

# Servitude and Rebellion

Rebellion within the American colonies prior to the Revolutionary War is a topic seldom discussed in American history classes. Yet the fiery rhetoric of freedom and the brave actions of many colonists eventually defeated the military might of the most powerful nation in the Western world. Why, then, are we reluctant to introduce the stories of Americans who fought not only against the British Crown, but also against the aristocratic rule of the colonial elite? What is it that prevents us from presenting a balanced portrayal of early America in which the diverse voices of both the powerful and powerless are celebrated?

Perhaps part of the answer is that traditional history books and history classes pay little or no attention to either the contributions or the grievances of the indentured servants who journeyed to North America. Instead, these traditional treatments of history most often describe a harmonious melting pot of colonists who busily set about to create a classless, democratic new society. The reality is far less harmonious and democratic, but much more interesting and real. Indentured servants, who comprised almost fifty percent of all colonial immigrants, were among the hardest-working but poorest, most abused, and most disgruntled of all the colonists. The realities of their servitude fueled the fires of rebellion.

## Document-Based Questions

### **RICHARD FRETHORNE**

1. What is scurvy? What is the “bloody flux”? What role did disease play in the lives of the colonists? How does it compare and contrast with the role disease plays in our lives today?
2. Why do you think indentured servants were “not allowed to go and get” fowl? Why do you think they never saw any deer or venison?

3. Who is the “enemy” in Richard Frethorne’s letter? What is his opinion of the “enemy”?
4. How do you think Frethorne’s letters might have changed, as well as remained the same, if he was still writing to his family in the 1640s?

### **COMMISSIONERS’ REPORT**

1. What words do the commissioners use to describe Nathaniel Bacon? His followers? How do these words compare and contrast with the words that a contemporary government commission might use to describe a modern rebellion?
2. Why was Governor William Berkeley of “James Towne” “pretending to be loath to spill bloode”? Once the battle begins, how do the Commissioners describe the rebellion?
3. How do the commissioners describe Governor Berkeley? His men? How do you think Governor Berkeley will or will not revise colonial policies after Bacon’s Rebellion?

### **PROCLAMATION OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE LEGISLATURE**

1. What were the actions of the men who were involved in the Mast Tree Riot?
2. What does the New Hampshire legislature propose to do in order that “the utmost justice may be done to his Majestic”? Do they succeed?

### **LETTER WRITTEN BY WILLIAM SHIRLEY**

1. Howard Zinn’s introduction to this letter explains that the riot described is in response to impressment. What is impressment?
2. How were militias raised in colonial America? What was the purpose of “the militia of the town? What did it accomplish?
3. Why does Governor William Shirley decide to stop “parleying with the mob”? How do our current governors at the state and federal level feel about such a word exchange?

### MITTELBERGER'S JOURNEY TO PENNSYLVANIA

1. Keeping in mind the 124-year differences between the two letters, how does Gottlieb Mittelberger's account of indentured servitude compare and contrast with that of Frethorne?
2. How does Mittelberger's discussion of the ship's passage to and life in North America compare and contrast with that of the circumstances endured by slaves?
3. By 1754, when Mittelberger embarked upon his journey, he must have been aware of some of the hardships awaiting him. Why, then, do you think he and thousands of others came to America?

### NEW YORK TENANT RIOTS

1. Why were local farmers living on land claimed by Van Rensselaer?
2. Was the treatment of the local farmers by Van Rensselaer's army legal?
3. From reading this account, what role do you think private property played in the hearts and minds of these colonists? Did everyone have access to private property? Why, or why not?

### Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 3, "Servitude and Rebellion"

After reading Chapter 3 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points.

1. Indentured servants played a large role in shaping the structure of and struggles within colonial America.
2. From the early years of Euro-American colonization, the colonists were divided by social, economic, and political differences.
3. Either rebellion or the threat of rebellion was a constant factor in colonial North America.

4. The “wandering poor” have always been a component in North American society.
5. Although servant and slave rebellions were rare, the threat of such rebellion was constant, and masters were quite fearful.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 3, “Servitude and Rebellion,”  
and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 3,  
“Persons of Mean and Vile Condition”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in chapters 3 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

6. The governors of colonial Jamestown had two primary motives for suppressing Bacon’s rebellion: to develop an Indian policy that would prevent tribal unity and would instead divide-and-conquer the Indian nations and peoples; and to teach poor whites that rebellion against the status quo had serious consequences.
7. More than half of all the colonists who immigrated to North America before the Revolutionary War came as servants.
8. While colonial North America was neither democratic nor egalitarian, more opportunities existed for economic, social, and political advancement than in Europe.
9. The fear of rebellion encouraged the wealthy white colonial elite to develop and implement policies designed to prevent unity among poor whites and blacks, among Indians and blacks, and among Indian nations and other Indian nations.
10. The “hope of leveling” was the motive behind many thoughts, plans, and actions undertaken by poor whites against the wealth and power of their colonial governors.

## General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 3, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. Why do you think students seldom learn about plans to rebel, actual rebellions, and the rebellious beliefs of the American colonists? Do you think it is important to hear these voices? Why, or why not?
2. How do these voices support Howard Zinn's contention that "the desperation of the poor was turned into profit by merchants and ship captains" (p. 63)?
3. What new information did you acquire about life in seventeenth-century colonial North America? How does this information compare and contrast with what you previously knew about life in the English colonies?
4. "Important" people in powerful positions within colonial society wrote three of these entries. What common words and phrases did they use to describe the rebels? What do these words and phrases tell you about social class in colonial North America?
5. What do the causes of and responses to the four rebellions have in common? How are they different?
6. What were the consequences of planning and/or carrying out a rebellion in colonial North America? Of running away from an indentured contract? If punishments were harsh, how can we explain the relatively large numbers of planned and actual rebellions as well as runaway servants?
7. How did the voices in this chapter reinforce any of the themes listed in "Main Points in *Voices*"?
8. Which of the voices in this chapter did you find most powerful? Least powerful? How and why?

## General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions posed for students who have read Chapter 3 in both books. For all questions, discussion must focus on ways in which the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

9. What were the primary grievances of Bacon and his men? How do they compare and contrast with other planned and actual rebellions discussed in "Persons of Mean and Vile Condition"?
10. Howard Zinn describes Bacon's Rebellion as "antiaristocrat" and "anti-Indian" (p. 40). Provide examples from both books of both descriptions.
11. Howard Zinn claims, "It was a complex chain of oppression in Virginia" (p. 42). What was this "chain of oppression"? What evidence does he provide to enforce this contention?
12. What information do these two chapters provide in regard to English attitudes about crime and poverty in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England? How did these attitudes contribute to the colonization of North America? How did they contribute to the ways the colonists dealt with crime and poverty?
13. How does Howard Zinn support his belief that "class lines hardened through the colonial period" (*A People's History*, p. 47)?
14. What is a feudal-type aristocracy? An almshouse? Squatting? Who were tenants? What does the use of these terms tell you about life in colonial North America?
15. What lessons about the "unimportant" people did the "wealthy elite" learn by the eve of the Revolutionary War? Do you agree or disagree with Howard Zinn's belief that the elite purposely turned poor whites against the Indians and blacks, as well as Indians and blacks against each other, "for the security of the elite" (*A People's History*, p. 54)? Why, or why not?
16. What role does fear play in the voices within these two chapters?
17. How does Howard Zinn describe the development of "a white middle class"

(*A People's History*, p. 56)? Do you agree with his statement that the middle class would provide a “solid buffer” for the elite? Why, or why not? Do you think this was a deliberate action by the elite? Why, or why not?

18. Why do you think enslaved African Americans and indentured white servants did not organize together to end their bondage?
19. White people justified the mistreatment of enslaved African Americans by arguing, in part, that they were racially inferior. How could white masters justify the mistreatment of white servants?
20. How did the development of a middle class help keep the wealthy in power?

## Evaluation Tools

### SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. In 1717, England began its Transportation policy. Learn as much as you can about Transportation. What were the goals and accomplishments of this British policy? How did Transportation influence colonization in North America? Were particular colonial regions impacted more than others? When and why did Transportation to North America end? What do you think about the use of such a policy to punish criminals?
2. Using at least three different sources, learn as much as possible about debtor's prison. How was it used in England? When the English colonists used debtor's prison in North America, was it the same system? When and why did debtor's prisons in North America end? Do you think people should be imprisoned for failing to pay their debts? Why, or why not? What happens to people who cannot pay their debts today?
3. Using a search engine of choice, locate and read Bacon's “Declaration of the People,” written in July 1676. What were his grievances against the colonial government at Jamestown? Against the Indians? Do you think these were

legitimate grievances? Using sources from both chapters, defend your answers.

4. Many historians have claimed that in proportion to population, King Phillip's War was the bloodiest conflict in American history. Learn as much as possible about the participants of this war, the goals and grievances of both sides, and its long-term consequences.
5. What were the goals, actions, and consequences of Jacob Leister's farmer's revolt of 1689? How do they compare and contrast with the rebellions discussed in both chapters?
6. Using a search engine of choice, find other voices of indentured servants who lived in colonial North America. Do theirs echo or differ from the voices heard in these chapters? How and why?
7. For over ten years, the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA) has funded archeological research at the original site of the Jamestown colony. Spend some time at the Jamestown Rediscovery Project website at <http://www.apva.org/jr.html>. After browsing the site, how does this information, coupled with what you read in both chapters of the Howard Zinn books, give you a more balanced perspective on how the ordinary colonists of Jamestown struggled to adapt to their new environment?
8. Learn more about the Indian nations whose traditional lands existed on what became Jamestown shortly after contact. Using a search engine of choice, try to locate a first-hand voice that discusses the relationship between the native occupants of the land and the English colonists. How did the Indians greet the English colonists? How did the colonists treat them? How had relationships changed by the 1630s? What do you believe were the primary obstacles to peaceful coexistence?

### SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Describe the various types of rebellions that were planned and carried out in colonial America. How did the goals of the rebels compare and contrast? Which were most successful in achieving their goals? Least successful? How and why?
2. Describe at least two rebellions that occurred in the late-twentieth and



early-twenty-first centuries. How do the goals of these rebellions compare and contrast with the goals of the colonial rebels?

3. Describe the life of a typical indentured servant before, during, and after immigration to North America. How did immigration change his/her life from that which was lead in Europe? How did his/her life compare and contrast with that of a slave?
4. Support or refute Howard Zinn's contention that "[t]he colonies . . . were societies of contending classes" (*A People's History*, p. 50).
5. Why is Chapter 3 in *A People's History* entitled, "Persons of Mean and Vile Condition"? How do the voices in "Servitude and Rebellion" reinforce that title?
6. Various comparisons between life in colonial America and serfdom in Europe are made in both chapters. Provide several examples of such comparisons and then support or refute the merits of this comparison.
7. What voices of resistance in chapters 3 in both *Voices* and *A People's History* were of most interest to you? How and why? Which did you find most compelling and why? Least compelling?
8. How do the voices and information in these two chapters improve your understanding of colonial history? Do you think it is important to learn about the voices of resistance, especially those of people who did not achieve their goals in the course of rebellion? Why, or why not?

### **SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES**

1. Make a drawing of class structure as you think it might have appeared in early America. Your drawing should illustrate the different conditions and amounts of power possessed by each group you identify.
2. Pick one person whom you read about or whose voice resonated with you. Based upon what you know about his life, write a short, reflective autobiography that he might have written toward the end of his life. It might include major accomplishments as well as regrets; stories to be passed on to grandchildren; historical experiences to be shared with a reporter or a historian.

3. Create a simulation of something that might have occurred in frontier Virginia prior to Bacon's Rebellion. Divide the class into four or five groups, each of which has six students who will work together to "overcome the small number of masters." Two students in each group will represent the Indian perspective, two the slave perspective, and two the poor white perspective. They will have twenty minutes to overcome any issues that might divide them and to determine what they have in common, so that they can design their response to their perceived dilemma. Each group then reports back to the class for an overall discussion of the following: the viability, or lack thereof, of each response; and how today's ordinary, powerless citizens might join together in a united response against perceived or actual injustice.
4. Stage a discussion forum during which Richard Frethorne and Gottlieb Mittelberger will discuss their experiences as indentured servants. The attending journalists (all the students in the class who will be sitting in the room) should have a series of politically astute questions ready for each of these men. After Frethorne and Mittelberger speak, the journalists will have the opportunity to ask questions of either speaker or of both. After the discussion, each student will write a short newspaper editorial summarizing his or her understanding of Frethorne's and Gottlieb's experiences and recommending either that indentured servitude continue or that it be abolished within the colonies.