

“They Were Good and Honest Men,” Bermuda Governor’s Early Relations with Pirates and Privateers

Meagan Schulman

Abstract

Bermuda's earliest governors sought to chart a middle ground between an appearance of propriety and the sponsorship of illicit activities, especially privateering and piracy. This work will further examine how the political agendas of the Stuart monarchs shaped and determined the activities of these colonial governors. While Bermuda's governors should have enforced the agenda set forth by James I, more often they did not; governor support of these activities flourished. Bermuda's colonial Governors accepted and promoted the docking of foreign ships in their harbors in exchange for goods, all while under the fabricated story of a famine occurring.

Privateering and piracy have long been a part of the Atlantic World’s history. Today, the word pirate or privateer often evokes mixed reactions, due to the mass media's portrayal of these two specific groups of individuals. Privateering has a direct relationship with foreign policy since the seventeenth century when privateering was state-sponsored, legal, and profitable. This gave rise to English colonies serving as centers for privateering as well as piracy, as seen in the case with Bermuda. The early governors of Bermuda charted a middle ground around the appearance of propriety

coupled with the tacit permission and even sponsorship of these forbidden activities. The economic benefits of piracy, privateering, and smuggling motivated the establishment of this middle ground. To effectively balance these tendencies, early governors fabricated cover stories in order to weaponize the empathy of their sponsoring company.

Situated off the coast of what would later be North Carolina, Bermuda was in an immaculate position to be a linchpin of the Atlantic and its trading systems that evolved later. Bermuda was under the jurisdiction of the Virginia Company from its colonization

in 1609 until 1614 when investors formed another company: The Somers Isle Company. The transition to the Somers Isles Company occurred towards the end of Bermudian Governor Richard Moore's (Bermuda's first colonial governor) term. According to the Somers Isle Company, the only vessels allowed to dock in the harbors of Bermuda were company vessels. The islands served as a rest stop for company vessels as they made their long journey across the Atlantic. Along with Company ships came the presence of privateer/pirate vessels who also used Bermuda as a rest stop, in addition to a market for their goods. The governors who were affiliated with either the Virginia or Somers Isle Companies were responsible for upholding James I's policy relating to privateering and piracy. This was not the case and the governors used Bermuda's reefs and coast as a way to hide illegal ships from Company vessels. Regardless of the laws the governors were supposed to enforce, privateering still occurred on many occasions as Bermuda became a center for these practices (Rodgers, 2017; Heywood, Thornton, 2007).

The separation between England and Bermuda raises questions about the enforcement of the foreign policy. Bermuda's governors were expected to follow Company protocol, especially in preserving the monopoly of trade. They were also assured that Company vessels would be enough to sustain the colony. However, Bermuda was able to produce its own resources and be self-sufficient year-round (as well as produce surplus for Jamestown and tobacco for England). This has led to a discrepancy between the accounts of famine and surplus in colonial Bermuda (Butler, 2007). Governors of Bermuda, as well as other colonists, have written accounts of this alleged 'famine' that later historians have deemed a moderate grain shortage.

These accounts, some of which were official correspondences between governors and the Company, portrayed a 'desolate' colonial life. Always with the mention of famine came the mention of a new vessel into the harbor, one that gave the colony supplies to survive. These vessels were not company ships but rather pirates and privateers. The accounts of famine were just cover stories in an attempt to weaponize the empathy of Virginia and later Somers Isle Company. Because of the governors accounts, the Adventurers in England were forced to make a decision on the information that was provided to them: warn the governors of their removal and the illegality of their acceptance of pirates/ privateers, or give them a slap on the wrist for breaking the rules and keep the colony out of famine.

The survival of the colony was not dependent on the ships that came into the harbors, but rather their own subsistence. However, when governors would claim that company ships were not enough for the growing population, they turned to receiving/trading goods with pirates. Still, the governors tried to persistently hide their correspondence with the pirates in fear of the Company's response. This was to be expected, as pirates were tried and hanged in England. Surely pirate sympathizers would not be treated kindly, especially ones in a government position. Nonetheless, it was the fabrication of a cover story (famine) that allowed privateers and pirates access to the harbors that kept the colony afloat during troubling times (in the eyes of the Company), even though it was not the reality of the situation.

Bermuda's earliest governors were trapped between what was seen as two choices: obeying the Company and England's laws or having the economic benefit that allowing pirates and privateers into the islands provided. The governors still portrayed themselves to the company in a

positive manner in fear of being recalled. Bermuda's governors found the middle ground of appearing to follow the laws as well as accepting and sometimes encouraging these forbidden activities. It is that decision that carried on throughout not one, or two, but *all* of the colonial governorships. While the Company lost their monopoly, they were

powerless to curb their governors, perhaps suggesting sympathy - and thus believing the fiction of 'troubling times'. A middle ground emerged between the Somers Isle Company, the governors, and the "good and honest men" with whom they dealt. This research will be continued into a Master's thesis after graduation.

References

- Butler, Nathaniel, *Butler's History of the Bermudas*. Edited by Hollis Hallett (The Keep, The Old Royal Naval Dockyard, Bermuda: Bermuda Maritime Museum, 2007)
- Heywood, Linda and Thornton, John, *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585-1660*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007)
- Rodgers, Bradley, "Preliminary Report on the Phase I of Pre- Disturbance Survey of Morgan's Island Wreck Site, Somerset Bermuda, May 2017,"

Recommended Citation

Schulman, M. (2020). "They were good and honest men," Bermuda governor's early relations with pirates and privateers. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com/risser-2020>