

**Berkeley, Sir William** (3 July 1606-9 July 1677), royal governor and captain general of Virginia, was born in or near London, the son of Sir Maurice Berkeley, a well-connected gentleman of distinguished family. He was the brother of John, first Baron Berkeley of Stratton, a colonial proprietary. He entered Queen's College, Oxford, in February 1623 and received his B.A. in July 1624 from St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. Five years later, he completed his M.A. at Merton College, Oxford. A charming, intelligent, well-connected gentleman, Berkeley became a favorite of King Charles I and was created a member of the Privy Chamber. In 1632 he was appointed a Commissioner of Canadian affairs and executed the office with distinction. He authored a number of notable plays, among them *The Lost Lady, a Tragi-Comedy*, published in 1638. In July 1639 the king knighted him and on 9 August 1641 commissioned him governor and captain general of Virginia, a position that he retained except for brief interruptions until shortly before his death.

When Berkeley arrived in Virginia the following year, he unified the colony's divided political life by developing a political alliance with aristocratic Virginians. This coterie remained in power for the rest of Berkeley's administration, except for the interruption caused by Oliver Cromwell's rule in the 1650s. During his early administration, Berkeley convinced Virginians that he had their best interests at heart, working assiduously for them in a number of ways. He encouraged crop diversification, silk growing, exploration of the western reaches of Virginia's territory, and the devolution of power to the General Assembly from the Council. He also proved his worth as a military leader. In April 1644 Indians of the Powhatan Confederation launched a devastating military assault in Virginia, killing 500 of the 8,000 settlers in a single, coordinated campaign. Berkeley began to rally the colonists for a powerful militia counteroffensive but suddenly took ship for England, ostensibly to solicit aid for his beleaguered colony. Actually he wished to join the side of King Charles I in the English Civil War. After fighting with the royal armies for some months, he returned to Virginia, where in 1646 he commanded a daring militia expedition that captured [Opechancanough](#), the Indian leader, and ended the frontier war. For this exploit, Berkeley gained the admiration of Virginians.

When the English Civil War had commenced in 1642, Berkeley had vehemently denounced Parliament's opposition to King Charles I and prevailed upon the General Assembly to do likewise. He was particularly outraged when the Roundheads executed the king in 1649, and he offered asylum in Virginia to defeated royalist gentlemen. He refused to submit voluntarily to parliamentary authority, and when Cromwell dispatched a small fleet against him, he organized military resistance. Compelled to capitulate and resign his commission, he nevertheless was granted the right to live peacefully on his Virginia plantation, "Green Spring," during the Interregnum. Upon the ascension of Charles II to the English throne in 1660, Berkeley was reappointed governor, and although the king meditated Berkeley's dismissal in 1665, nothing came of it. Probably the king did not act because of the outbreak of the Anglo-Dutch wars in that year, which necessitated Berkeley's remaining in Virginia to organize the colony's defenses. Already Berkeley had regularized and systematized the Virginia militia system, and in 1667 he put together a scratch force of merchant ships to fend off a Dutch war fleet. Six years later, he more easily repulsed a smaller Dutch squadron. In both instances, he ordered militiamen to patrol Virginia's shores and man coastal batteries to drive off landing parties. Having proved his abilities as an administrator and a brave soldier, Berkeley now stood high in the esteem of Virginians, described as "just in peace, diligent and valiant in war." About 1670 he married Frances Culpeper Stephens ([Lady Frances Berkeley](#)). They had no children.

As Berkeley aged, he became more inflexible in his attitudes. Already he had shown a lack of toleration in religion, zealously persecuting both Puritans and Quakers. Also, he had manifested unfriendliness toward education and the printing press, declaring that "learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged these and other libels." But his popularity among Virginians began to wane only in the 1670s, when his political control came to be perceived as too centralized and oppressive. Other problems also arose for Virginians, such as a depressed tobacco market and restraints on trade imposed by the Navigation Acts. When in 1675 and 1676, Berkeley failed to respond adequately to Indian raids on Virginia's frontiers, angry colonists led by [Nathaniel Bacon](#) began to fight the Indians on their own. Finally, after provocations by both Berkeley and Bacon, a fairly localized mutiny exploded into full-scale civil war known as Bacon's Rebellion. In August 1676 Berkeley abandoned Jamestown to Bacon's forces and fled to the Eastern

Shore. From there he commandeered merchant vessels, returned in September to Jamestown, and was expelled once more. Only after Bacon died on 26 October 1676 did Berkeley negotiate an end to the uprising and restore order. Immediately, he launched a series of reprisals, including hangings and property confiscations, that created additional dissensions. Moreover, he refused to cooperate with a royal commission sent to investigate the Virginia troubles and acceded to its order to return to England only when his health was broken. He died in London before he could present his case to the king and was buried at Twickenham.

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