

Turner, Nat (2 Oct. 1800-11 Nov. 1831), slave leader, was born in Southampton County, Virginia, the son of Nancy, an African-born slave, and her husband (name unknown), also a slave and perhaps African-born, both of whom belonged to Benjamin Turner. Though Nat Turner changed owners a number of times, he did not experience the disruption of being shipped south to Georgia or Mississippi. He spent his entire life in Southampton County; nonetheless, as a consequence of slavery, he experienced separation from all the people who mattered most to him. Separated while very young from his father, who reportedly escaped to the North, Nat was raised by his mother and paternal grandmother. In 1809 Benjamin Turner loaned Nat and his mother, along with some other slaves, to work his son Samuel Turner's land; the next year Benjamin died, and Samuel inherited both mother and son. Nat was put to work as a field hand at the age of twelve. By 1822 he had married a slave named Cherry, but that year he was separated from his wife and his mother when, after the death of Samuel Turner, each was sold to a different owner. Nat Turner became the property of Thomas Moore, but Moore died in 1828. Turner then became the legal property of Thomas Moore's nine-year-old son Putnam Moore, whose mother married Joseph Travis in 1829, and thus Joseph Travis gained control of Nat Turner, who continued to be the property of the child Putnam Moore.

Whites and blacks alike recognized Turner's exceptional intelligence even as a child, so much so that it was widely said of him that he "would never be of any service to any one as a slave," that--as his parents had drummed into him--he was "intended for some great purpose" (Turner, *Confessions*). As a child he learned to read. In his teens he began preaching at slaves' clandestine religious meetings, and in 1827 he even baptized a white overseer, Etheldred T. Brantley. All through his teens and twenties he worked as a field hand and found himself separated from one family member after another. He had to live apart from his wife and their children. At thirty years of age, standing about 5'7", weighing 150 pounds, very dark skinned, wearing a mustache, often projecting a commanding presence, he belonged to a little boy. None of his masters had been particularly cruel or unkind, but each had presumed to be his master.

Slavery was a great and terrible serpent, Satan institutionalized. Nat Turner was proud, brooding, austere, and deeply religious. On 12 May 1828 he experienced a vision that led him to believe that God had chosen him to lead a great uprising of blacks against whites. As he was later reported to have recalled, he "heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men." The Spirit went on to declare that Nat Turner should take that yoke on "and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first." Turner must watch the heavens for signs that would tell him when, and then "I should arise and . . . slay my enemies with their own weapons" (*Confessions*).

Turner recruited four slave men to work with him--Nelson, Sam, Henry, and Hark, each a field hand and active in the slave church--and in the summer of 1831 he set a date for action, the Fourth of July, later postponed to 21 August, a Sunday. The rebellion began in the early hours of 22 August. The Travis place was the first stop, and the first to be killed were young Putnam Moore, his mother Sally, and her husband Joseph, the man, woman, and child whose property he had been; "General Nat" swung first at Joseph Travis, and Will, a member of his small army, finished him off. More than fifty more whites died at the hands of Turner and his men during that Monday and Tuesday.

Supported by forces ranging from the local patrol and vigilante groups to units of the U.S. Army and Navy stationed at Fortress Monroe, Virginia militia captured or dispersed Turner's comrades. Dozens of his followers were tried, convicted, and either executed or transported out of Virginia to slavery elsewhere. Scores more among slaves and free blacks in other communities were also tried, or were killed without the formality of a trial.

The vision Turner had that led toward the uprising featured a scene in which "white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, . . . and blood flowed in streams." Turner's plans called for killing all whites at first without discrimination. Nevertheless a letter dated 1 November 1831 from a writer in

Southampton County (likely Thomas R. Gray) to the *Richmond Enquirer*, published 8 November, assured readers that "indiscriminate slaughter was not [the rebels'] intention after they obtained [a] foothold" but was employed "to strike terror." Turner did, in fact, make a few exceptions during those two days.

Although Turner's uprising is typically termed a slave rebellion, it highlights some peculiarities of antebellum Tidewater Virginia. At that time Southampton County typified the region in that, while the majority of its residents were black (59 percent in 1830), the majority of the residents were also free (52 percent). A significant minority of free blacks (11 percent) made this arrangement of society possible. Given that free blacks found their freedom greatly limited under laws and customs that in many ways refused to distinguish them from slaves, slavery blighted free blacks' lives and curtailed their opportunities. Thus Turner's followers included a number of free black men. And thus, too, his men attacked white nonslaveholders as well as slaveholders. In short, his uprising was as much black against white in a slaveholding society as it was slave versus owner.

Turner himself was found on Sunday, 30 October, hiding in the woods less than two miles from the Travis place. Brought to trial on 5 November in Jerusalem (now Courtland), Virginia, he was convicted of "conspiring to rebel and making insurrection." He was hanged six days later from an oak tree. While in jail awaiting trial, Turner granted an interview to Thomas R. Gray, a white lawyer Turner's age, and the collaboration continues to supply much of what is known about Turner and the rebellion.

The uprising in Southampton County led to a fractious debate in the Virginia legislature in January and February 1832 over whether to take steps to bring slavery to an end in the Old Dominion. In that debate, Delegate James McDowell explained why "distant counties" had taken steps to "arm and equip for a struggle," why so many had sent militia to Southampton County, indeed why the subject of slavery and emancipation was now being debated in the Virginia House of Delegates: "It was the suspicion eternally attached to the slave himself, the suspicion that a Nat Turner might be in every family, that the same bloody deed could be acted over at any time in any place, that the materials for it were spread through the land and always ready for a like explosion." In the end, in a close vote in the House of Delegates (the matter never reached a vote in the state senate), Virginia legislators rejected a gradual emancipation measure. Proponents and opponents of the measure agreed, though, that steps should be taken to reduce the number of free blacks in Virginia.

The rebellion led various states to tighten their laws regulating the freedom of slaves and free blacks alike to conduct unsupervised religious services or other meetings and to learn how to read and write. Moreover, in private imagination and in the discourse of political debate, it supplied the image of a rebel as an alternative to that of the contented slave. Two centuries after Nat Turner's birth in 1800, his brief life continued to stand out for its exhibition of black rage and rebellion. Controversy over interpretations of his life continue to reveal "truths of the national ordeal over slavery which reverberate from 1831 to the present" (Gross and Bender, p. 518).

Bibliography

Much of what is known about Turner derives from *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va., as Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray* (1831), published days after Turner's execution. Significant modern works on Turner's life and times include Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion, Including the Full Text of Nat Turner's 1831 "Confessions"* (1966); F. Roy Johnson, *The Nat Turner Story* (1970); Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (1975); Thomas C. Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia* (1978); Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832* (1982); and Peter H. Wood, "Nat Turner: The Unknown Slave as Visionary Leader," in *Black Leaders of*

the Nineteenth Century, ed. Leon Litwack and August Meier (1988). Valuable collections of materials from Turner's time are Henry I. Tragle, ed., *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (1971), and Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (1996).

Two novels portray Turner: Daniel Panger, *Ol' Prophet Nat* (1967), and William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). Styron's, a bestseller, proved a lightning rod in the politics of culture, as is displayed in John Henrik Clarke, ed., *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968). Useful collections of materials are John B. Duff and Peter M. Mitchell, eds., *The Nat Turner Rebellion: The Historical Event and the Modern Controversy* (1971), and Eric Foner, ed., *Nat Turner* (1971). Subsequent analysis appears in Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender, "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner," *American Quarterly* 23 (Oct. 1971): 487-518; James M. Mellard, "This Unquiet Dust: The Problem of History in Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 36 (Fall 1983): 525-43; and Albert E. Stone, *The Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature, and Cultural Politics in Sixties America* (1992). Daniel S. Fabricant, "Thomas R. Gray and William Styron: Finally, a Critical Look at the 1831 *Confessions of Nat Turner*," *American Journal of Legal History* 37 (July 1993): 332-61, and Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993), reassess Turner and the place of his *Confessions* in U.S. history, law, and culture.

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Online Resources

- Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1831
<http://metalab.unc.edu/docsouth/turner/menu.html>
From the Documenting the American South Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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Citation:

Peter Wallenstein. "Turner, Nat";
<http://www.anb.org/articles/15/15-00711.html>;
American National Biography Online Feb. 2000.

Access Date: Sat Jul 17 11:37:44 CDT 2010

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