness by a distant government
 - all resulted in widespread changes in American society

Enhancing Understanding

SOVEREIGNTY — the question of who will have power, rank, and authority over others. Ultimately, all rebellions are a struggle over sovereignty — who will rule and what system of control they will employ.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Hand out or display the document, "Nathaniel Bacon's Manifesto," (shown on page 18) and ask the following:

- How does Bacon view himself and his supporters?
- What oppressive acts does Bacon charge Governor Berkeley with? How do you think the governor would answer these charges?
- Whom does Bacon call "juggling parasites"?
- From your knowledge of the rebellion, which of its elements are not mentioned in Bacon's Manifesto?
- How does Bacon attempt to make the rebellion a political and economic protest?
- From this document and your knowledge of the rebellion, was Bacon the first American revolutionary or simply a blood-thirsty Indian hater?

Three Major Rebellions in Early U.S. History

	Date	Cause	Events	Significance
Nathaniel Bacon's Rebellion	1676	Virginia frontiersmen seeking land clashed with Indians Frontiersmen demanded help from government Jamestown refused aid, fearing Indian War	Bacon and his men lived on frontier Bacon and his men stormed Jamestown Burned Jamestown Bacon died of fever Rebellion collapsed	Colonial rebellion against government authority Clash between east/west, rich/poor Tidewater's discrimination against frontiersmen Revision of indentured servant system, greater reliance on slave labor
Daniel Shays's Rebellion	1786–1787	Unfair taxes in Massachusetts Farms foreclosed Farmers imprisoned as debtors	Shays/1,200 men attacked courts in western Massachusetts State militia put down rebellion	Uprising was a general threat to property Threat that rebellion could spread to other states Articles of Confederation viewed as too weak to maintain law and order Bolstered call for revisions of Articles (Constitutional Convention, 1787)
Whiskey Rebellion	1794–1795	Farmers in western Pennsylvania refused to pay federal excise tax on whiskey Attacked tax collectors Farmers compared tax to Stamp Act of 1765	Washington called for 13,000 troops to suppress the rebels Rebels dispersed, ceased rebellion	Put the force of the government behind the Constitution Government could enforce the law Constitution protected law/order Hamilton's idea of an energetic national government prevailed
Nat Turner's (slave) Rebellion	1831	Slaves wanted freedom Nat Turner saw "vision" and attacked whites in Southampton County, Virginia	Turner, 70 slaves, and 55 whites killed Turner caught; he was executed, and hundreds of slaves were punished	Frightened South Tightened slave codes Restricted freedom for all blacks in South South began to aggressively defend slavery as a "positive good"

Nathaniel Bacon's Manifesto

If virtue be a sin, if piety be guilt, all the principles of morality, goodness, and justice be perverted, we must confess that those who are now called rebels may be in danger of those high imputations. Those loud and several bulls [Governor Berkeley's declarations] would fright [sic] innocents and render the defense of our brethren, and the inquiry into our own sad and heavy oppressions, treason.

But if there be, as sure there is, a God to appeal to; if religion and justice be a sanctuary here; if to plead the cause of the oppressed; if sincerely to aim at this Majesty's honor and the public good without any reservation or by interest ... [then] let God Almighty judge and let [the] guilty die.

But since we cannot in our hearts find one single spot of rebellion or treason, or that we have in any manner aimed at the subverting [of] the settled government, or attempting of the person of any either magistrate or private man, notwithstanding the several reproaches and threats of some who for sinister ends were disaffected to us and censured our innocent and honest designs; and since all people in all places where we have yet been can attest our civil, quiet and peaceable behavior, let truth be bold and all the world know the real foundation of pretended guilt ...

But let us trace these men in authority and favor, to whose hands the dispensation of the country's wealth has been committed. Let us observe the sudden rise of their estates, composed [compared] with the quality in which they first entered this country, or the reputation they have held here amongst wise and discerning men. And let us see whether their extractions and educations have not been vile, and by what pretense of learning and virtue they could soon [enter] into employments of so great trust and consequences. Let us consider their sudden advancement and let us also consider whether any public work for our safety and defense ... is here extant in any [way] adequate to our vast charge.

Now let us compare these things together and see what sponges have sucked up the public treasure, and whether it has not been privately contrived away by unworthy favorites and juggling parasites, whose tottering fortunes have been repaired and supported at the public charge.

Now if it be so, judge what greater guilt can be than to offer to pry into these and to unriddle [sic] the mysterious wiles of a powerful cabal. Let all people judge what can be of more dangerous import than to suspect the so long safe proceedings of some of our grandees, and whether people may with safety open their eyes in so nice a concern.

Directions: Using the excerpt below and your knowledge of American history, answer the following questions. Use the Document Source worksheet on page 156 to guide your analysis of the source.

“Without an alteration in our political creed, the superstructure we have been seven years in raising at the expense of so much treasure and blood, must fall. We are fast verging to anarchy and confusion...What stronger evidence can be given of the want of energy in our government, than these disorders?...Thirteen sovereignties pulling against each other, and all tugging at the federal head, will soon bring ruin on the whole...”

—Letter from George Washington to James Madison,
November 5, 1786

Multiple-Choice

- Which of the following alterations in America’s political creed would George Washington most likely support?
 - revising the governing principles of the American Revolution
 - promoting debt relief and currency reform
 - encouraging greater regional cooperation and trade
 - aligning America’s creed more closely to that of Great Britain
- The sentiments expressed in the letter led most directly to late eighteenth-century political controversies over the issue of the
 - creation of the National Bank
 - ratification of the Jay Treaty
 - establishment of a presidential Cabinet
 - collection of excise taxes on whiskey

Shays’s Rebellion showed that the emphasis on liberty and freedom expressed during the Revolution needed to be modified in the 1780s when liberty seemed to become license. A central government authority, which had been an anathema to revolutionaries, now seemed necessary.

(POL-1, Use of Relevant Historical Evidence)

The farmers of western Pennsylvania refused to pay their whiskey tax. The new government under Washington exercised “energy” by collecting the tax by force. Washington’s forceful suppression of the protest caused controversy in his Cabinet (Jefferson) and in the nation.

(POL-2, Historical Causation)

Short-Answer

Using the excerpt, answer parts a and b.

- a) Shays's Rebellion affected Washington's political thinking. Briefly explain how the disorder changed Washington's position on TWO of the following:
- Suppression of dissent in the mid-1780s
 - The effectiveness of the Articles of Confederation
 - Attendance at the Philadelphia meeting to amend the Articles of Confederation
- b) Briefly explain how ONE of Washington's positions expressed in part a could be challenged in the mid- and late 1780s.

a. Answers will vary. Shays's Rebellion shook up Washington's political thinking because he feared the nation was coming apart. He accepted more power in a central government, a revision of the Articles of Confederation, and a willingness to attend the Constitutional Convention. His attendance at the meeting gave it importance and legitimacy in the eyes of many colonial citizens.

(POL-2, Patterns of Continuity and Change over Time)

b. Answers will vary. Students might explain: that acceptance of suppression of dissent ran counter to the liberty achieved by the revolutionary leaders such as Washington; that the Articles overall provided a government supported by a majority of Americans and that they need only to be slightly changed; that attendance in Philadelphia raised questions about the motives and agenda of the participants who might replace the Articles with an oppressive government along the lines of England's.

(POL-2, Historical Causation)