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The Virginia Planters' Answer
to Captain Butler,
1623

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INTRODUCTION

CAPTAIN NATHANIEL BUTLER served as governor of the Bermuda Islands from the spring of 1619 to October, 1622, during which time he got into trouble by extorting money from some Spaniards who had been shipwrecked there. He spent the winter of 1622-1623 in Virginia, and on his return to England in the spring presented to the king a document called "The Unmasked face of our Colony in Virginia as it was in the Winter of the yeare 1622." After this no more was heard of the complaint which the Spanish minister had lodged against him for his conduct in the Bermudas. The company, deeming it necessary to reply to Butler at once, drew up the paper below and sent out and secured the affidavits of each of the persons in London best acquainted with Virginia affairs. As far as Butler's attack proved anything, it showed how much credit the managers of the company deserved for having rescued the colony from the depths of despair to which it had been brought by the evils of the old government of martial law.

The text of this document is taken from the "court books" of the Virginia Company preserved in the Library of Congress. It occurs in *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, 1906), II. 381-385. It was first printed by Neill in his *Virginia Company of London*, pp. 395-404. Butler's paper is embodied in it.

L. G. T.

THE VIRGINIA PLANTERS' ANSWER TO
CAPTAIN BUTLER, 1623

*The Answers of divers Planters that have long lived in Virginia,
as alsoe of sundry Marriners and other persons that
have bene often at Virginia unto a paper intituled: The
Unmasked face of our Colony in Virginia, as it was
in the Winter of the yeare 1622.*

1. I FOUNDE the Plantacions generally seated uppon meere Salt marishes full of infectious Boggs and muddy Creekes and Lakes, and therby subjected to all those inconveniences and diseases which are soe commonly found in the moste Unsounde and most Unhealthy parts of England wherof everie Country and Clymate hath some.

Answer 1. Wee say that there is no place inhabited but is conveniently habitable. And for the first ¹ plantacion w^{ch} is Kiccoutan against w^{ch} (if any be) most exception may be made, itt is every way soe well disposed that in that place well governed men may enjoy their healthes and live as plentifully as in any parte of England or other his Ma^{ties} Dominions, yett that there are Marishes in some places wee acknowledge; Butt soe as they are more Comodious for divers good respects and uses then if they were wantinge.² As for Boggs wee knowe of none in all the Country and for the rest of the Plantacions as Newports News, Blunt poynt, Wariscoyake, Martins Hundred, Paspahay, and all the Plantacions right over against James Citty, and all the Plantacions above these w^{ch} are many,

¹ *I.e.*, the plantation nearest the mouth of the river.

² Eastern Virginia is intersected with great numbers of creeks and rivers, lined with marshes, the favorite resorts of sora, ducks, and other toothsome birds.

they are verie fruitfull and pleasant Seates, free from Salt Marishes being all on the fresh River, and they are all verie healthfull and high land except James Citty w^{ch} is yett as high as Debtforde or Radelyffe.¹

2. I founde the shores and sides of those partes of the Mayne River where our Plantacions are setled every wher soe shallow as noe Boates can approach the shores, soe that besides the difficulty daunger and spoile of goods in the Landinge of them the people are forced to a Continuall wadinge and wettinge of themselves and that in the prime ² of winter when the Shipps commonly arrive, and therby gett such vyolent surfetts of colde uppon colde as seldom leave them until they leave to live.

Answer 2. That generally for the Plantacions att all times from halfe ffloud to halfe ebb any boate that drawes betwixt three and 4 foote water may safely com in and Land their goods dry on Shore wthout wadinge and for further Cleeringe of these false objecons, the Seamen there doe at all times deliver the goods they bringe to the Owners dry on Shore, wherby itt plainly appeares not any of the Country people there inhabitinge are by this meanes in daunger of their lives, And at a great many Plantacions belowe James Citty and almost all above they may att all times Land dry.³

3. The new people that are yearly sent over which arrive here for the most part very Unseasonably in Winter, finde neither Guest house, Inne nor any the like place to shroud themselves in at their arrivall, noe not soe much as a stroake given towards any such charitable worke soe that many of them by want hereof are not onely seen dyinge under hedges and in the woods but beinge dead ly some of them many dayes Unregarded and Unburied.

Answer 3. To the first they Answered that the winter is the most healthfull time and season for arrivall of new Commers.

¹ This answer could hardly be made in truth. The climate of the James River was undoubtedly very deadly to the newcomers. Conditions have changed since that day, because of the opening of the forests. Deptford and Ratcliff were on the Thames near London.

² Middle.

³ This description accords with the modern topography.

True itt is that as yett ther is noe Guesthouse or place of interteynm^t for Strangers. Butt wee averr that itt was a late intent and had by this time been putt in practise to make a generall gatheringe for the buildinge of such a Convenient house, w^{ch} by this time had been in good fowardnes had itt not pleased God to suffer this Disaster to fall out by the Indians. But although there be no publique Guesthouse yett are new Commers entertayned and lodged and provided for by the Governo^r in pryvate houses; And for any dyinge in the feilds through this defecte and lying unburied, wee are altogether ignorant, yett that many dy suddenly by the hand of God, wee often see itt to fall out even in this flourishinge and plentifull Citty in the midst of our streets. As for dyinge under hedges there is no hedge in all Virginia.

4. The Colony was this winter in much distress of victuall soe that English meale was sould at the rate of thirtie shillings ¹ a bushell their owne native Corne called Maize at ten and fifteen shillings the bushell, The w^{ch} howsoever itt lay heavy uppon the shoulders of the Generallytie it may be suspected not to be unaffected by some of the chiefe, for they only haveinge the means in these extremities to trade for Corne with the Natives doe herby ingrosse all into their hands and soe sell yt abroad at their owne prices, and my selfe have heard from the mouth of a prime one amonst them that hee would never wish that their owne Corne should be cheaper among them then eight shillings the bushell.

Answer 4. True itt is that English meale hath of late since the Massacre been sould for Tenn pounds of Tobacco the bushell w^{ch} no understandinge man can there value above fifteen shillings sterlinge, and here we finde (wthout a Massacre) by the judgment of God for our murmuringe att plentie Wheat hath this yeare been sould and still is in many places at three times the rate itt hath borne wthin two or three years last past; And againe Indian corne hath heretofore comonly been sould after the rate of five shillings the bushell. And farther meale bore so high a price this year as itt cost ready mony in

¹ About \$30 in present values.

England together wth the freight and other charges neer uppon twelve shillings, soe that if itt were sould at Tenn pounds of Tobacco ther will not be gayned twenty in the hundred.

5. Ther Howses are generally the worst that ever I sawe the meanest Cottages in England beinge every way equall (if not superior) with the most of the beste, And besides soe improvidently and scatteringly are they seated one from an other as partly by theire distance but especially by the interposicion of Creeks and Swamps as they call them they offer all advantages to their savadge enimys and are utterly deprived of all suddaine recollection of themselves uppon any tearmes whatsoever.

Answer 5. First that the houses there were most built for use, and not for ornament, and are soe farr from beinge soe meane as they are reported that throughout his Ma^{ty}s Dominions here all labouringe mens houses (w^{ch} wee cheifly professe our selvs to be) are in no wise generally for goodnes to be compared unto them. And for the howses of men of better Ranke and quallety they are soe much better and convenyent that noe man of quallety wthout blushing can make excepcion against them; Againe for the Creeks and Swamps every man ther that cannott goe by Land hath either a Boate or a Conoa for the Conveyinge and speedy passage to his neighbors house. As for Cottages ther are none in Virginia, that they knowe.

6. I found not the least peec of Fortification, Three Peeces of Ordinance onely mounted at James Citty and one at Flowerdue Hundred,¹ but never a one of them serviceable Soe that itt is most certaine that a smale Barke of one hundred Tunns may take its time to pass up the River in spite of them and cominge to an Anchor before the Towne may beate all their houses downe aboute their eares and so forceinge them to retreat into the Woods, may land under the favour of their Ordinance and rifle the Towne at pleasure.

¹ Flowerdew Hundred was about twenty miles from Jamestown up the river on the south side. It was at this time the property of Sir George Yeardley, who in 1621 erected on a point of land the first windmill in the United States. This point is yet known as "Windmill Point."

Answer 6. Itt is true ther is as yett no other artificiall Fortificacions then Pallisadoes wherof allmoste everie Plantacion hath one, and divers of them hath Trenches, And this last yeare Cap^t Eache was sent for that purpose. As for great Ordinance there are fower peeces mounted att James Citty and all serviceable, ther are six Mounted at Flowerdue hundred all of them likewise serviceable, And three mounted att Kiecoutan and all of them serviceable, there are likewise att Newporte Newes three, all of them serviceable, ther are likewise att Henrico seaven peeces and at Charles hundred two, and in other places, besides Fowlers and Murders ¹ at divers places.

7. Expectinge accordinge to their printed Bookes ² a great fowardnes of divers and sundry Comodities, At myne arrivall I found not any one of them so much as in any towardnes ³ of being. For the Iron workes were utterly wasted and the men dead, The Furnaces for Glass and Pots at a stay and in a smale hope, As for the rest they were had in a generall derision even amongst themselves, and the Pamphlets that had published here beinge sent thither by Hundreds wer laughed to scorne, and every base fellow boldly gave them the Lye in divers perticulers, Soe that Tobacco onely was the buisines and for ought that I could here every man madded upon that, and lyttle thought or looked for any thinge else.

Answer 7. That the Country yields divers usefull and rich Commodities w^{ch} by reason of the Infancie of the Plantacion, and this unexpected Massacre cannot yett be brought to perfecon, and is no lesse hindred by the emulous and envious reports of ill willers whose pryvate ends by time wilbe discovered and by God recompensed. And wee doe further answer that this Country is a moste fruitfull Country and doth certainly produce divers rich Comodities. Itt is true that the Iron-workes are wasted and the men dead, but that was by the Massacre w^{ch} if itt had not happened ther had been a good prooffe of that Comodity, for the works wer in a very great forwardnes. As for Vines likewise ther were divers Vine-years planted in sundry places, butt all of them putt back by the Massacre,

¹ Murderers (cannon). ² Circulars or pamphlets. ³ Forwardness.

butt for the peoples derydinge of these Comodities or the books sent by the Comp^a: wee have never heard of any such scoffinge or derisions, butt as the Governor and Counsell ther are very desirous and have sett forth Proclamacions to cause all men to sett both Vines and Mulbery Trees, so the people generally are very desyrous and forward to rayse those former Commodities of Wine and Silke and likewise divers other good Comodities.¹

8. I found the Antient Plantations of Henrico and Charles Citty wholly quitted and lefte to the spoile of the Indians, who not onely burned the houses saide to be once the best of all others, but fell uppon the Poultry, Hoggs, Cowes, Goates and Horses wherof they killed great numbers to the greate grieffe as well as ruine of the Olde Inhabitants, whoe stick not to affirme that these were not onely the best and healthiest parts of all others, but might allsoe by their naturall strength of scituacion have been the most easefully preserved of all the rest.

9. Wheras accordinge to his Ma^{ties} gracious Letters Patents his People in Virginia are as neer as possibly may be to be governed after the excellent Lawes and Customes of Englande, I found in the Government there not onely ignorant and enforced strayings in diver particulers, but willfull and intended ones;² Insomuch as some who urged due conformity have in contempt been tearmed men of Lawe, and were excluded from those rights which by orderly proceedings they were elected and sworne unto here.

10. There havinge been as it is thought not fewer than Tenn thousand soules transported thither ther are not through the aforementioned abuses and neglects above Two thousand of them at the present to be found alive, many of them alsoe in a

¹ Nevertheless, Butler was very near right when he gave the emphasis to tobacco; and doubtless for many years the culture of tobacco was too absorbing.

² Butler means that he found that the orders of the company, which promised a government after the excellent laws and customs of England, were wilfully disregarded.

sickly and desperate estate:¹ Soe that itt may undoubtedly [be] expected that unlesse the Confusions and pryvate ends of some of the Company here, and the bad executions in secondinge them by their Agents there be redressed with speed by some divine and supreame hand, that in steed of a Plantacion it will shortly gett the name of a Slaughterhouse, and soe justly become both odious to our selves and contemptible to all the worlde.

Answered. All these wee leave to be answered by the Governor and Company some of them beinge unfitt to be determined of by us. And for the last wee being ignorant how many have been transported or are now lyvinge there.

Wee whose names are hereunder and hereafter written have uppon mature deliberacion and after full examinacion and consideracion of the premises, drawne upp these answers beinge such as we finde in our consyencies to be true, and shall att all times justifie them uppon our oathes. In wittnes wherof wee have hereunder sett our hands.²

¹ The Virginia Company afterwards undertook to answer these three last charges. The condition of the plantations at Henrico and Charles City was ascribed to an Indian massacre, which was unavoidable. There was nothing in the charge of arbitrary rule, which had no better ground than the exclusion of Butler's unjust claim to a seat in the council. As to the number of emigrants, it did not exceed 6000, of whom 2500 had been sent over during the twelve years of Sir Thomas Smith; 2500, and not 2000, still survived.

² Upon this follow sixteen attestations by persons who had lived in Virginia or mariners who had visited the country, all of whom declare the answers above given to be truthful.