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Bacon's Rebellion and the Invention of Race in America¹

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“No one was white before he/she came to America,” James Baldwin pointedly observed.

As Michelle Alexander elaborated in *The New Jim Crow*, “In America, the idea of race emerged as a means of reconciling chattel slavery – as well as the extermination of American Indians – with the ideals of freedom preached by whites in the new colonies.”

The first slaves were brought to America in 1619, but not all Blacks were enslaved – some were treated as indentured servants, which constituted the principal form of labor at that time. Indentured servants were treated only slightly better than slaves, and poor Whites treated slightly better than indentured servants.

In 1675, Nathaniel Bacon – a White property owner – united slaves, indentured servants, and poor whites in a rebellion against plantation owners. Although the rebellion was suppressed, the planter elite immediately took steps to prevent any such future alliances by providing poor White settlers with some slight privileges: “Their own plight had not improved by much, but at least they were not slaves,” Alexander wrote.

There is a direct line from Baker's Rebellion to the spread of slavery to the institution of Jim Crow. As historian Edmund S. Morgan noted:

For those with eyes to see, there was an obvious lesson in the rebellion. Resentment of an alien race might be more powerful than resentment of an upper class. Virginians did not immediately grasp it. It would sink in as time went on.

And sink in it did. The elites learned their lesson well, and they have never stopped applying it. In the 1890s the emerging Populist Party was threatening to unite Blacks and poor Whites. A prominent Populist leader, Tom Watkins, urged Black and White farmers to unite with the following message:

You are made to hate each other because upon that hatred is rested the keystone of the arch of financial despotism that enslaves you both. You are deceived and blinded that you may not see how this race antagonism perpetuates a monetary system which beggars both.

¹ *The Delray Democrat*, April 2021, p. 7.

The burgeoning interracial alliance of poor people was ultimately crushed by another racial bribe, this time in the form of the Jim Crow segregation laws that disenfranchised and discriminated against Black across the South. As sociologist William Julius Wilson put it,

As long as poor whites directed their hatred and frustration against the black competitor, the planters were relieved of class hostility directed against them.

From Baker's Rebellion to Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy to Ronald Reagan's odious memes of "welfare queens" and "strapping young bucks using food stamps to T-bone steaks" to Donald Trump's demonization of people of color, racists have duped working class Whites into voting against their economic interests for the last half-century.

As the great Pete Seeger wrote, "Oh, when will they ever learn?/Oh, when will they ever learn?"