

Leisler's Rebellion

Jacob Leisler {lyz'-lur}, b. 1640, d. May 16, 1691, led a revolt against English authority in colonial New York in 1689-91. The German-born soldier reached New York (1660) when it was under Dutch rule. By the time the English took over (1664), he had married a wealthy widow and was a prosperous merchant.

The Glorious Revolution, which drove the Roman Catholic James II from the English throne in 1688, sparked American rebellion against Sir Edmund Andros, governor of the Dominion of New England, which included New York. In New York, Leisler assisted in the seizure of Fort James in May 1689 and assumed command of the rebel army after Lt. Gov. Francis Nicholson fled in June. In December he proclaimed himself lieutenant governor. In March 1691 a new royal governor arrived in New York. When Leisler hesitated to relinquish power, he was arrested, convicted of murder and treason, and hanged. Parliament later reversed the conviction. Leisler generally represented Protestant, antiaristocratic interests in New York, and his popular, or anticourt, faction was a factor in the colony for another generation.

Bacon's Rebellion

Bacon's Rebellion was a short-lived revolt in colonial Virginia. It began in May 1676 when Nathaniel Bacon (1647-76), a young, well-placed Virginian, led a small army of his fellow colonists in combat against both the royal governor, Sir William Berkeley, and the Indians on the frontier. The participants in the rebellion were motivated by a variety of concerns. Some resented Berkeley's growing personal power, others were anxious to strengthen the popular voice in the political process, and nearly all were opposed to the governor's Indian policy, which threatened to restrict their expansion into western lands occupied by Indians.

Bacon and his men enjoyed some initial success. In June 1676 an assembly dominated by Bacon's supporters passed laws extending the rights of freemen and restricting still further the rights of Indians. Bacon died of swamp fever, however, in October 1676, and by January 1677, Berkeley was once again in control of the colony.

Prosser's Rebellion

Gabriel Prosser, sometimes called simply Gabriel, b. c.1776, d. Oct. 7, 1800, was a black slave who led an abortive uprising near Richmond, Va., in 1800. Having sought in vain to develop a broad base of support, he and his followers nevertheless made plans to assault Richmond on August 30. The plot was discovered, and James Monroe, governor of Virginia, called out the militia to round up the rebels. Gabriel fled but was brought back and hanged, along with some 35 others. The incident apparently disturbed many slaveholders, who, as Monroe said, could no longer "count with certainty" on the "tranquil submission" of the slaves.

Nat Turner's Rebellion

A revolt by about 70 black slaves in Southampton County, Va., in 1831. Led by Nat Turner, a preacher, the rebels killed at least 57 whites. Turner and others were captured and hanged.

Shays' Rebellion

An armed outbreak by debtor farmers in western Massachusetts in 1786-87. Directed against the courts, the uprising followed years of fruitless appeals for relief from an unsympathetic state government. By alarming conservatives in Massachusetts and the other states, it spurred the drive for a strong national government.

During the 1780s the merchant-dominated Massachusetts government imposed heavy taxes to retire state debts, while rejecting paper money and stay laws for debtor relief. As a result, seizure of debtor farmers' property and imprisonment for debt became common. In August 1786, armed mobs began closing courts in western counties, and soon Revolutionary War veteran Daniel Shays (*c.*1747-1825) became the insurgents' leader. The state militia dispersed rebels in Springfield on Jan. 25, 1787. On February 4 a force supported by private contributions dealt the Shaysites a crushing blow at Petersham.

The state government initially imposed death sentences on rebels. A more liberal government was elected in 1787, however; it soon offered full pardon to all, including Shays and other leaders. Some modest relief for debtors was provided.

Whiskey Rebellion

An insurrection in western Pennsylvania that reached its climax in 1794. It was a consequence of the excise law of 1791 that imposed a tax on distilled liquors. In western Pennsylvania, where distillation was the most economical way of consuming surplus corn - to the extent that jugs of corn liquor were utilized as currency - the farmers considered the tax to be burdensome and a violation of their rights. The mountain people, not far removed from the tactics of the American Revolution, and with the Stamp Act in mind, refused to pay the duty and gave the excise agents rough handling.

The tax delinquency of the distillers provided a test of the powers of the fledgling federal government. Alexander Hamilton, particularly, was eager for the power of the new government to be demonstrated and thought that the situation in Pennsylvania justified exemplary action. It was at Hamilton's insistence that President George Washington acted to call out the militia.

In the fall of 1794, militia of four states, including Pennsylvania, was on its way across the Alleghenies. Faced with this opposition, the leaders of the farmers fled, and the rebellion collapsed.