



# The Barbados “Declaration of Independence”

18 February 1651  
EXCERPTS\*

Settled by the English in 1627, Barbados became a major sugar producer by the 1640s, enjoying increased autonomy from England as the home country became embroiled in political rivalry and civil war. But with the overthrow of King Charles I by Oliver Cromwell in 1649, the island fell into its own political turmoil as supporters and opponents of the monarchy competed for power. As Charles’s supporters gained the upper hand, their opponents successfully urged Parliament to take action against them. The Barbadians were declared traitors, all trade was halted between the island and England, and a naval fleet was dispatched to Barbados to subdue the Royalist leaders. At this point the Barbadian governor and council issued the first “declaration of independence” from England.

The Lord Lieutenant-General, together with the Lords of this said Council and Assembly, having carefully read over the said printed Papers [Acts of Parliament], and finding them to oppose the freedom, safety, and well-being of this island, have thought themselves bound to communicate the same to all the inhabitants of this island; . . .

**FIRST**— They allege that this island was first settled and inhabited at the charges, and by the especial order of the people of England, and therefore ought to be subject to the same nation. It is certain, that we all of us know very well, that

we, the present inhabitants of this island, were and still be that people of England, who with great danger to our persons, and with great charge and trouble, have settled this island in its condition and inhabited the same, and shall we therefore be subject to the will and command of those that stay at home? Shall we be bound to the Government and Lordship of a Parliament in which we have no Representatives, or persons chosen by us, for there to propound and consent to what might be needful to us, as also to oppose and dispute all what should tend to our disadvantage and harm? In truth, this would be a slavery far exceeding all that the English nation hath yet suffered. And we doubt not but the courage which hath brought us thus far out of our own country, to seek our beings and livelihoods in this wild country, will maintain us in our freedoms; without which our lives will be uncomfortable to us.

**SECONDLY**— It is alleged that the inhabitants of this island have, by cunning and force, usurped a power and Government.

If we, the inhabitants of this island, had been heard what we could have said for ourselves, this allegation [would have] never been printed; but those who are destined to be slaves may not enjoy those

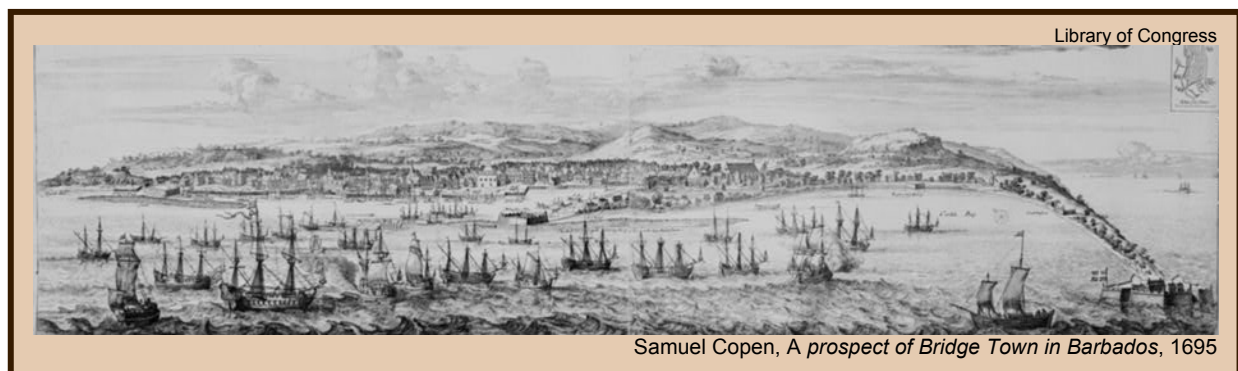
Excerpted and images added by the National Humanities Center, 2006: [www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm](http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/pds.htm). “A Declaration of my Lord Willoughby, Lieutenant-General and Governor of Barbados, and other Caribbee Islands; as also the Council of the Island belonging to it; serving in answer to a certain Act formerly put forth by the Parliament of England, the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1650”; cited in R. H. Schomburgk, *The History of Barbados* (London, 1848), pp. 706-708; as presented in Eric Williams, ed., *Documents of West Indian History*, Vol. I, 1492-1655 (Port of Spain, Trinidad: PNM Publishing Co., 1963), pp. 301-303. Permission pending. Complete image credits at [www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm](http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us/pds/amerbegin/imagecredits.htm).

privileges; otherwise we might have said and testified with a truth, that the Government now used amongst us, is the same that hath always been ratified, and doth every way agree with the first settlement and Government in these places; and was given us by the same power and authority that New England hold theirs; . . .

**THIRDLY**—<sup>1</sup> By the abovesaid Act all outlandish [foreign] nations are forbidden to hold any correspondence or traffic with the inhabitants of this island; although all the ancient inhabitants know very well, how greatly they have been obliged to those of the Low Countries for their subsistence, and how difficult it would have been for us, without their assistance, ever to have inhabited these places, or to have brought them into order; and we are yet daily sensible, what necessary comfort they bring to us daily, and that they do sell their commodities a great deal cheaper than our own nation will do; but this comfort must be taken from us by those whose will must be a law to us: but we declare, that we will never be so unthankful to the Netherlanders for their former help and assistance, as to deny or forbid them, or any other nation, the freedom of our harbors, and the protection of our laws, by which they may continue, if they please, all freedom of commerce and traffic with us.

**FOURTHLY**— For to perfect and accomplish our intended slavery, and to make our necks pliable for to undergo the yoke, they got and forbid to our own countrymen to hold any correspondence, commerce, or traffic with us, nor to suffer [allow] any to come at us, but such who have obtained particular licenses from some persons, . . . that no other goods or merchandizes shall be brought hither, than such as the licensed persons shall please and think fit to give way to; and that they are to sell the same at such a price, as they shall please to impose on them; and suffer no other ships to come hither but their own: as likewise that no inhabitants of this island may send home upon their own account any island goods of this place, but shall be as slaves to the Company, who shall have the abovesaid licenses, and submit to them the whole advantage of our labor and industry.

**WHEREFORE**— having rightly considered, we declare, that as we would not be wanting to use all honest means for the obtaining of a continuance of commerce, trade, and good correspondence with our country, so we will not alienate ourselves from those old heroic virtues of true Englishmen, to prostitute our freedom and privileges, to which we are born, to the will and opinion of any one; neither do we think our number so contemptible, nor our resolution so weak, to be forced or persuaded to so ignoble a submission, and we cannot think, that there are any amongst us, who are so simple, and so unworthily minded, that they would not rather choose a noble death, than forsake their own liberties and privileges.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Barbados shipped most of its sugar on Dutch ships and had traded steadily with the Netherlands since its founding. Parliament, by banning all English colonial trade with foreign nations through the Navigation Acts, was directly targeting the Barbadian trade relationship with the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> The naval fleet of seven ships arrived from England in October 1651 and set up a blockade of Barbados. Battles between the English forces and Willoughby's militias took the lives of several hundred Barbadian men. Facing certain defeat against the imperial navy, Lord Willoughby surrendered on January 17, 1652.