ANALYZING BACON’S REBELLION THROUGH PRIMARY SOURCES

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW
Bacon’s Rebellion was an armed rebellion of settlers in Virginia in 1676 led by Nathaniel Bacon against the rule of Governor William Berkeley. The colony’s disorganized frontier political structure, combined with accumulating grievances (including leaving Bacon out of his inner circle, refusing to allow Bacon to be a part of his fur trade with the Native Americans, and Indian attacks), helped motivate an uprising against Berkeley, who had failed to address the demands of the colonists regarding their safety.

About a thousand Virginians of all classes rose up in arms against Berkeley, attacking Native Americans, chasing Berkeley from Jamestown and ultimately burning most of the town down to the ground. Government forces from England arrived soon after and spent several years defeating pockets of resistance and reforming the colonial government to one more directly under royal control. Bacon, however, died from dysentery before their arrival.

It was the first rebellion in the American colonies in which discontented frontiersmen took part. The alliance between former indentured servants and Africans against bond-servitude disturbed the ruling class, who responded by moving away from indentured servitude as the dominant labor force and more towards slavery.

DIRECTIONS
Read and analyze the various primary source documents related to Bacon’s Rebellion to gain a better insight into its causes, events, and lasting impact. Then, answer the questions on the worksheet in complete sentences.
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Directions: Bacon’s Rebellion was an armed rebellion in 1676 by 300-400 Virginian settlers led by Nathaniel Bacon against the rule of Governor William Berkeley. Read through the 12 primary source documents related to Bacon’s Rebellion then answer the following questions.

1. What were some of the causes for Bacon's rebellion?

2. What did the frontier colonists of Isle of Wight County ask the Royal Commissioners for?

3. According to Documents 3 and 4, what were Native Americans doing that frightened the colonists?

4. How do Bacon and his wife describe the Governor’s relationship with Native Americans?

5. Describe the differences between Bacon and Governor Berkeley’s strategies for dealing with Indian attacks based on Documents 6 & 7. Which do you feel was more appropriate and why?

6. What did Bacon and his followers do to the Indians they encountered and to Jamestown?

7. How did the rebellion finally come to an end?

8. What effect do you think Bacon’s Rebellion had on the early American colonies?
DOCUMENT #1


"The occasion of the Rebellion is not easy to be discovered, but there were many things that concurred toward it. First, the extreme low price of tobacco.

Secondly, the splintering of the Colony into Proprieties, contrary to the original Charters; and the extravagant taxes [the colonists] were forced to undergo.

Thirdly, the heavy restraints and burdens laid upon their trade by Act of Parliament in England. Fourthly, the Disturbance given by the Indians..."

DOCUMENT #2

A petition of grievances from the citizens of Isle of Wight County (on the frontier) to the Royal Commissioners investigating the rebellion, March 5, 1677 (note the date).

"We desire that there may be a continual war against the Indians so that we may have [finally] done with them. Also we desire that every man be taxed according to the tracts of land they hold.

"We desire to know for what do we pay our Levies [taxes] every year, and that it may no longer be [decided] in private but that we may have liberty to hear and see every particular for what it is raised....Some great persons...are exempted from paying Levies and the poorest inhabitants are compelled to pay the great taxes which we are burdened with."
DOCUMENT #3
The History of Bacon's and Ingram's Rebellion, by an unknown Virginian of the time.

"In a very short time [the Indians] had, in a most inhumane manner, murdered no less than 60 innocent people, no ways guilty of any actual injury done to these...brutish heathens....They devised a hundred ways to torture and torment those poor souls..."

DOCUMENT #4
A letter written by Nathaniel Bacon's wife to her sister in London, June 29, 1676.

Dear Sister,
I pray God keep the worst Enemy I have from ever being in such a sad condition as I have been in since my [previous letter to you], occasioned by the troublesome Indians, who have killed one of our Overseers at a plantation which we had, and we have lost a great stock of cattle and a good crop...which is a very great loss to us....The Indians are killing the people daily [but] the Governor is so much their friend that he would not [allow] anybody to hurt one of the Indians; the poor people came to Nathaniel to desire him to help against the Indians...and he was willing to do them all the good he could....They did destroy a great many of the Indians, thanks be to God, and might have killed a great many more, but the Governor was so much the Indians' friend and our enemy that he sent the Indians word that Mr. Bacon was out against them that they might save themselves.
"By an Act of State, it was provided for the better security of the country, That no Trade should be held with the Indians, notwithstanding which our present Governor monopolized a trade with the Indians and granted licences to others to trade with them....I fear we shall all be lost, for this commerce having acquainted the Indians...with our manner of living and discipline of war, has also brought them to the use of firearms.

The Governor, who from the Neighbor Indians receives benefit by the trade, still protects them against the [white] people; and though the complaints of their murders have been continual, yet he hath...furnished them [the Indians] with ammunition (which by the Law is death)....I sent to the Governor for a [military] commission to fall upon them, but being denied, and finding that the country was for a small and sordid gain betrayed, and the lives and fortunes of the poor inhabitants wretchedly sacrificed, I resolved to stand up and expose my life and fortune than desert my post.

"Upon this I resolved to march out upon the Enemy with volunteers, but by so doing found that I had not only lost the Governor’s favor, but exposed my very life and fortune...but considering the necessity, I still proceeded, and returned with a greater victory from sharper conflict than ever yet has been known in these parts of the world."
**DOCUMENT #6**
*The King’s Royal Commissioners narrative, presented to the King in Oct. 1677.*

"Bacon had got over the [James] River with his Forces, and hastening away into the woods, went directly and fell upon the Indians and killed some of them [who] were our best Friends....Bacon’s people would not make any distinction of Friendly Indians and Indian Enemies, for at that time it was impossible to distinguish one nation from another, they being deformed with paint of many colors. So the common cry of the Vulgar was, away with these distinctions, we will have war with all Indians...we will spare none."

**DOCUMENT #7**
*From a letter by William Sherwood, Attorney General of Virginia, to the King’s Council, June 1, 1676.*

"Sir William Berkeley, our honorable Governor (who hath had long experience of war with the Indians) that he might provide for the safety of this Country, caused our Assembly...to...enact that forts should be built at the heads of several rivers, being the [best] way to secure our frontier plantations...But one Mr. Nathaniel Bacon, a person of little experience and but of two years’ [residence] in the country, thinking himself wiser than the law, hath stirred up a great number of indigent and dissatisfied persons, marching in warlike posture...the intent of which is the subversion of the Laws and to level all [ed. note: to 'reduce' society to a democracy, to impose equality]."