Black Americans of Achievement
LEGACY EDITION

Nat Turner

SLAVE REVOLT LEADER

Terry Bisson

Nat Turner

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Muhammad Ali
Frederick Douglass
W.E.B. Du Bois
Marcus Garvey
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Langston Hughes
Jesse Jackson
Coretta Scott King
Martin Luther King, Jr.
Malcolm X
Thurgood Marshall
Jesse Owens
Rosa Parks
Colin Powell
Sojourner Truth
Harriet Tubman
Nat Turner
Booker T. Washington

Nat Turner

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Introduction

Nearly 20 years ago, Chelsea House Publishers began to publish the first volumes in the series called BLACK AMERICANS OF ACHIEVEMENT. This series eventually numbered over a hundred books and profiled outstanding African Americans from many walks of life. Today, if you ask school teachers and school librarians what comes to mind when you mention Chelsea House, many will say—"Black Americans of Achievement."

The mix of individuals whose lives we covered was eclectic, to say the least. Some were well known—Muhammad Ali and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, for example. But others, such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, were lesser-known figures who were introduced to modern readers through these books. The individuals profiled were chosen for their actions, their deeds, and ultimately their influence on the lives of others and their impact on our nation as a whole. By sharing these stories of unique Americans, we hoped to illustrate how ordinary individuals can be transformed by extraordinary circumstances to become people of greatness. We also hoped that these special stories would encourage young-adult readers to make their own contribution to a better world. Judging from the many wonderful letters we have received about the BLACK AMERICANS OF ACHIEVEMENT biographies over the years from students, librarians, and teachers, they have certainly fulfilled the goal of inspiring others!

Now, some 20 years later, we are publishing 18 volumes of the original BLACK AMERICANS OF ACHIEVEMENT series in revised editions to bring the books into the twenty-first century and

make them available to a new generation of young-adult readers. The selection was based on the importance of these figures to American life and the popularity of the original books with our readers. These revised editions have a new full-color design and, wherever possible, we have added color photographs. The books have new features, including quotes from the writings and speeches of leaders and interesting and unusual facts about their lives. The concluding section of each book gives new emphasis to the legacy of these men and women for the current generation of readers.

The lives of these African-American leaders are unique and remarkable. By transcending the barriers that racism placed in their paths, they are examples of the power and resiliency of the human spirit and are an inspiration to readers.

We present these wonderful books to our audience for their reading pleasure.

Lee M. Marcott
Chelsea House Publishers
August 2004

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An End and a Beginning

It was a perfect day for a hanging.

The autumn air was brisk as an eager crowd gathered at the edge of town. A hanging, especially the hanging of a slave, was a popular public spectacle in pre–Civil War Virginia, almost as exciting as a horse race. Fried chicken and biscuits were unpacked. Men took long pulls at the apple brandy that Southampton County produced in abundance. Older children ran through the growing crowd, while the little ones tugged at their mothers' skirts, wondering what all the excitement was about.

Suddenly, a mother stood and hoisted her baby to her shoulder. A father pulled his son from play and commanded him to pay attention. A wagon was approaching from the center of town, with armed men on horses riding in front and behind. Nat Turner, a compact, muscular man about 30 years old, rode in the wagon, bound in chains. His broad, handsome

African features were calm and composed; his brown eyes scanned the crowd without wavering. If he was looking for a friendly face, he was disappointed. All of the faces that he saw were white, and most were twisted with hatred. A few weeks before, when he was captured, the crowd had taunted him and spat at him, then had beaten him with ropes and sticks. On this day they were silent.

The wagon stopped. The jailer helped the prisoner down, and whispered in his ear as he led him toward the twisted old oak that served Southampton County as a hanging tree. The jailer had asked him if he had any last words that he wanted to say. Turner shook his head. He had already had his say. In a long interview conducted in jail a few days before, he had told the story of the slave rebellion that he had led. That would be his statement for the world. "I am ready" was all he would now say.

Without flinching, Turner allowed a thick hemp rope to be put over his neck and the knot pulled snug. Ignoring the breathless crowd, he looked up for one last time at the autumn sky, towering with clouds. Then, without a flicker, he closed his great, dark eyes on the world. The other end of the rope was thrown over a high limb. A ripple of excitement ran through the crowd as a few white men especially chosen for this honor spat on their hands and took hold of the rope. As they yanked the doomed man off his feet, the crowd gasped in anticipation.

Yet they were denied the spectacle that they had come to see. Turner died as he had lived: with the dignity and courage of a leader of men, and with a measure of mystery as well. Hoisted toward the Heaven that he firmly believed was preparing to receive him with honors, he hung perfectly still, as if already dead; he hung without a kick or a twitch, determined even in his last moments to deny his enemies the satisfaction of watching his torment. It was Turner's last act, and it spooked the crowd. "Not a limb or a muscle was observed to move," an awed eyewitness reported.

Nat Turner's 1831 slave revolt resulted in the death of more than 50 whites and struck fear into slave owners and Southerners. Although Turner was captured and hanged for his actions, his revolt challenged the idea that slaves were content in servitude and brought attention to the importance of the slavery issue.

Unnerved, disappointed, uneasy, the white people of southeastern Virginia went home—some to pitiful hardscrabble farms, some to vast plantations. Later in the evening, as their slaves watered and bedded the horses, they said their prayers, lit their lamps, and kissed their children good night, as they

usually did. This night was also different. This night they locked their doors. They checked the pistols under their beds; they primed the shotguns leaning against the bedroom walls. They woke up at every moaning of the wind, every cracking branch, every cooing dove.

For Turner and the men who rode with him had put an end to the peaceful sleep of Virginia. By attacking slavery with the sword, they had shattered the complacency of the South. By organizing and leading the most successful slave revolt in American history, Turner had drowned in blood the absurd lie that blacks were happy as slaves and would submit forever to be the beasts of burden of whites. Now everyone—both blacks and whites—knew that slavery would be stopped. It was only a matter of time.

2

The World of Slavery

By the time of Nat Turner's uprising in 1831, the United States was no longer engaged in the international slave trade. Still, its black population was far from free. The men who drafted the Constitution in 1787 were supposed to have addressed the question of slavery in their newly "free" country when they met in Philadelphia, but they had chosen instead to avoid the issue in an effort to get Southern as well as Northern delegates to approve of the document they were drafting. Reluctant to discuss the future of slavery, the Founding Fathers formulated a legislative compromise when it came to counting slaves for purposes of representation and put off action on the fate of the institution as a whole for at least 20 years. Better to let a future generation handle the problem, they agreed, so it was decided that the importation of slaves from abroad would be banned not at the moment the nation was formed but in 1808.

The Constitution did put an end to American participation in the international slave market in 1808, but the traffic of human beings was far from over. The demise of the trans-Atlantic trading structure, in fact, triggered a rapid expansion of the domestic market. Fed by the natural increase of slaves already in the United States and energized by the westward drift of the young republic, a startling transformation took place in the demographics of slavery. The opening of fresh, fertile lands in the West combined with the rise of commercially viable, large-scale cotton cultivation to alter the distribution patterns of slavery throughout the South.

A profound shift took place, in which slaves from the coastal South (the Tidewater region of Maryland and Virginia) were sold to planters setting up operations in places such as Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. Although a substantial number of slaves remained in the East, particularly in parts of southern Virginia and the Carolinas, the economic niche they occupied was changing rapidly. A new era of human tragedy, in which the buying and selling of human beings was a solely domestic economic pursuit, was dawning. The history of the slave trade, then, is really two sad tales of human misery, one involving a trans-Atlantic exchange network and another that was an entirely American enterprise.

A TALE OF TWO SLAVERIES: THE ATLANTIC TRADE

From 1619 to 1808, a commercial arrangement that came to be known as the Triangular Trade brought slaves from West Africa to the Americas, where they were exchanged for staples such as rice, indigo, sugar, and rum, which were shipped back to Europe. Finished goods such as cloth, firearms, and hardware, traded to African merchants for more slaves, completed the last leg of the "triangle" that ran from Africa to the New World to Europe and back to Africa. Slave traders reaped immense profits and caused unimaginable suffering during

this period. Men, women, and children stolen from Africa were herded aboard rotting, insect-infested slave ships; squeezed into ships' holds, often with no more than 18 inches of room allotted per slave; poorly fed; and denied medical care. As they crossed the ocean, many died of disease and malnutrition and some, overcome with despair, took their own lives.

The Middle Passage was a nightmare that ended only when the Americas came into sight. Off the coasts of North and South America, slaves were fed, clothed, and exercised in anticipation of sale in the world's greatest market for human "cargo." The New World consumed an estimated 11 million Africans during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; 95 percent of them wound up in either Brazil or the West Indies. Of the total number of imported slaves, only 5 percent made their way to the British North American colonies. Most of these unfortunate people went to work in Virginia and the Carolinas, but, during this time, slaves could be found as far north as Massachusetts and as far south as the border between Georgia and Florida.

Before 1808, fresh shiploads of slaves arrived regularly in American ports. The Northern colonies did have a small market for West Indian slaves who had been exhausted by toil in the Caribbean sugar fields, but at least 85 percent of the slaves stepping onto the soil of what would become the United States came directly from Africa. With working conditions harsh at best and supply plentiful, most American planters opted for the purchase of new humans over encouraging reproduction within the existing slave population. For the owners who could afford to do so, it was easier simply to work slaves until they broke down and then buy more. Import levels, therefore, remained high. On the eve of the American Revolution, for example, colonists imported more than 32,000 slaves from Africa in just 15 years. So many slaves crossed the Atlantic at the time of American independence that human beings became Africa's chief export.

From 1619 until 1808, the Atlantic slave trade brought slaves from Africa to the Americas in exchange for raw and manufactured goods. Though the international slave trade ended in 1808, the trade inside the United States grew throughout the early 1800s. In this sketch, a large group of slaves returns home after working in the fields.

A TALE OF TWO SLAVERIES: THE DOMESTIC TRADE

All of this changed in 1808. Congress's prohibition of further importation stimulated the internal American slave trade, which coincided with a Southwestern shift in slavery's demographics and economics. By the 1830s, when the opening of vast tracts of formerly Indian land and the mass production of the cotton gin stood poised to make cotton the most lucrative Southern staple on the market, the shift was clear.

Nat Turner was born in 1800 in Southampton County, Virginia. The time and place of his birth are significant, because

Turner was born a slave at a time when the views of slavery in Virginia and other parts of the Tidewater region were changing. White masters in the region began to view slaves more as a commodity to be sold—to other regions of the country where slave labor was needed—than as a profitable source of labor for their own homes and lands. As one North Carolina slaveowner lamented, "Negroes are unprofitable in this country except for their increase . . ." and sale. The coastal soil had been denuded (stripped of nutrients) by intensive tobacco growing; the land was simply played out. No one spoke openly of the end of slavery, but the institution undoubtedly was changing as the economic framework it supported began to collapse.

The numbers spoke for themselves. The proportion of slaves in the general population in the old Chesapeake tobacco-growing area was on its way down from 30 percent during the Revolutionary period to only 15 percent just before the Civil War. At the same time, plantations were springing up in prime cotton areas in the Deep South that desperately needed slaves' hands to work them. Between 1824 and 1860 the number of slaves in Crawford County, Georgia, skyrocketed from 579 to 4,270, with the average holding per family more than doubling from 5 slaves to 12. (For additional information on the growth of cotton farming, enter "cotton gin and slavery" into any search engine and browse the sites listed.)

SLAVE LIFE DURING A TIME OF TRANSITION

For most slaves, the change in the economics of slavery mattered little. For black slaves left out of the westward migration, life droned on according to rhythms that had altered little in nearly 200 years. Like Turner, most slaves labored on medium-sized farms and small plantations housing anywhere from 10 to 50 slaves. Some plantations were larger, but they stood as an exception. In Turner's Southampton County, only 13 percent of all slaveowners held more than 20 slaves and only 15 individual planters owned more than 50.

These common slaves worked long days in the fields raising wheat and corn, and, to a lesser extent as time wore on, tobacco. White masters also employed slaves as rural craftsmen, carpenters, millers, and blacksmiths. In cities such as Richmond and Charleston, slaves performed manual day labor and served as domestic servants. A few found work in the skilled trades and could be counted among a city's artisans.

Slavery Compared

Two very different types of slavery existed in Nat Turner's day. One form appeared in early America; the other took hold in the British West Indies and Brazil. Each was unique, and the two models were distinguished primarily by the degree to which slave labor insinuated itself into the general economy and the extent of routine social contact and interaction between whites and blacks.

In the United States, slaves labored in almost every sector of the national economy. By the 1830s, slavery was confined, for all practical purposes, to the Southern states, but its commercial impact was felt throughout the country. Slaves worked as urban craftsmen and plantation field hands, mechanics, carpenters, sailors, and wagon drivers. Such broad distribution made slaves an integral part of the American marketplace and guaranteed intimate contact with whites. Although interaction occurred through a haze of mutual hostility and suspicion, whites and blacks could not avoid seeing each other everywhere they went.

In contrast, the West Indian–Brazilian model ensured limited black participation in the broader economy and scarce contact between the white and black communities. Slaves on the British islands and in Brazil worked, almost without exception, on massive plantations growing sugar and other staple crops for the export market. These large-scale operations relied on huge slave populations managed by a tiny number of white overseers. Slaves in these areas lived in a world apart from the whites around them. Many plantation owners, in fact, did not reside in the Americas at all, preferring to direct their holdings from the comfort of Europe. As a consequence, segregation became the rule, as opposed to the spatial and economic integration, however fitful, that became the hallmark of American slavery.

After Native Americans were removed from the Deep South in the 1830s, the slave population skyrocketed. Cotton was becoming the most lucrative crop, and plantation owners purchased more and more slaves to handle the difficult work tending the cotton fields.

Living conditions for slaves varied considerably from place to place. Depending on the exact location, type of work, and, most important, the master's temperament, slave life could be tolerable or excruciatingly difficult. The master's personality and outlook bore directly on an individual slave's condition. The master determined the quality of food, clothing, and shelter afforded to his "people." He set the hours and decided the intensity of the work slaves performed. He chose whether slave families stayed together or were sold separately. Owners settled the nature and degree of punishment meted out to slaves for any number of infractions, major and minor.

Slaves did have a few ways to rebel. Harsh masters could expect repeated bouts of sabotage, crop destruction, and other acts of vandalism. Runaways and violent resistors usually came from plantations where they had been subjected to brutal treatment and unbearable working conditions. Masters known for fairness and a light whip, however, rarely encountered serious or sustained slave resistance beyond occasional work slowdowns and episodes of feigned illness to avoid work.

Nat Turner was born into a complex, multilayered world on the cusp of great change. He was determined to accelerate that change and push it in a radical and violent direction. He came to see doing so as a mission from God, a divine order. All the signs had been pointing toward such a heavenly commission since his very birth.

3

A Slave's Dream

Nat Turner was born in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1800. According to legend, his mother was so determined not to subject him to a life of slavery that she tried to kill him as soon as he was born. She was tied to her bed and held away from him until she calmed down. After that brief moment, however, Nat's mother lavished love and affection on him. To make him grow proud and independent, she continually told him of the greatness of his African heritage—even before he was old enough to understand her. If she could not keep him from being born into slavery, at least she could keep his young mind from being enslaved.

Nat's mother had been brought to Virginia from Africa in 1797. She was sold to Benjamin Turner in 1799, where she was given the name "Nancy." She refused to speak English for several years and was beaten frequently. One of her few friends

on the farm was an older woman named Bridget, whose son would become her husband.

While Nat was still very young, his parents and grandmother searched his head and body for bumps and marks that were, in African religion and folklore, signs of prophecy. They then told him, and any others who would listen, that he was destined for great things. In his *Confessions*, written after the 1831 rebellion, Nat emphasized his parents' strong influence on his life by saying, "My father and mother strengthened me in this, my first impressions: that I was to be a Prophet."

While his parents labored in the fields, Nat was watched over by the older slaves on the farm, who told him the stories, myths, and legends of their beloved African homeland. His early days were filled with stories about his heritage told to him not only by his mother but by others as well.

Nat was able to read at an early age, perhaps as young as five. This was very unusual in a country where most of the adult whites were illiterate.

There are several legends that are told about how Nat learned to read. Some suggest that his grandmother, Bridget, taught him. Turner himself said that the alphabet "came to him" in a vision, the letters burning themselves into fallen leaves on the ground. He may have sincerely believed in such miracles, or he may have just been keeping a secret, that the old slaves taught the young ones some forbidden things. Some historians maintain that the family of his master, Benjamin Turner, taught Nat how to read. It was a criminal offense to teach a slave to read in those days, and although Benjamin Turner was a liberal Methodist, it is not likely that he was so liberal that he would attempt such a thing. Yet he did allow Nat to read once he discovered that Nat knew how; he even encouraged it—as long as Nat's reading was confined to the Bible.

Nat was also instructed in religion by his grandmother. He became a Christian, although it appears that he took less to the

New Testament and its lessons of forgiveness and more to the stern righteousness, blood, and thunder of the Old Testament prophets. Once he became a Christian, religion and freedom

Slave Religion

Slave religion represented a unique blend of Old and New World influences. Indeed, three distinct traditions—West African folk ritual, European Judeo-Christian symbolism, and nineteenth-century American revivalism—became thoroughly mixed in the crucible of American slavery. Kidnapped Africans brought a powerful heritage of animism, a belief that the spirits who inhabited the natural world could be bargained with and controlled through the use of magic, with them. Slaves held to a spiritual tradition based on the assumption that nature could be manipulated, partially if not fully, via the correct employment of various charms, fetishes, spells, and other conjuring devices.

On arrival in the Americas, African slaves were confronted with and adapted to a European Judeo-Christianity that was both messianic and inherent to a people in bondage. Christianity spoke at length of salvation through an abiding faith in a "chosen one," a man ordained by God to lead the oppressed out of misery and torment. The biblical promise of a heavenly kingdom where all would be equal in the eyes of God held out hope of deliverance. The certainty of a paradise in the next life, where "the last shall be first and the first shall be last," comforted men and women who suffered physically and emotionally every day.

These two spiritual streams flowed smoothly into the phenomenon of revivalism that took hold of the United States by the 1820s. The revival movement sought to energize Christian faithfulness by elevating emotion over reason. Revivalism also stressed a common accessibility to the divine, a general access to God's power and love without the need for complex liturgies and, most important, devoid of social bias. The simplicity, openness, and egalitarianism of revivalist Christianity encouraged all people to seek salvation without concern for whom or what they were. By combining revivalism with established Christian traditions and West African spirituality, slave religion evolved into a potent antidote to the injustices and terrors of slavery that fostered a sense of defiance in the hearts and souls of its adherents.

became tied together in his mind. Nat learned to respect African religion as well during these early days. Later, one of the most trusted leaders of his rebellion was a "conjure man" trained in African folklore, medicines, rituals, and charms. Nat's religious foundation was already well laid by the time the first of many misfortunes in his tumultuous life struck.

Nat's father ran away from the Turner farm when Nat was only eight or nine. One story has it that Nat's father escaped to the North; another has it that he made it back to Africa, to Liberia. Another and more chilling story is still told around Southampton County. It says that Nat's father was betrayed after his escape and was sold to the turpentine plantations in Georgia, which few men survived. The story also says that when Nat later discovered that his father was not free but was probably dead, it was the bitterest disappointment of his life.

By the time he was 12 years old, Nat worked from dawn to dusk plowing, hoeing, weeding, building fences, feeding animals, and gathering in crops. His owners were not rich, nor were they idle; they were farmers who sometimes even worked in the fields alongside their slaves. As hard as they worked, they were getting something in return for their efforts. They owned the land, and they owned the crops; the improvements as well as the profits were theirs.

THE FIRST VISION

As Nat worked the sandy fields behind a plow, he thought deeply on his own plight and that of his people. One day, he claimed to have heard a voice that told him to seek "the Kingdom of Heaven." The Kingdom of Heaven meant only one thing to a slave: freedom. Nat did not know at this point if the voice meant freedom just for himself, for his family and friends, or for his entire people.

When Nat was 20 years old, Virginia fell into an economic depression that lowered the price of land, farm commodities, and slaves. The price of the state's main cash crops plummeted.

Tobacco, already in decline, became even less profitable. Cotton, toward which some of the larger planters had turned in hopes of a profit, dropped sharply from 30 cents to 10 cents a pound. Wheat and corn prices collapsed. Gains from other crops, such as apples, which were made into a crude brandy that was a local specialty, and peanuts also fell off drastically.

Many of the farmers started to sell their land and move west and south, to Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi. Those farmers who managed to hold on to their land sometimes saw their children leave. Few new settlers moved in to replace the emigrants. The opening of the American frontier

IN HIS OWN WORDS . . .

Like many slaves, Turner looked to religion for comfort and hope. His grandmother taught him religion at a young age, and possibly taught him how to read. In his *Confessions*, Turner discusses his interest in religion and the opportunities afforded to him by being literate:

> **. . . To a mind like mine, restless, inquisitive and observant of every thing that was passing, it is easy to suppose that religion was the subject to which it would be directed, and although this subject principally occupied my thoughts-there was nothing that I saw or heard of to which my attention was not directed-The manner in which I learned to read and write, not only had great influence on my own mind, as I acquired it with the most perfect ease, so much so, that I have no recollection whatever of learning the alphabet-but to the astonishment of the family, one day, when a book was shewn to me to keep me from crying, I began spelling the names of different objects-this was a source of wonder to all in the neighborhood, particularly the blacks-and this learning was constantly improved at all opportunities-when I got large enough to go to work, while employed, I was reflecting on many things that would present themselves to my imagination, and whenever an opportunity occurred of looking at a book, when the school children were getting their lessons, I would find many things that the fertility of my own imagination had depicted to me before. . . .**

further helped to depopulate the Tidewater area—especially Southampton County, with its sandy, worn-out soil.

Because of the depression, slavery did not prove to be as profitable as it had once been in the part of Virginia where Nat lived. Many slaves were sold and transported out west and down south. Some avoided this fate by purchasing their freedom with the money that they had managed to scrape together. Few hard-pressed planters could refuse such a proposition; they needed the money. There was even talk of legally abolishing slavery as a way to stimulate white job growth and put cash back into circulation.

In the early 1820s, there were about 1,700 free blacks living in the area around Jerusalem, Virginia. A few were independent farmers, but most worked for white farmers in return for a few dollars and a shack in which to live. Because their living conditions were not much removed from the conditions that they had endured when they had been slaves, the depression was harder on these free blacks than it was on the poorer white farmers who lived in the shadows of the wealthier planters.

One of the farmers hit hard by the depression was Benjamin Turner's son, Samuel. Forced to choose between selling his slaves or getting more profit out of them, Samuel hired an overseer to drive them harder. Among his slaves was Nat, whom Samuel had inherited from his father. Nat promptly ran away. Patrols and hunting dogs were sent out to find him, and they combed the nearby swamps and woods. Nat was nowhere to be found.

The runaway's fellow slaves prayed for him. After two weeks had passed, the slave catchers gave up their search. The slaves rejoiced in secret. Yet they were all in for a surprise 30 days later, when Nat, who had eluded all of his pursuers, suddenly walked up to the front porch of his owner's house and gave himself up. The other slaves were furious with him. Why, they wanted to know, did he come back when he had gotten away clean? Why did he turn himself in? These were logical questions, but Nat refused to give them an answer.

The Turners were relatively kind owners who allowed Nat to read and sometimes worked on their farm, seen here, with their slaves. Nevertheless, Nat and his family still hoped for freedom, and several slaves on the farm, including Nat, attempted to run away.

Later, while in jail, Nat explained in his *Confessions* that while he was in hiding, "the Spirit" had chastised him for having his wishes directed to the things of this world and not to the "Kingdom of Heaven." One way to interpret this statement is that he realized his destiny was not only to pursue his own freedom but the freedom of his people. He had bigger plans and a greater destiny than a simple escape. Thus, he chose to sacrifice his own freedom—just as he was to sacrifice his life—so that his people might have a chance to fight for theirs. Samuel Turner was so amazed to see a fugitive slave return of his own free will that Nat went unpunished. He

returned to his daily work, but immediately set about plotting, planning, and biding his time. Nat could almost feel his destiny taking shape. The earlier wanderings of his mind were settling into a clear sense of mission.

As the economic depression continued, many of Nat's fellow slaves turned to religion for comfort. In the rural areas of the South, camp meetings and religious revivals became very popular. Whites gathered in huge tent cities to take part in days of preaching, feasting, singing, and expressing their religious convictions. The staid, respectable Episcopal establishment, the American version of England's Anglican Church, with its polite hymns and solemn ceremonies, had become outdated. Americans wanted a fiery faith, replete with dire warnings of hell and damnation, shouting, moaning, speaking in tongues, and, in rare instances, even the handling of snakes. All over the South, Christians attended meetings that collectively made up the uniquely American phenomenon of revivalism. The slave-owners wanted to share their Christian religion with the slaves, so long as it was adapted to suit their own purposes, of course. They hired preachers to explain to the slaves that the slaves who were patient on earth would get their reward in Heaven. If a slave were whipped, worked to death, or separated from his family, these ministers assured their literally captive congregants that the unfortunate victim would only be that much happier in Heaven, where he would be united with his family and ancestors at last.

The masters hoped that the slaves would believe these explanations. Perhaps some did believe them and looked forward to Heaven, figuring that their white owners would all go to Hell for their sin of slavery. For the most part, though, black slaves adapted the religion of their owners to meet their own ends. They studied the Old Testament, learned about Moses leading the Jews out of slavery in Egypt, and took a special interest in the stories about Judgment Day. The slaves created their own "churches," where they were able to gather

among themselves away from the view of whites. In these meetings, they not only practiced religion, for they were religious people, much like their owners, but also dreamed of

DID YOU KNOW?

Nat Turner's voluntary return to his master's plantation in 1821, after 30 days of freedom, came as a shock to the runaway's comrades. The other slaves could not believe that after a month, Turner, who ran away to avoid the lash of a particularly cruel overseer, would walk back into bondage of his own free will. They respected Turner's courage but questioned his judgment.

Turner later recalled how his fellow slaves "found fault, and murmured against me, saying, if they had my sense they would not serve any master in the world." Turner's explanation that the Holy Spirit had commanded him to return rang hollow. Even more unbelievable was his acknowledgment that his master's rightful course of action, at this point, would be to whip him. Turner announced proudly that, in the words of the Bible, any slave who knows "his Master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes . . ."

Why Turner offered himself up for such punishment remains a mystery, as do the events that took place during his monthlong foray in the Virginia woods. Turner never revealed how he occupied his time during his absence. Those who withdraw to the solitude of forests and desert caves often do so for the purpose of experiencing religious visions. The Muslim Prophet Muhammad reported his first encounter with God after a period of solitude in the Arabian Desert. According to the New Testament, Jesus spent 40 days and nights alone in the desert, during which time he confronted Satan himself. Turner might have heard about Muhammad's experience from elderly slaves with a memory of Africa, but he surely would have been familiar with the biblical account of Jesus' wanderings. Whether Turner modeled his retreat on Muhammad's or, more likely, emulated Jesus' sojourn, will never be known. What is certain is that Turner was willing to pay any price to fulfill what he had convinced himself to be his righteous, divinely ordained destiny.

freedom and discussed the many rumors and hopes that often swept through the countryside.

Most of these rumors concerned the British. The slaves were always hoping that the former rulers of the American colonies would go to war against the United States. Most slaves wanted the British to take control of America because the British often talked about abolishing slavery (they would ultimately do so in 1834). During the War of 1812, the British had promised freedom to all of the slaves who were willing to rebel against their American masters. Although the opportunity never arose for the slaves to take advantage of this offer, they did not forget it. Consequently, the slaves in Virginia hoped that the British would again attempt to invade the United States, much as they had done toward the end of the War of 1812.

When the possibility of a British invasion or some other way of fighting for freedom was discussed during a religious service, this talk was often couched in phrases from the Bible—such as "Day of Judgment," "crossing over Jordan," and "coming of the Jubilee"—just in case whites were listening or had sent spies. One version of Judgment Day came to Nat and his family in the early 1820s, shortly after he was married.

Not much is known about Nat's wife. Her slave name was Cherry, she lived on the Turner farm, and her husband trusted her with his most secret plans and papers. After his slave rebellion, she was beaten and tortured in an attempt to get her to reveal his plans and whereabouts. Although we cannot know for sure, it is probable that Nat never mentioned her in his *Confessions* because he wanted to spare her and their three children as much pain as possible.

THE WHEEL TURNS

In 1822, soon after Nat was married to Cherry, Samuel Turner died. His estate had to be divided up, and so his property had to be appraised. Nat, his wife, their children, his mother (as well as his grandmother—if she was still alive), and the other

slaves on the Turner farm were lined up with the cows and tools and furniture. A few appraisers went down the line assigning a value to each lamp, each chair, each tool, and each human being. Nat was valued at $400, the going price for a top field hand. Cherry was valued at only $40. The family was separated. Nat's mother was told to stay with Samuel Turner's daughter on the Turner farm, while Nat was sold to one farmer and his wife was sold to another.

Although this division of the family surely must have been painful, it could have been worse. Nat's new owner, Thomas Moore, was a neighbor of Giles Reese, who had become the owner of Nat's wife and his children. Also, Nat was lucky not to be sold either south or west, where strong black men were being shipped daily to work on cotton, hemp, and turpentine plantations to replace the laborers there who were literally being worked to death. Life in Southampton County for a slave was difficult, but it was not quite as harsh as life on those plantations. Nevertheless, the daily toll of work—as well as the sorrow and the humiliation of slavery—was still hard on Nat and all of his fellow slaves. Yet he did not dwell on these topics. He saw himself as a man of destiny, and he not only dreamed of his own independence but of freedom for all of his people.

4

"Prophet Nat"

While Nat Turner slaved for Thomas Moore, he devoted his life to religion—or so it seemed. In fact, he was planning his rebellion. From 1825 to 1830, Turner served as a preacher because it gave him the ability (at least on Sundays) to travel around the neighborhood. He preached at different black churches: at the Turner chapel which his former master had built for his slaves, at the Barnes Church on the North Carolina line, and at churches in Jerusalem and nearby Greensville County. Often fasting during the week, Turner studied and prayed when he was not working, keeping himself apart from others. "I studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapt myself in mystery," he said. On Sundays, he used a resonant voice filled with poetry to share his visions with the other slaves. His visions were of conflict, struggle, and liberation.

"I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle," he cried out from the pulpit. "And the sun was darkened—the

thunder rolled in the heavens and the blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, 'Such is your luck, such are you called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it.'" Turner told his congregation that while he was working in the fields, he saw figures drawn in blood on the leaves. He interpreted this vision for his eager listeners as "the Blood of the Savior, who was about to lay down the yoke he bore for the sins of men." According to Turner, his vision meant that "the great day of judgment was at hand."

Turner soon became the most sought after of all the black preachers for miles around. His fellow slaves knew what he meant by sin, they knew what he meant by judgment, and they knew what he meant by salvation. Freedom was on all of their minds. A few whites also understood what Turner was talking about. Although Sally Moore, his new owner's wife, had known him for years and thought that he was docile, her brother Salathial warned her that Turner was "a negro of bad character" who was stirring up trouble. Other whites suspected him of being a "conjure man," or witch doctor, and wished that the Moores would keep him closer to home. Yet the Moores believed that he was harmless. Turner was polite and respectful, if just a little bit reserved and distant. He did not drink,

IN HIS OWN WORDS...

Nat Turner was viewed by many of his peers as a prophet, and he experienced a series of visions and signs that he interpreted as telling him to organize a revolt against slavery. In *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, he described one of the visions:

> **While laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn . . . I then found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood . . . the great day of judgment was at hand.**

steal, or gamble. He knew everything that there was to know about farming and he worked hard all week, so they let him enjoy his preaching.

The slaves held "Prophet Nat" in so much respect that it bordered on awe. His dedication and single-mindedness gave them confidence in his ability and judgment. Rural Virginians, both blacks and whites, were simple people in superstitious times, and they came to believe that Turner was a prophet who could cure ailing people just with his touch. Some people even thought that he was so magical that he could control the weather.

Turner's eloquence and conviction were so impressive that he convinced a white man, E.T. Brantley, to give up his errant ways and to convert to Methodism. Brantley even asked Turner to baptize him, an unheard-of thing in such bigoted times. Although the Methodist church refused to approve the baptism of a white man by a black slave, the two men went ahead and made plans to perform the ceremony at a river. Word of this event spread for miles around, and on the day of Brantley's baptism, a crowd gathered on the bank of the river and threatened Turner and Brantley. It must have taken much courage for both of them to defy the menacing racism of the hostile and curious mob, yet they proceeded with the ceremony. They waded into the river, and Turner baptized Brantley while the crowd hooted and jeered.

Turner worked hard as a preacher. One Sunday he was in Jerusalem, the next in Cross Keys, the next in Bethlehem Crossroads or Bellfield. During his travels, he always made sure to take a different route and visit with a different family until he knew every swamp, every thicket, every forest, every dirt road, path, barn, shack, shed, and house within 30 miles. He was nothing if not thorough.

In between preaching, planning, and working, Turner spent as much time as possible with his wife and children at the Reese farm. He got to know everybody in the area, both blacks

On Sundays, Turner preached at black churches in the area, like the Methodist church seen here. His opinions were highly respected by the black community and some even saw him as a prophet with magical powers.

and whites. He knew which whites were cruel to their slaves and which ones were not. He knew which blacks were bold and which ones were not, and he knew who could be trusted and who was a betrayer, eager to curry favor with his master.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

This last piece of information was particularly important because the two largest slave rebellions until that time had both been betrayed by other blacks. Gabriel Prosser's rebellion in Richmond had been double-crossed by one of his own people, and in 1822, even more heartbreaking news for rebellion-minded slaves had come from Charleston, South

Carolina. An immense slave uprising led by a free black named Denmark Vesey had been betrayed to the whites and had failed. Vesey was not unlike Turner in that he learned how to read and write and eventually devoted his life to the liberation of his people. He struggled to convince them to stop taking the insults of the slaveowners and to consider themselves as men. The next step after convincing them of this was to organize a rebellion. Vesey and his recruits made their plans in strict secrecy. At the stroke of midnight, six organized battle units were to seize the town, seal off the major roads, and kill the plantation owners in their houses. Then they would either seize Charleston or, if that seemed impossible, commandeer a ship in the harbor and sail for the black republic of Haiti. Vesey's chief lieutenant, an African "conjure man" named Gullah (Angola) Jack, gave all of the recruits a crab claw as a good-luck token and a sign that the ancient African gods were watching over them.

The conspiracy was huge. Vesey had not only organized the free blacks in the town but also the slaves on the surrounding plantations, taking hundreds into his confidence. That was his mistake. Some of the house servants were loyal to their masters and gave away Vesey's plans. He was arrested along with 70 others, including a few whites who were helping because they also wanted to do away with the slave system. He and 35 others were hanged, and 37 more blacks were sent to a penal colony, and certain death, in the Caribbean. Vesey and his men went to their deaths with their heads held high, never revealing any of the details of their conspiracy.

When the rebellion was over, the slaveowners in South Carolina breathed easier. Then, on Christmas Eve in 1825 and every night thereafter for six months, buildings in Charleston were torched, once again creating terror among the town's white residents. News traveled swiftly among the slaves throughout the country, so it is very likely that Turner was familiar with Vesey's rebellion in Charleston and became

determined to emulate his courage while avoiding his errors. Consequently, Turner moved very slowly and deliberately, and his efforts paid off in the end, for his slave rebellion was not only the biggest and bloodiest in American history, but it was the most unexpected. Very few whites suspected what was brewing around them. As a white survivor in the area later said, "Not one note of preparation was heard to warn the devoted inhabitants of woe and death."

In addition to the slaves who knew and trusted Turner in the late 1820s, there were nearly 1,750 free blacks living in Southampton County. Many were servants, farm laborers, and sharecroppers, but some were independent small farmers and craftsmen, much like the dissatisfied free blacks who plotted with Vesey. One of Turner's most trusted followers was Billy Artis, a free black who owned a 14-acre farm yet was married to a slave woman. He knew that without freedom for all of his people, his own individual freedom was a charade. Consequently, he decided to join Turner's rebellion.

ABOLITIONISM BY DEGREES

While Turner was making his plans and gathering his forces, the same stirrings of freedom were being felt around the country and in other parts of the world. The abolitionist movement, which demanded that human slavery be outlawed, was beginning to grow into a national movement, although it would not reach its full strength until after 1830. The first and the most radical of the abolitionists were black, but many whites—especially in the North—joined the movement as time went on.

Among the better-known white abolitionists who were believers in human rights and equality were William Lloyd Garrison, who edited *The Liberator*, one of the nation's most popular antislavery newspapers, and John Brown, who ultimately gave his life while fighting slavery. Almost 30 years after Turner led his rebellion, Brown led an armed group of

black and white abolitionists who attempted to capture the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia. (For additional information on specific abolitionists and their contributions to the anti-slavery movement, enter "abolitionists" into any search engine and browse the sites listed.)

John Brown: The White Nat Turner

To some, John Brown seemed like the white equivalent of Nat Turner. Brown's story is just as spellbinding as Turner's and likewise is filled with intrigue and bloodshed. In the end, John Brown's tale proved just as tragic as well. Like Turner, Brown burst out of obscurity to commit terrifying acts of violence in the name of freedom. As was the case with Turner, Brown had nourished his hate on a steady diet of religious fervor—some would say fanaticism—and an abiding belief not only in slavery's diabolical nature but also in the absolute need for its bloody overthrow.

Born in New England, the heartland of fiery radical abolitionism, Brown moved to Ohio, where antislavery sentiment was similarly strong and the actual institution was near—Kentucky, just across the Ohio River, was a slave state. The heated rhetoric of Ohio's abolitionists and slavery's physical proximity engendered an unshakable militancy in Brown that drove him to action. While living in Ohio, Brown risked arrest, or worse, by helping more than a few slaves escape to the North.

By 1855, Brown had moved on, settling in Kansas, where he quickly got caught up in the bitter fighting between the state's proslavery and anti-slavery factions. It was in Kansas that Brown first took human life. In May 1856, Brown, his four sons, and three other men killed five allegedly proslavery farmers living along the Pottawatomie Creek. Brown had blood on his hands for the first, but not the last, time.

Brown made his next appearance in Virginia, at a place called Harpers Ferry. In 1859, at Harpers Ferry, Brown, believing himself ordained by the Almighty to wipe away the stain of slavery, attacked a government arsenal in the hope of igniting a general slave revolt. Brown's reckless and ill-advised assault failed miserably: 21 of his followers were killed in the gun battle that ensued, and he was captured. Like Nat Turner, Brown followed the path of violence to defeat and went unrepentant to his grave, never faltering in his conviction that his actions had been moral and just. Brown was hanged in December 1859.

There were many different types of abolitionists. Some were against slavery on moral grounds, while others were against it for political reasons. Some, like the armed bands that were organized to defend runaway slaves in the Northern cities, believed in taking action against slavery; in many cases, they opened fire on Southern slave catchers and sent them packing. Other abolitionists only believed in "moral persuasion" and never broke the law or threatened violence against the slave-owners. Some combined both methods—such as the Quakers, who would hide escaped slaves but would refuse to fight. Some whites were against slavery without advocating freedom for blacks or equal rights. Many of these whites simply thought it best to ship all of the blacks in America back to Africa. They hated slavery only because they saw that it was ultimately dangerous to the whites. Others felt as well that they did not want free blacks living in "their" America.

The most militant abolitionists, of course, were the slaves themselves. They took part in slave revolts in Martinique, Cuba, and Jamaica as well as in the United States. In the fall of 1826, a group of slaves that was being taken from Maryland to Georgia hijacked the slave ship *Decatur*, killed two crew members, and sailed for Haiti. They were eventually captured, but when the ship was brought into New York City's harbor, all but one of the captives escaped to freedom. In Alabama, fugitive slaves who built a fort in the swamps were finally subdued, but not before the slaves, according to one report, had "fought like Spartans . . . and not one gave an inch of ground."

Echoing this militancy, the antislavery movement grew. Abolitionists spoke on the streets and in the churches in Northern cities such as Boston and Philadelphia, but they did very little campaigning against slavery in the South, where relatively few people were literate. Only people who knew how to read could be influenced by the abolitionists' published arguments. That is a major reason why slaves were not allowed to learn how to read and why it was a crime to

The 1839 revolt on the Spanish slave ship *Amistad* was the most famous slave uprising of the early nineteenth century. Joseph Cinquez led the *Amistad's* African passengers in killing its captain and seizing the ship. The slaves eventually received their freedom, after staying in the United States for two years awaiting the verdict of the court trial regarding their revolt.

teach reading to a slave. It is also why Turner's literacy was such an important aspect of his contribution to his people's struggle for freedom.

Slave states such as Virginia did all that they could to keep abolitionist propaganda out of their territories. The piece of literature that government officials hated the most—and the one that was perhaps an inspiration to Turner and other rebels around the country—was a book written by a free black abolitionist named David Walker. Originally published in Boston in 1829, *David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of The United States of America* remains one of the most devastating, eloquent indictments of American slavery ever written.

In his *Appeal*, Walker called American slavery the cruelest and most hypocritical system that had ever existed because it dehumanized its victims while flourishing in a so-called democracy. In particular, he had nothing but scorn for the white abolitionists who wanted to rid the country of blacks. "America is our country more than it is the whites," he said. "We have enriched it with our blood and tears."

Circulated chiefly by the author himself, Walker's *Appeal* was a direct call to his enslaved brethren in the South to strike boldly at their oppressors:

> Should the lives of such creatures be spared? . . . Are they not the Lord's enemies? Ought they not to be destroyed? . . . If you commence, make sure work—do not trifle, for they will not trifle with you—they want us for their slaves, and think nothing of murdering us in order to subject us to that wretched condition—therefore, if there is an attempt made by us, kill or be killed.

This was strong talk by a skilled writer—indeed, one of the best of his day—and Walker's *Appeal* immediately sent shock waves of panic through the South. His book was promptly banned everywhere that slavery existed, and a price was put on his head. Walker died under mysterious circumstances only a year after his *Appeal* was published. It has been suspected that he was poisoned by friends of slavery in the North.

Walker's words soon proved to be a chilling foreshadowing of the fate of the slaveowners, who were killed by Turner and his men within two years of the publication of the *Appeal*. "They keep us miserable now," he said of the slaveowners, "and call us their property, but some of them will have enough of us by and by—their stomachs will run over with us; they want us for their slaves, and shall have us to their fill."

The words that so alarmed the slaveowners must have sounded like the pealing of a liberty bell to Turner. Although

he never mentions Walker's book in his *Confessions*, the whites of Virginia never doubted that the hated *Appeal* contributed to Turner's rebellion. He might well have heard of it through word of mouth. Yet Walker's words did not reach Virginia until almost the end of the 1820s, and Turner's course had been set several years before. During most of the years from 1825 to 1830, he was biding his time, waiting, trusting in the God in whom he sincerely believed: the God of judgment and salvation, who had promised him a sign.

Meanwhile, Turner continued his planning, getting to know the people, both black and white. Slowly and patiently, he was gathering his forces together, as a storm cloud gathers its energy for the lightning stroke that will illuminate both heaven and earth in one tremendous flash.

5

"Ours Is a Fight for Freedom"

The first sign came on May 12, 1828. There was, as Turner later said, a "great noise" in the heavens. He stated that after this noise, "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, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first." Other signs in the heavens would show Turner when to begin. He understood that after seeing these signs, "I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons." Until these signs arrived, Turner kept this prophecy to himself. He prepared himself but withheld the details of his plans from even his closest and most trusted followers. He only slipped once, when he remarked to his owner, Thomas Moore, that the slaves would surely be free "one day or other." After hearing Turner say this, Moore beat him with a whip.

Later that same year, Moore died and Turner became the property of Moore's nine-year-old son, Putnam. Moore's widow, Sally, soon married Joseph Travis, a carriage maker from Jerusalem, who moved his business to the country and took up supervision of the farm, including all 17 slaves. Turner continued working, keeping his mouth shut and his eyes open. He was looking for another sign. It came in February 1831, when a major eclipse of the sun took place. The eclipse was so striking and so unexpected that superstitious people of all races thought that the end of the world was at hand.

Turner, on the other hand, took this spectacular heavenly event as the sign he had been waiting for, and began to pull his plan together. He told his trusted inner circle to prepare their weapons, inform their contacts, and wait. The time to strike was approaching. Turner had chosen for his inner circle about 20 people, all of whom he trusted completely. He chose so wisely and kept his secrets so well that today we only know the names of about seven or eight of his confidants. His wife, Cherry, was one. She was entrusted with maps written with pokeberry ink (made from a purple berry that grows wild in the South), lists in code, and strange ciphers that have never been deciphered to this day.

Hark, a slave at the Travis farm, was Turner's second in command. The name "Hark" was short for Hercules and was given to Turner's second because he was a giant. He looked like a "black Apollo," according to the whites. Nelson Williams lived on the Williams farm, four miles southwest of Jerusalem. He was said to have special privileges—as Turner did—and was allowed to come and go as he pleased. A respected leader, he was rumored by both blacks and whites to be a conjurer with supernatural powers. Henry Porter and Sam Francis were said to be a bit more ordinary. Both lived near Turner and were reliable and well liked, although they apparently were not leaders. Henry Porter was one of 30 slaves on a good-sized plantation, and his task was to recruit for Turner among

Nat Turner spent years plotting a rebellion as he worked for his master. He was careful to include only the most trustworthy people in his plot, to ensure that his plans were not betrayed. Here, Turner is depicted meeting with fellow slaves, encouraging them to join him in rebellion.

his fellow slaves. Sam Francis was owned by Sally Travis's brother, so he had freedom of movement between the two farms. Among the others whom Turner held in confidence were Billy Artis and Barry Newsome, two free black men in the neighborhood. Billy Artis was an independent farmer and, as he would ultimately show, a noble warrior. Not much is known about Barry Newsome except that Turner trusted him.

HATCHING THE PLOT

Turner began to meet and conspire in secret with these confederates. They compiled a list of 18 or 20 other trustworthy blacks. Most likely, they planned their route, tallying up the number of slaves and firearms, horses and mules on each plantation and farm between the Travis place and Jerusalem. This was the information Turner had spent years in gathering.

They set their target date for July 4, 1831, because it was a holiday. On that date, work was usually light and slaves were allowed to move around, while the whites were at ease or even drunk. Also, one suspects the date was chosen for its ironic significance. As the black abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass was to point out later to the whites, "This is your holiday, not mine. You rejoice; we mourn."

Further arrangements were made, but the rebels were frustrated in their efforts when Turner became sick as the fateful day drew near, and the rebellion was temporarily postponed. So many plans had been considered and rejected that,

Frederick Douglass: The Anti–Nat Turner

Perhaps the strongest and clearest denunciations of American slavery came from the mouth of Frederick Douglass. Brilliant and articulate, Douglass argued not only for an end to slavery but also for the full integration of former slaves into American public life. Although unrelenting in his attacks on the South's "peculiar institution," Douglass sought black emancipation through the slow, grinding process of social debate and political action. He understood the impulse but never approved of violence, especially not the type resorted to by Nat Turner.

Like Turner, Douglass had been born into bondage, and as a slave, he suffered the full force of the system's degradation. When time served, Douglass escaped, making his way from Maryland to Massachusetts. There, he immersed himself in the cause of radical abolitionism. Unlike Turner, Douglass advocated active nonviolence and cooperation with sympathetic whites. Rather than striking out with club and sword, Douglass deftly wielded his pen, using it to undermine the moral, social, and economic logic of slavery.

Douglass complemented his writing with eloquent and persuasive oratory (public speaking) that made him the best-known and most well-respected black voice on the issue. He remained so even after the Civil War, as abolitionism gave way to the movement for black civil rights. No black leader could have been more different from Nat Turner than Frederick Douglass, whose uncompromising but peaceful opposition to slavery resulted in a degree or success and fame Turner could only have dreamed of.

as he later explained, "it affected my mind." Perhaps his sickness was due to nervousness, fear, dread, anticipation; after all, the destiny for which he had been preparing for at least 10 years—and probably more—was about to come to pass.

Where did these doubts and fears come from? Surely Turner knew that he was taking on a well-armed and determined enemy. Every slave uprising so far had failed and had been followed by mass hangings of black slaves. He was vastly outnumbered; even though Southampton County contained as many blacks as whites at that time, none of the blacks were routinely armed and few were willing to fight. They were psychologically unprepared, too. Many slaves believed that the whites were unbeatable, and Turner knew that it would take a few successes before significant numbers joined his rebellion.

The whites, on the other hand, were well prepared, even if they could be caught off guard. Slave owners in Virginia told the world that their slaves were docile and content, but the slaveowners knew better than to believe their own propaganda. The Virginia militia was 10,000 strong, and there were numerous other volunteer military organizations. There were also the county patrols—the "paddy rollers" or "redlighters"—who rode the sandy roads with pitch pine torches pursuing runaways. Behind all this was the awesome power of the federal government, garrisoned at Fort Monroe in Norfolk.

To battle against this manpower, the slaves—disorganized, scattered, and unarmed—had only their desperation and desire for freedom. Also working against them was the knowledge that many revolts had been tried but none had succeeded. The always-present threat of betrayal and the need for secrecy meant that Turner's forces had to be kept extremely small—at least at the beginning, until after the first few blows had been struck.

All of these thoughts and more must have been going through Turner's mind, testing his determination, as the Fourth of July approached. We know from his *Confessions* that he was prepared to undergo the horrors of war and that he did

not expect to survive ("Let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it," his vision had warned him). We also know that for several years he had sacrificed the meager family life that slavery allowed him, choosing instead to travel on his rare days of rest so that he could gather his forces and learn about the roads and the people around him.

SIGNS EVERYWHERE

Turner's hesitation in starting the rebellion is understandable. Yet his resolve was unshaken. Although July 4 came and went, the next and final sign came soon after. On Saturday, August 13, there was such a strange darkness in the atmosphere that one could look directly at the sun. It seemed to shimmer and change colors—from green to blue to white. The phenomenon was visible along the entire eastern seaboard of the United States, and it made people fearful.

Then there was an even more awesome occurrence: A black spot appeared on the sun, passing slowly across its fiery surface. At this sign, Turner put his hesitations aside and called together his "chosen four": Hark Travis, Nelson Williams, Henry Porter, and Sam Francis. "Just as the black spot passed over the sun," Turner told them, "so shall the blacks pass over the earth." The word went out—cautiously but swiftly—to the other waiting slaves. The storm clouds began to gather. Only a few incidents, which were revealed later in the trials of the insurgents, gave any indication that something unusual was about to happen. On the following Sunday morning, some whites who were passing a slave church near the boundary line between Virginia and North Carolina noticed that the slaves were more "disorderly" than usual. They were rapturously listening to a thunderous "hell and damnation" sermon. The preacher was Nat Turner.

On Monday, August 15, a slave girl overheard several slaves in a cabin on the Solomon Parker farm. She noticed that two of them were visitors from neighboring Sussex County. In

Turner had some trouble recruiting rebels for his uprising because many slaves knew a mass slave revolt had never succeeded before and they believed whites were unbeatable. If the rebellion failed, the slaves feared that all blacks in the area would be in danger of being hanged, beaten, or sold to plantations in the South, where conditions for slaves were even more brutal than on Northern farms.

low tones, they said, "If the black people come this way, we will join and kill the white people." One of the slaves said that he had had his ears cut off by his master and vowed that the man would find his own cropped in return before the year was out. On Thursday, a slave named Isham told another slave, "General Nat is going to rise and murder all the whites." Blacks must join the revolt, Isham said, or the whites would win and then kill all of the slaves. Later reports show that in Virginia and in North Carolina—in Southampton and in the neighboring counties—many of the slaves knew that something was about to happen. They were not (or claimed they were not) exactly sure of what it was or when it would take place.

Turner had planned well. August seemed to be a good month to strike. Because it was a time when the crops had already been planted and the harvest had not yet begun, everyone's workload was relatively light, and Sunday was the lightest workday of all. The slaves had time for hunting and fishing while the whites went to church and then drank apple brandy and visited neighbors and relatives for the rest of the day.

On the evening of Saturday, August 20, 1831, Turner laid down his farm tools for the last time. He told Hark to prepare a dinner for Sunday at Cabin Pond, in the woods at the back of the Travis place, and to bring together the "chosen four." Turner took his time joining his men, not wanting to seem too familiar to them. He had studied why the French emperor Napoleon and the liberator Toussaint L'Ouverture were successful leaders, and he knew that the authority of a leader was increased by a little mystery and aloofness.

On Sunday afternoon, at about three o'clock, Turner joined his men at Cabin Pond. He found them sitting around a fire, roasting a pig and sharing some apple brandy. There were Hark Travis and Nelson Williams, Henry Porter and Sam Francis, and two new recruits: Jack and Will, a slave owned by Nathaniel Francis. Turner knew Jack, but he was unsure

of Will and challenged him: "How came you here?" Will answered, "My life is worth no more than the others, and my liberty is as dear to me."

"Do you think to obtain it?"

"I will, or lose my life."

Satisfied with this answer, Turner welcomed him. The men sat around the fire and made their final plans. They decided to strike that very night. They would begin with Turner's masters, the Travis family, relying on sheer terror and speed to give them the initial advantage.

Toussaint L'Ouverture

However indirectly, Toussaint L'Ouverture provided the inspiration for Nat Turner's uprising, just as he did for every other slave who had contemplated the violent overthrow of the slave system. L'Ouverture also served as a terrifying example to Southern slaveowners of what might happen if armed, rebellious slaves found a competent and charismatic leader.

A former slave and one-time French army officer, L'Ouverture began his career defending the Caribbean interests of the French revolutionary regime in the 1790s. When Napoleon Bonaparte tried to reintroduce slavery into his New World colonies in 1802, L'Ouverture became a rebel leader seeking liberty for the people of what would become the nation of Haiti. After months of fighting on the shores and in the lush forests of Santo Domingo, L'Ouverture forced the French to agree to a truce. Later, he was betrayed and captured by Napoleon's forces and died in a French prison in April 1803. L'Ouverture's tenacity and vision, however, carried on after his death, until, in November 1803, Haiti finally won full independence from France, becoming the first black republic in the Americas.

Slaves and slaveholders alike in the United States followed L'Ouverture's exploits closely. Both sides saw in his rebellion the prospect of similar armed rebellion on American soil. L'Ouverture proved that black men could challenge and overcome the power of a white empire, rising up from bondage to domination. Slaves were thrilled at the notion, but whites recoiled in fear. The distance between Haiti and Southampton County suddenly did not seem so great.

According to black folklore, Turner gave a final speech to his men in which he laid out their strategy and goals. He said, "Remember, we do not go forth for the sake of blood and carnage; but it is necessary that, in the commencement of this revolution, all the whites we meet should die, until we have an army strong enough to carry out the war on a Christian basis. Remember that ours is not a war for robbery, nor to satisfy our passions; it is a struggle for freedom." Turner warned them to "spare neither age nor sex." Then they all stood, doused the fire, picked up their weapons—at that point only hatchets and knives—and set out across the fields and through the woods on the bloody journey that would carry them into history.

6

"General Nat"

At two o'clock in the morning on Monday, August 22, 1831, Turner and his band of men stood in the yard of the Travis house. They were joined by two other slaves, Austin and a teenager named Moses. They approached the house. Hark wanted to break through the door with his axe, but Turner held him back, worried that the noise might wake the nearest neighbor, whose house was less than a half mile away. The night was deep and silent, and Turner wanted to preserve the element of surprise as long as possible.

Hark fetched a ladder and placed it against the side of the house. Turner waved him and the other men aside and climbed it alone. It was important to him that he actually lead the way, at least at the beginning. After a few breathless moments, when the only sounds in the yard were the crickets and the frogs in the distant ponds, the downstairs door was unbarred with a muffled thud and Turner's whisper came

from the darkness inside: "The work is now open to you." The rebels poured into the house as silently as shadows, their knives and axes gleaming in the moonlight.

With Will close behind him, Turner led the way to the upstairs bedroom, where Joseph Travis and his wife were sleeping. As the General, the Prophet, the leader of the rebellion, Turner knew that he must strike the first blow and draw first blood. He struck with a blunt sword, and the master of Travis farm screamed. Will moved in from behind and finished off Travis and his wife before they were fully awake. Downstairs, the other men began to kill the rest of the whites in the house—one of them was 12-year-old Putnam, Turner's legal master. Soon all in the house were dead but an infant, momentarily forgotten in its cradle. Remembering Turner's instruction to "spare neither age nor sex," Henry Porter and Will returned upstairs and killed the child. After the screams and blows, there was silence once again. Now there was also the smell of blood, dark and sticky, on the plank floor. Jack was sick to his stomach in the yard. Moses grew afraid, but he followed the others anyway. Both were learning that freedom can carry a great and awful price.

From the Travis house, they took four rifles, several old muskets, and some gunpowder. Leading his men to the barn, Turner armed them and drilled them with the weapons, marching them up and down trying to convince them that they were not outlaws or bandits but soldiers—soldiers of their people. The next farm that they reached belonged to Sally Travis's brother, Salathial. It was he who had warned her that Turner was not just an innocent and carefree preacher, and tonight his fears were to be fully justified. Henry Porter and Will knocked on the door, telling the man that they had a letter for him. When he opened the door, he was pulled outside into the yard and was cut down.

In perfect silence and order, the rebels marched on, toward the town of Jerusalem more than 10 miles away. Turner had

Turner and a group of four other slaves gathered in the middle of the night on August 22, 1831 to begin their rebellion. They began at Turner's master's house, killing the master's entire family, then moved towards the town of Jerusalem, picking up slaves and killing whites on the way.

ordered that no firearms were to be used as of yet. Either at Salathial Francis's or along the way, he obtained a light sword, which he carried as a symbol of his command.

At the next darkened farmhouse, an old woman and her son were killed. As Turner later said in his *Confessions*, the son awoke during the rebels' attack, "but it was only to sleep the sleep of death, he had only time to say, 'who is that?' and he was no more." Another house was passed by because its owner saw them coming and barricaded himself inside. "Here I am, boys!" he dared them. "I will not go from my home to be killed." Turner decided that the house was not

worth attacking; the noise of the battle would arouse the neighbors. Instead, the rebels raced on toward town, picking up more slaves at every stop.

The first shots were fired near dawn, when it was no longer possible to catch people asleep in their beds. Ironically, these shots came at the old Turner place, where the slave revolt leader had lived for 10 years. The farm was now a plantation with 18 slaves. The overseer was taken by surprise at the cider press and was shot lest he warn the people in the house. The shot proved to be enough of a warning. Widow Turner and a visiting neighbor tried to lock themselves inside the kitchen, but their efforts were of no use. The door was bashed down with an axe and both women were killed.

By the time that daylight came and the other white slave-owners were beginning to wake up, the rebels had become a full company of 15 armed men, 9 of them mounted. Turner split up his forces, sending six men to one farm and nine to another. At each farm, what he later called "the work of death" was gruesome. The rebellion still had not yet turned into a full-fledged fight, however: The rebels still had the advantages of speed and surprise.

Turner discovered that his sword was too dull for fighting, but he continued to carry it anyway. There were plenty of fighters now, and they were as eager as he and far more skilled. At every homestead, all of the whites were killed without exception and all of the slaves who were willing to join the fight were recruited. Those who had no stomach for the rebellion were warned not to betray or interfere with it in any way. Then each house was searched for firearms, ammunition, food, clothing, and money. Horses and mules were saddled and taken.

The only lapse in the discipline of Turner's army was brought about by the apple brandy that was found in every Southampton home. Even though Turner was never known to drink, he initially permitted his men to imbibe at every stop.

In doing so, he made a tragic mistake, one that would not become clear until much later.

THE "WAR" ROLLS ON

Francis. Travis. Whitehead. Bryant. Newsome. The homesteads fell one by one as the rebels rode toward Jerusalem, destroying the slaveowners farm by farm. The Giles Reese place, where Turner's wife lived, was spared, as was the farm of a childhood friend, John Clark Turner, but virtually no other homesteads were spared from an attack. It was a fearsome kind of war, swift and bloody and remorseless.

Turner split up his forces again, sending the cavalry with Hark. On arriving at the Porter farm with half of his army, he found that the place was empty. Everyone had fled. Turner understood immediately that word about the rebellion was out. The rebels had now lost the advantage of surprise (as he knew they would sooner or later).

Next, Turner and his men reached a strategic objective, the Barrow farm, and found the owner, a veteran of the War of 1812, hoeing in the fields. The old man fought so valiantly before he was killed that the rebels honored him by wrapping his body in a quilt and placing a plug of tobacco on his chest—this was the way that warriors were honored in parts of Africa. Barrow was the only one of their enemies that the rebels so honored. In contrast, when some of the rebels were killed later on, their bodies were mutilated shamelessly by their enemies.

By this time, Turner was riding at the back of his army, trying to coordinate the whole as his men struck from farm to farm. Billy Artis, Will, Hark Travis, and Nelson Williams had come to the forefront as natural leaders; they were Turner's lieutenants. Hark was the first among them, leading the largest detachment of cavalry.

At about 10:00 A.M., Turner caught up with a section of his forces at the Harris farm, only five miles from the town of Jerusalem. Their journey was half over. As Turner rode up to

them, his sword in hand, he was surprised to see how large his forces had grown. A group of 40 insurgents, mounted and armed with an array of weapons from clubs and hoes to rusty muskets—greeted him with loud hurrahs. More than their sheer number, Turner found the men's spirit impressive. In his mind, the band gathering around Turner was transformed. The men before him suddenly became 40 black warriors with African blood—an army of slaves riding for freedom. Turner imagined himself to be a modern-day Spartacus, commanding a rebel force prepared to strike a blow not against a corrupt Rome, as the original Spartacus had done in ancient days, but against a cruel American slave system. Whether he would be any more successful than Spartacus, who ended his days on a Roman cross, crucified with his followers, remained to be seen.

Still, this was Turner's greatest moment, the culmination of his dreams and plans. Win or lose, he had achieved something that no other slave in America had ever accomplished: he had collected, armed, and fielded a group of black men prepared to fight for their freedom. Now, Turner felt confident, men who only a few short days before had been sunk in a pit of degradation would prove their mettle. They would show their owners that they could and would fight.

Some of the men had been drinking, though, and this worried Turner. He sternly ordered his troops away from the brandy barrels that they had rolled onto the lawn and told them to stand at attention. Then he dressed them down. He explained again that they were fighting for a cause beyond their individual freedom or pleasure, and in his magnificent preacher's voice, he commanded them to "shape up."

At this point, Turner's authority was challenged for the first time. A slave named Aaron spoke up and warned that it was time to turn back, that the rebellion did not have a chance against the white man's powerful forces. Nonsense, Turner said. Even though the slaves were outnumbered, they

could defeat the whites if enough slaves rallied to their cause. Aaron persisted. He said that he had accompanied his master to fight in the War of 1812, and if Turner had seen as many white soldiers as Aaron had seen at Norfolk, then Turner would know better.

PAST THE POINT OF NO RETURN

History has not recorded Turner's reply, much less his feelings. Certainly, he knew that there was much truth in what the fainthearted slave was saying. Half of Virginia was already up in arms and was preparing to crush the rebels. If Virginia failed, the full strength of the United States would be brought to bear against them.

Turner knew that there was no turning back. They were facing an enemy that refused to recognize their humanity, let alone the slaves' right to rebel against an unjust and immoral institution. Southern whites lived in constant fear of an uprising just like the one Turner had begun and would stop at nothing to put one down; Southern blacks, like Turner's men, knew well the terror that vengeful whites could visit on the slave quarters. Neither side thought of quarter, and surrender was not an option. A few individuals might slip back to their slave cabins, but the leaders were known and the white reaction would encompass all blacks, not just those who took up arms. Turner consoled himself with the notion that, win or lose, his band had already struck a mighty blow against slavery. An army of black rebels, Turner imagined, would be an inspiration to future generations, even in defeat. Were they not free men now, if only for a day? Was it not better to die free than to live in slavery?

Yet Turner knew as well that no general ever rallied his troops by preparing them for defeat. As a result, he may have attempted to inspire his men by hinting at some sort of miracle, or perhaps divine assistance at the last moment. Whether inspirational, prophetic, harsh, scornful, soaring,

By dawn, word of the rebellion had spread. White families tried to hide or flee, and some organized militias to fight back, as the rebels continued to ruthlessly kill any white person in their path.

bitter, or poetic—whatever words Turner used, they ended the debate. The doubter was silenced, if not converted, and the general prevailed.

The men who followed Turner were inspired not only by their leader's oratory but by what was in their hearts. Many of them were teenagers who would be facing a life of servitude if they gave up the fight. They knew how powerful and ruthless their enemy was, just as surely as they knew that they were fighting for a freedom that could not easily be won.

As the rebels stood in the ranks with their guns at the ready, they must have known the literal meaning of the words "freedom or death." Each man had to make a choice in his heart. He had to choose between riding with Turner, even into the jaws of death, or slipping back into a life of slavery, which was to kill them, as David Walker said, "by inches." Almost to a man, they chose to follow Turner. A final hurrah was shouted,

and then Turner, with a gruff command, formed up his ranks. Then his army rode off, toward the next slaveowner's farm.

The general continued to ride at the rear rather than the front of his troops—planning, watching, looking for signs. He knew that the going would get rougher, not easier. So far there had been little resistance. Sooner or later, though, the whites would stop fleeing in terror and confusion. They would rally together, and then his army would face a fight.

Until the whites started to band together, the raids continued to go smoothly. Turner adapted his tactics to fit the size of his growing army. He placed his fastest, fiercest-looking troops at the front of the column because he wanted to terrorize the whites into fleeing. The more people who saw the rebels coming, the more fear was generated.

At each homestead, the rebels charged ahead with their guns blazing and their axes flashing while shouting out their battle cries. The pattern was the same at each homestead. There was a charge, shooting, screams—and then silence.

The deeds were done by the time Turner reached the house. The whites had been killed—men, women, and children alike. The weapons and powder had been seized. The horses had been saddled, and more men had been mounted. Then, at a sign from the general, the army would ride on toward Jerusalem.

More slave recruits joined at every farm—the strongest and boldest of the men and boys. Although it has not been recorded that any women rode with the force, they joined in the fighting at every plantation. By noon, the rebellious contingent was 60 strong. They began to ride openly through the fields. The element of surprise had gone with the darkness; now, speed was all. If they could gain the town of Jerusalem, they would at least be relatively secure until more slaves joined them.

They would let the future take care of itself. Perhaps they would flee for the Great Dismal Swamp, 20 miles to the east. Perhaps they would fight their way to the sea and hijack a ship for Haiti. Perhaps they could drive the whites from this corner

of Virginia altogether. Consciously or not, Turner must have always had this last possibility in his mind, for he strictly forbade his men to burn or destroy any house or barn. His "army" destroyed only the people but left the livestock, houses, and barns, as though the rebels hoped that they might someday return to occupy them. Why not? Had not they built every house, laid every fence rail, plowed and cleared every field? Whose land was it, if not theirs?

7

The Fortunes of War

Slave rebellion! It was mid-morning on Monday, August 22, 1831, and southeastern Virginia was in a state of panic. Riders with news of the rebellion had reached Jerusalem, and the church bells were tolling the alarm. Terrified families were straggling into town across the Nottoway River, and the streets were choked with refugees. In Sussex and Greensville counties to the north and west, in North Carolina to the south, slaves were seen literally jumping for joy, kicking their heels in the air at the roadsides. It had come, as everyone in their heart of hearts had known it would someday—the long-awaited, or long-dreaded (depending on one's point of view) Judgment Day. Jubilee. Slave rebellion! (For additional information on slave rebellions in history, enter "slave revolts and rebellions" into any search engine and browse the sites listed.

Rumors flashed through the air like summer lightning: The British had landed and were on their way; an army of

Slaves rejoiced as word of the rebellion spread throughout Virginia. They believed that their time of freedom had finally come, and that slave owners were receiving the punishment they deserved, "blow for blow," as this print depicts.

500 slaves was riding down on Jerusalem. Through it all, however, a few people learned the truth, and the truth was terrifying enough for the whites and joyous enough for the blacks. Nat Turner, Southampton County's own "Prophet Nat," was leading a slave army toward the town, leaving a zigzag trail of death and destruction behind him.

Amid all of the confusion in Jerusalem, Justice James Trezevant of the Southampton County Court scrawled a hasty note: "Terrible insurrection; several families obliterated. Send arms and men at once; a large force may be needed." The judge sent the message with a fast rider, who clattered across the boards of the Nottoway Bridge, heading north toward Petersburg and Richmond.

All of the church bells in Jerusalem were tolling in warning as lone riders, nervously looking out for armed blacks, galloped through the countryside to alert the scattered militia. Meanwhile, women and children barricaded themselves in the stores and churches, and men rolled out cider barrels, cotton bales, boards, and logs to build a hasty barricade at the bridge over the Nottoway River, all the while scanning the Murfreesboro Road for the army of 500 slaves that was rumored to be coming.

By noon, the rebel army that they feared was only three miles from Jerusalem. Behind them was a trail of death and terror, with more than 50 whites killed and the buzzards still circling. At the Waller plantation, where there had been a school, 10 children had been killed and thrown into a pile, as if in terrible revenge for all of the innocent black babies thrown from the slave ships to the sharks.

Some of the rebels, like Billy Artis, wept at the sight of the slain children. Not Turner. He viewed it all, as he said later, with "silent satisfaction," knowing that unrelenting terror was his only hope of scattering the whites and winning freedom for his fellow slaves. He had held his army back from attacking people whom he did not know well only once, at a cabin

belonging to poor whites who held no slaves. They were people, he said, "who thought no more of themselves than they did the negroes," and therefore they were not subjected to his army's terrible retribution.

More ominous to Turner than the slaughter was the brandy. He could see that he had been too lax, and the alcohol was now taking its toll on his men in spite of his efforts to curb their drinking. Although Turner did not know about it at the time, one of the rebels who got drunk and fell behind was captured and then tortured and mutilated by whites.

THE REACTION BEGINS

By this time, the slaveowners had rallied, spread the alarm, and were beginning to fight back, although they were still a bit disorganized. There were two bands of militia in the field, separated and unaware of each other. One group, numbering 30 or 40 men, was led by a Jerusalem lawyer in his 30s named William C. Parker. Another group of about 20 men was led by Captain Arthur Middleton of the Southampton Militia. Both groups were following Barrow Road.

Middleton's group reached the Waller school only minutes after the slaughter there, and Middleton was so shaken by what he saw that he deserted the company and rode off to find his own family. Two other men, Alexander Peete and James Bryant, took command and rode on cautiously, looking for the slave army. It was they who found Turner's drunken soldier straggling behind in the road. They cut the tendons in his heels and left him unable to stand or walk. When another group came by, the men tied him to a tree and used him for target practice.

The retaliation of the whites, as savage as anything that Turner's army did, was already beginning. At a little after noon on Barrow Road, Turner could see smoke from the town over the trees and hear the frantic ringing of the church bells. He formed up his men, and they started riding full speed, straight

toward Jerusalem. He knew that by now there were companies of militia out looking for him. Although his men were well mounted, their weapons were poor and there was little ammunition. They had powder but only a little birdshot. Turner showed them how gravel, poured down the barrel of a gun, would serve almost as well as lead.

Turner knew that the success of his rebellion depended on gaining the town. In Jerusalem, there were arms, ammunition, and food. The whites, he knew, were panicked and terrorized to the point that they could be driven out. He hoped that once he and his men were established in the town, they could hold out long enough for larger numbers of slaves to join them, or perhaps even until the still-hoped-for intervention of the British.

It was at the Parker farm on Barrow Road, in what came to be known as the Battle of Parker's Field, that Turner faced the open fighting he had both dreaded and sought. His inexperienced and poorly armed men were to do better than he had expected. The battlefield was not of Turner's choosing but was forced on him by the fading discipline of his soldiers. They were riding toward the town, with Turner at the rear, when they passed the Parker farm, where several of the men had relatives and friends among the slaves. Over the protests of Hark and the other leaders, the men stopped and went out back to the slave cabins to recruit more fighters—and to show off their guns and horses.

When Turner caught up with Hark, he was furious. He could hear the church bells, and he knew that the whites were gathering their forces. Angry and impatient, he left eight men by the gate to guard the front of the house and rode down the hill with Hark to the slave cabins to fetch the rest. What he saw there dismayed and sickened him: Several of his men were drunk on apple brandy, and others were bragging and showing off. Angrily, Turner ordered them back into formation when he heard the ominous sound of gunshots coming from the front of the house.

While Turner had gone to fetch the men from the slave quarters, the militia force of 20 men led by Peete and Bryant had come over the hill and surprised the eight men left standing guard. Although the rebels fought back, their ancient, single-shot guns that took a half minute to load were not much good against 20 modern military rifles. As Turner's guard fell back, the slaveowners' militia advanced on the house, thinking victory was in their grasp.

Seeing that the men around him were wavering and indecisive, Turner ordered them into battle formation and brought them around the house, into the high weeds in the field. Gaining strength from his confidence, the men followed—guns, knives, and axes at the ready. The whites kept on advancing until Turner yelled, "Charge! Fire on them!" Yelling and screaming, the rebel army leaped into action, inspired by their leader's courage. The militia hesitated, then broke ranks and fell back in panic and disorder. These men had never seen black slaves with weapons before. Captain Bryant's horse stampeded, and he was carried away, into the woods and out of the battle.

Yelling wildly, brandishing axes and swinging gun butts, the insurgents chased the slaveowners' militia over the hill. Just then their fortunes changed. One of the other groups of militia happened to be passing on the road, purely by chance, and it reinforced the fleeing whites, giving them time to reload their weapons. Regrouping while doubling in numbers, the militia counterattacked, and this time it was the rebels' turn to fall back, their guns discharged and useless.

In the withering fire of the militia's better weapons, five of Turner's best men fell wounded. Others panicked and fled into the woods. Hark's horse was shot out from under him, but Turner caught another mount on the fly and handed the reins to Hark. The two men then led a retreat into the thick forests along the Nottoway River, carrying their wounded with them. They knew what would happen to any men whom they left

As the white militias mounted a counterattack against the rebels, Turner and his men retreated into the forest and planned to re-enter Jerusalem from behind by crossing the Nottoway River at Cypress Bridge, seen here. However, the bridge was guarded by militiamen and Turner struggled to devise a new plan for continuing the rebellion.

behind. Stopping as soon as they were safe in the woods, Turner rallied his troops. A few stragglers joined them, bringing their force back up to 20. The men were shaken; many were bleeding. Others, the survivors said, were still hiding in the woods or fleeing across the fields.

Turner was still bound to try to take Jerusalem, which he believed was his best hope for success. By now it was clear that the main road was blocked by the militia; he had not expected so many men to arrive there so soon. In his years of preparation, Turner had made other plans. He would cross the Nottoway at

Cypress Bridge, three miles south of Jerusalem, and enter the town from behind.

Turner led his men through the brush, then down a little-known back road. When they reached the bridge, his worst fears were realized. The little wooden span was bristling with guns and crawling with nervous, fierce-looking, armed whites. Turner's forces were too small to take it.

It was now in the late afternoon, and Turner had yet another plan. Riding fast, he and Hark led the men south, then doubled back north, across the Barrow Road again, eluding all pursuers. He was headed for the Ridley plantation—one of the largest in the county, with 145 slaves—where he hoped to recruit enough followers to make up his losses.

It was dusk by the time they reached the Ridley place, and again luck was against them. The militia had beaten them there. The slaveowners had occupied and barricaded the main buildings and were keeping a close watch on the slaves.

Without letting the militia see them, Turner and Hark led their weary troops into the woods nearby, set up lookouts, and camped for the night. Their numbers were back up to 40; in spite of the guards at the Ridley place, 4 of the slaves had managed to sneak away and join them. The men were exhausted, demoralized, and shaken by the defeat at Parker's field. More than anything, Turner knew, they needed rest. Tomorrow their fortunes might change.

8

Retreats and Reverses

It was midnight. Turner had not been asleep for long when he was startled and awakened by what he later said was "a great racket." Getting up, he found some of his men mounted, some reaching for their weapons in the dark, and others scrambling about in confusion. One of the sentinels had given a warning cry, and the entire camp had fallen into disarray. Turner suspected that it was a false alarm, yet he still sent scouts out to the edge of the woods to check up on the Ridley house. Sure enough, the militia was safely inside. They were not going to attack in the darkness. The damage was done: Turner's inexperienced force was already panicked. When the scouts returned, they were taken for attackers and fired on. Disorder fed on disorder, and, in the ensuing confusion, many of the troops deserted.

Dawn found Turner without sleep, frustrated, low on ammunition and food, and down to 20 men again. Giving up

on the idea of sleep, he ordered his men to mount. Hoping to gain recruits, they rode for the nearby Blunt plantation, where he knew there were 60 slaves. In the gray morning light, the place looked deserted. Turner thought that perhaps his luck was turning at last for the better: Perhaps all of the whites were with the militia at the Ridley house. Cautiously, the rebels rode through the gate, with Hark leading the way. Still cautious, Hark yelled out. There was no answer. Then he fired his gun into the air.

A thunderous volley of gunfire came from the house. It was an ambush! The horses and mules—farm animals that had been pressed into cavalry service—panicked and galloped wildly, carrying the rebels around and around the house while shotgun and rifle fire coming from behind the shutters picked them off. Hark fell, badly wounded. Horses tumbled and crushed their riders. Worst of all, some of Blunt's slaves joined in the fight on the side of their masters. Perhaps they were forced to fight; perhaps they fought willingly.

Shouting at his men to follow him, Turner retreated. This time he was forced to leave Hark and the other wounded men behind. Will helped him pull the troops back into some kind of order, and the small rebel army, exhausted and demoralized, backtracked through the woods. Many of them were wounded, most of them were without mounts, and some were without weapons.

At 10:00 A.M., they approached the Harris farm, where Turner's army had assembled and saluted their leader with bold and hopeful hurrahs only 24 hours before. This place, too, was crawling with whites—they were fresh troops with military rifles and horses. While Turner and his men were assessing the troops from the edge of the woods, a lookout spotted them. There was an alarm followed by shouts. Then came a blast of rifle fire, and three more of Turner's men fell dead. Among them was Will. In response, the rebels knelt, aimed, and fired, and then turned to flee into the

woods. Shouting, the militia set out after them. The skirmish in the woods was brief and bitter. The rebels, who were outnumbered, were outrun and then overwhelmed. Turner was among the few who managed to escape, but this time he could not count on his forces to regroup. His army was in total disarray, with many dead or wounded and others scattered in every direction.

Unwilling to give up, Turner kept his sword, even though it was useless as a weapon. He found two men, then two more, and led them to a hiding place where they concealed themselves while the searching patrols almost stumbled over them. Finally, night fell around them, and, shivering and exhausted, the five men stumbled out of the woods onto a back road. With his hand on his sword, Turner spoke softly but earnestly to inspire the men for one last try at freedom. Two of them, Curtis and Stephen, had joined the rebellion on the night before, sneaking away from the Ridley plantation, and were still fairly fresh. Turner sent them riding south, ordering them to round up as many men as they could and bring them to the woods at the Travis place, where the rebellion had begun. He would wait there for them. The revolt was not over, he insisted. They must not give up.

Accompanied by the other two men, both of them exhausted like himself, Turner struck off through the darkness. They made their way through the woods and along the back roads to the Travis place. While his two companions slept, Turner sat up all night and waited for his reinforcements to arrive.

THE END NEARS

The sun rose, but no one had come.

Turner then played his last card. He awakened his remaining two men and sent them out just as he had dispatched the others, instructing them to bring anyone whom they could find to Cabin Pond, where he had

By the second day of the rebellion, Turner's forces found white militia stationed at every farm and house they tried to raid. Turner refused to give up the revolt and hid in the woods and swamps, trying to develop a plan to recruit more rebels and overcome the whites, not realizing that almost all of his forces had been killed or captured.

planned the revolt with his "chosen four." He would wait for them there.

They left, and he was never to see them again. Although Turner had no way of knowing it, by this time half of his men had been killed and about half had been captured. Few had turned themselves in. Billy Artis had ridden from plantation to plantation, with his slave wife at his side, in a futile effort to rally support after the defeat at Blunt's. When he was at last chased down and surrounded, he defended himself with rifle fire instead of surrendering. After the shooting stopped and the whites moved in to inspect him, all they found was his hat on a stick, and his body. He had saved his last shot for himself.

Stephen and Curtis, Turner's first two messengers, had been captured less than a mile into their journey. They were taken to Cross Keys at gunpoint and locked in a log hut with other actual and suspected rebels. The little town was filled with refugees, and the whites were on a rampage. Some wanted the blacks held for trial; others wanted them beaten or executed on the spot. One female slave was tied to a tree and shot by her enraged owner.

By Tuesday, not only Southampton County but the entire state of Virginia was armed and out for blood. Judge Trezevant's message had arrived at the governor's mansion in Richmond at 3:00 A.M. on Tuesday, just as Turner was being awakened by the panic in the woods. Because the first reports indicated that the rebellion was widespread, perhaps even reaching all across the South, the governor had decided to send riders in all directions to alert and gather the militia. To play it safe, he had also ordered all units north and west of Richmond on alert. Then he had sent two Richmond units—one cavalry and one artillery—south toward Jerusalem. On top of all this, he had also dispatched a total of 2,000 guns and had ordered in the local militias of Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Petersburg.

Passions ran high all Tuesday afternoon as cavalry and artillery moved through the streets of Richmond. Rumors

swept through the town, including one that a slave army was moving out of the Great Dismal Swamp and was heading toward the state capital. Mobs moved through the city, chasing and beating any blacks unfortunate enough to be seen on the street. "We experience much anxiety here," the governor said. The seaport cities of Portsmouth and Norfolk were also seized by panic. Norfolk's mayor called in the U.S. navy from Fort Monroe, convinced that the militia alone could not protect the city. Federal army and navy units were dispatched to Southampton County to back up the state militia. In nearby Murfreesboro, North Carolina—just across the state line—one white man was so terrified by the news of a slave uprising that he fell dead of a heart attack on the street. All of the local militia was off at a revival meeting, and a rider was sent to alert them. He rode through the campsite, shouting, "The negroes have risen in Southampton and are killing every white person from the cradle up, and are coming this way!"

By Tuesday afternoon, the North Carolina Governor's Guards had assembled in Murfreesboro. By then, 3,000 armed whites were on the march toward Southampton County from neighboring counties in Virginia and North Carolina. This number included men from the U.S. army and navy, state and local militias, armed vigilante units, and lynch mobs.

The white reign of terror that soon began proved to be bloodier than the attacks by Turner and his men. Two detachments of cavalry from North Carolina killed 40 blacks in two days, decapitating 15 people and placing their heads on poles. At Cross Keys, five blacks were lynched by a mob. At a Barrow Road intersection, a man was beheaded and his skull was left to rot on a pole (called ever since "Blackhead Signpost"). Blacks were pulled from their cabins and were whipped, tortured, and lynched.

Over the next four days, more than 120 blacks were killed by lynch mobs and militia (a total that does not include the number of armed insurgents who had been captured and

The retaliation by the whites was even bloodier and more vicious than the attacks by Turner's rebel army. This Virginia intersection was renamed "Blackhead Signpost" because the decapitated head of a slave was left on a pole there.

killed). The violence became so bad that the army commander, General Eppes, declared that any further atrocities would be dealt with under the Articles of War. By Wednesday, August 31, 10 days after the revolt had begun, 49 rebels had been captured and imprisoned, including the badly wounded Hark Travis and Nelson Williams. Because slaves and free blacks were not entitled to a jury trial under Virginia law, a court trial known as "oyer and terminer" was held in Jerusalem to deal with the captured rebels. In such a hearing, the fate of each defendant is decided on by one or more judges rather than by a jury.

To give the trial an appearance of due process, lawyers were appointed for all of the slaves at a fee of 10 dollars apiece. While the cases were being heard, the courthouse was surrounded by an angry, armed mob in the event that any of the defendants were acquitted. Every slave was priced as well as tried. Thus, when Hark was sentenced to death, the state had to pay the estate of his owner $450 for the pleasure of hanging him. Court records and newspaper accounts show that anywhere from 15 to 20 men, and a few women, were hanged. Many more were sold back into slavery in areas with even more brutal conditions in the Caribbean and the Deep South.

The hangings went on for two weeks. Yet the panic continued in Virginia and spread west to the mountains, south into the Carolinas, and even north into Maryland and Delaware. One question was on everyone's mind: Where was Nat Turner?

9

The First War

The "Great Banditti Chief," as the newspapers called Turner, was still at large long after all of his fellow rebels had been captured. The slaveowners did not rest easy. Posters and descriptions of him were sent out all over the state; he was described by Jerusalem lawyer William C. Parker (the same man who had led one of the patrols to find Turner and who was later appointed to "defend" him) as "between 30 and 35 years old—five feet six or 8 inches high—weighs between 150 & 160 rather bright complexion but not a mulatto—broad-shouldered—large flat nose—large eyes—broad flat feet rather knock kneed—walk brisk and active—hair on the top of the head very thin—no beard except on the upper lip and the top of the chin . . ."

The governor of Virginia put up a reward of $500, and others added to this until the price on Turner's head totaled $1,100. He was worth far more as a rebel than the $400 he had brought as a slave.

By late September, posters of Turner were up all over North Carolina as well as Virginia. Rumors multiplied among both blacks and whites: "General Nat" was hiding out in the mountains to the west; he had escaped to the Caribbean; he had been seen in the tall reeds near the Nottoway River "armed to the teeth." One story even had him spotted on an open road, walking with a Bible toward Ohio and the West, scattering seeds of rebellion much like Johnny Appleseed planted orchards across the country.

In fact, Turner was close by, hiding out in the woods and swamps that he knew so well. He had waited two days and two nights by Cabin Pond, hoping against hope that his men would return and his army would regroup. Then he had seen white men riding around, he later said, "as if looking for someone," and he concluded that his messengers had been captured and forced to betray his whereabouts. "On this," he wrote in his *Confessions*, "I gave up all hope for the present."

Turner then broke into the still-empty Travis house, which he knew well (the upstairs bedroom floors were still dark with the blood of his late owners) and found food, candles, and blankets. Then he literally went underground, hiding himself in a shallow cave that he dug under a pile of fence rails in an open field, figuring correctly that it was the last place that his pursuers would look. He spent sometime hiding out, perhaps contacting his wife (who had been savagely beaten but had never betrayed him) but more likely staying away to protect her and the children.

For a month, Turner ventured out solely at night, seeing only the still-secret supporters who must have provided him with food and water as well as news. His heart must have been heavy. He had seen Hark and Will shot down, and he surely must have been told that they had been captured and hanged and that Billy Artis had taken his own life rather than surrender. Still, Turner never gave up hope entirely. We know this because he never gave up his sword. Even though it was useless as a

weapon, it was the symbol of his rebellion and of his command, and he kept it by his side.

Turner's only hope for survival was to flee either to the West or to the sea, but individual survival had never been his goal. After all, he had escaped once and had come back for his people. In the end, he stayed with them, choosing to die in Southampton County rather than fleeing and living in exile.

As the days dragged on for Turner, and September turned into October, he pondered and brooded, praying for a sign that was never to come. He was almost caught on two separate occasions. One day, two slaves who were out hunting surprised him and betrayed him to their masters; he barely eluded the mob that subsequently came after him. Another time, Nathanial Francis spotted him and fired his weapon; the shot put a hole through Turner's hat. Once again he was pursued, so he dug another cave under a fallen sassafras deep in the woods. After spotting him for a second time, his pursuers knew for sure that he was in the neighborhood, and patrols with dogs began to comb the woods day and night. On October 30, the inevitable happened. As Turner was crawling out of his carefully camouflaged tunnel, he was surprised by a white man holding a shotgun. The man, named Benjamin Phipps, ordered Turner to hand over his sword. He did, and his war against slavery was over.

Phipps tied up his captive and then fired into the air in triumph. (Ironically, Turner's captor was not a slaveowner but a poor white, of the kind whom Turner had ordered his men to spare.) Word of Turner's capture was soon out, and bells rang all across Southampton County as he was marched to a nearby plantation. Nearly a hundred people gathered around him, spitting in his face and taunting him.

Turner faced them back with a fierce pride, neither answering their taunts nor asking for mercy. A witness reported that he "just grinned" and refused to repent. At the nearby village of Cross Keys, he was beaten, then boarded up in a farmhouse for the night.

By September, all of the captured rebels had been either hanged or sold back into slavery, but Nat Turner was still on the loose. The authorities and locals hunted for him until late October, when he was finally discovered, crawling out of his hidden cave in the woods by Cabin Pond, where his rebellion had begun.

The infamous captive was carried in chains to Jerusalem on the following day. There he was taken before two judges—Trezevant and Parker—who began to question him. He answered them frankly and unrepentantly. His calm dignity amazed the reporters and observers who had crowded into the courtroom, expecting to see a crazed madman. He expressed no repentance over the deaths of the nearly 60 whites who had been slain during the rebellion. He said only that had the rebellion been successful, "women and children

would afterwards have been spared, and men too who ceased to resist."

The judges persisted. Hadn't he done wrong? they wanted to know. Didn't he feel remorse?

No, Turner insisted, he had done no wrong, even though the rebellion had failed. If he had to do it over, he said, he "must necessarily act in the same way again."

Turner's hearing was set for November 5, 1831. He was then carried to the jail, followed by an immense crowd jeering and cursing him. Inside the jail, Barry Newsome and Thomas Haithcock, two free blacks who had ridden with him, were being held for hanging. While Turner was being chained and manacled, a white man taunted him, asking what had he done "with all the money he stole."

Turner replied coolly that he had taken exactly 75 cents. Then he turned to Newsome and Haithcock and said to them, "You know money was not my object." Even in this grim setting, they laughed. Money? Freedom or death had been their object, and failing the one, they now were to have the other. Their motive was something that these slaveowners could not seem to understand.

TALKING TO POSTERITY

On Tuesday, November 1, an elderly white man visited Turner's cell. He was Thomas Gray, a local lawyer, who had defended some of the insurgents. A friend of the jailer, he had received permission to transcribe Turner's story—his "confessions," as Gray called it—because public curiosity was "much on the stretch" to know the true story behind the rebellion. For some reason—perhaps because Gray showed him a little decency and respect—Turner decided to talk to him. Although he told Gray the entire story, he omitted all of his rebels' names except for those whom he knew had been killed or hanged. Also, he never once mentioned his wife or his children. He explained most of his motives in religious terms, both because that was

what he felt whites understood best and because he saw his devotion to freedom and liberty as a religious quest. Indeed, when Gray asked Turner the same kind of question that the judges had asked him—Wasn't he sorry about what he had done, seeing that he was now to be punished with death?—he answered simply, "Was not Christ crucified?"

Gray ultimately attributed Turner's actions to revenge and religious fanaticism, and in several instances in the *Confessions*, he also put his own words in Turner's mouth. Generally, however, he seems to have recorded Turner's story pretty much as the revolt leader told it. All told, Gray was impressed by the dreaded rebel general. He said that he found Turner "for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, surpassed by few . . . he possesses an uncommon share of intelligence, with a mind capable of attaining anything." Yet Gray was also horrified by what he said was Turner's "calm composure, still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless victims . . . covered with chains; yet daring to raise his manacled hands to Heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man. I looked upon him and my blood curdled in my veins." Rightly so. What Gray was seeing was the very thing that "curdled the blood" of every slaveowner: their nightmare—the slave who had seized back his own humanity with the sword. (For additional information on *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, enter "confessions of Nat Turner" into any search engine and browse the sites listed.)

IN HIS OWN WORDS . . .

As Thomas Gray interviewed Nat Turner from jail, he looked for signs of remorse from Turner, or an explanation for his vicious, merciless killings. Turner explained that his only motivation was liberating his people. He gave no apology, and ended his confession with these words:

I am here loaded with chains, and willing to suffer the fate that awaits me.

It is not recorded that Turner had a last meeting in the jail with his wife and children. Perhaps such a meeting had already happened in secrecy, while he was still in hiding. After his capture, he seemed more careful than ever to protect them from the rage and terror that still gripped the whites of Southampton County and that had claimed so many lives of the innocent as well as of the "guilty" who had been his followers.

TURNER'S DAY OF JUDGMENT

Turner's trial began on November 5. Such a huge crowd had gathered for it in Jerusalem that the sheriff had recruited extra deputies, fearing that the prisoner would be lynched on his way to the courthouse. The sheriff felt that it was important for Turner to be given the appearance of a fair trial.

After Turner was brought into the courtroom in chains, a clerk read the charges against him: "Nat, alias Nat Turner, a negro slave, the property of Putnam Moore, an infant, charged with conspiring to rebel and making insurrection."

William Parker, who was appointed as Turner's defense attorney, acted fairly, and on the instructions of his client (and probably to his own surprise), he entered a plea of not guilty. Turner informed his lawyer, the courtroom, and the judge very clearly that he felt no guilt whatsoever.

The first person to testify against Turner was a man named Waller who had managed to escape from one of the farms that was ravaged by the rebels. He stated that Turner did in fact command the rebels who had killed his wife and children. Turner did not dispute this. Next, Judge Trezevant took the stand and repeated the testimony that Turner had given to him on the day after his capture. The clerk then read the long statement that Turner had given to Gray (later published as the *Confessions*), which Turner acknowledged to be "full, free and voluntary."

That was it for the trial. Turner was quickly pronounced guilty, and he was asked by Judge Cobb, "Have you anything to say why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon you?"

Turner was convicted of conspiring to rebel and make insurrection, and hanged in front of an eager crowd on the tree seen here. Though it cost him his life, his rebellion succeeded in proving to Southerners that slaves were neither content nor docile and inspiring slaves to hope and strive for freedom.

"Nothing but what I've said before," Turner replied calmly.

The judge then delivered a long and passionate speech on the horrors of rebellion. His voice rose in pitch as he concluded, "The judgment of this court is that you . . . on Friday next, between the hours of 10 A.M. and 2 P.M. be hung by the neck until you are dead! dead! dead! and may the Lord have mercy upon your soul." Turner was then valued at $375, which the judge ordered to be paid to the Moore estate.

On the appointed day—November 11, 1831—Turner went unflinchingly to the death that he had chosen over slavery. He was not the first—nor would he be the last—black rebel to be hanged in the aftermath of the rebellion. In all, 50 stood trial and 21 were hanged. There were at least 20—and perhaps as many as 30—more rebellion-related "legal" executions (not including outright lynchings) in neighboring Virginia counties and in North Carolina. Whether these were actually related to Turner's rebellion, or only thought to be so by the panicked whites, is not known. All told, the rebellion cost the lives of approximately 60 whites and as many as 200 blacks. The heavy toll of slavery and rebellion did not stop there. After all, slaves were property; and whereas hangings brought personal satisfaction to many whites, destroying property brought financial hardship. Consequently, the governor commuted the sentences of 10 convicted slaves who were then sold south. Among them were Turner's wife and daughter.

According to legend, one of Turner's sons found his way to relative freedom in Ohio. Another is said to have stayed in Southampton County. Even today, near the town of Jerusalem (now called Courtland) there is a black storekeeper named Turner who proudly claims to be Nat Turner's direct descendant. In black folklore, "The Second War" is a phrase that is often used to refer to the Civil War, a bloody struggle that put an end to slavery in America. "The First War" was the rebellion led by Nat Turner.

10

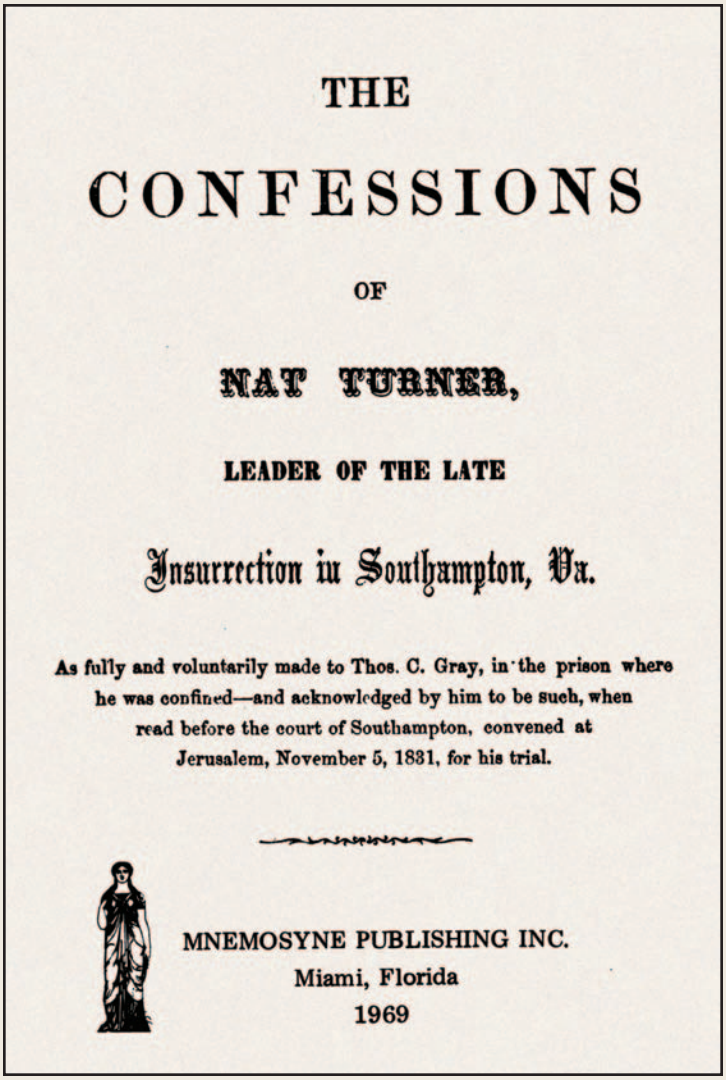
Nat Turner's Legacy

As a historical event, Nat Turner's uprising has never lent itself to easy moral generalization. Ever since the killings of 1831, people have argued about the various interpretations of Turner's actions. Black leaders in particular have been compelled to sort out the precise legacy "General Nat" left in terms of the fight against racial injustice. This task has been quite difficult. Part of the problem lies in the fact that Turner's meaning and message defy any attempt to categorize them as "good" or "bad." Looking back on Turner, one is struck with a profound sense of ambivalence. His uprising was at once courageous and foolhardy. Turner's conduct and that of his "soldiers" was understandable but nonetheless murderous. The drama of his personal war on slavery cannot be denied but neither can the tragedy that ultimately befell his followers, victims, and bystanders alike.

The man himself can be viewed through any number of lenses, depending on an observer's perspective or agenda. Turner is alternately a saint or a sinner, a rebel or a murderer, a legendary hero or an infamous villain. Yale historian David W. Blight argues that "Nat Turner is a classic example of an iconic figure who is deeply heroic on the one side and deeply villainous on the other." Blight contends that people see whichever Nat Turner they want to see: "For those who need a slave rebel, he serves that purpose. For those who need to see him as a deranged revolutionary who liked slaughtering people, they can see that, too. [Turner is] forever our own invention in some ways."

Nat Turner left behind a bittersweet legacy indeed. On one hand, his efforts inspired those who advocated active, forceful resistance against institutionalized racism in the United States. Anyone who felt compelled to meet violence with violence in the quest for civil rights took Turner as one of his or her heroes. Hate understands only hate, these people claimed, and force responds only to force. Bending down before an oppressor encourages little more than further oppression. Turner's uprising represented a bold and morally just blow for freedom.

On the other hand, Turner's rampage served as a cautionary tale for those who called for passive resistance and nonviolent agitation. His "rebellion," this camp contended, accomplished nothing of lasting significance. In fact, popular outrage over the spilling of innocent blood generated a wave of fear and vengeance that swept over the slave South and actually strengthened the system Turner sought to undermine. During the 1830s and 1840s, in the aftermath of the Southampton rising, new and revised slave codes were enacted to make freedom less likely and conditions far worse for Southern blacks, both free and slave. For his detractors, Turner's ill-fated rebellion proved that violence only made matters worse for



THE

CONFESSIONS

OF

NAT TURNER,

LEADER OF THE LATE

Insurrection in Southampton, Va.

As fully and voluntarily made to Thos. C. Gray, in the prison where he was confined—and acknowledged by him to be such, when read before the court of Southampton, convened at Jerusalem, November 5, 1831, for his trial.

MNEMOSYNE PUBLISHING INC.
Miami, Florida
1969

While in jail awaiting trial, Turner dictated his story to Thomas Gray, a local lawyer who published the details of the rebellion as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Though the rebellion resulted in the deaths of about 60 whites and 200 blacks, Turner showed no remorse and maintained that he was instructed by God to take actions against whites for the institution of slavery.

African Americans struggling to free themselves from tyranny of racial hatred and discrimination.

The prophet-leader's famous sword thus seemed to be truly double edged in terms of the message it sent to future black leaders. Only two paths appeared to stretch before those seeking liberty and equality for black Americans: to fight hate and injustice with violence or to oppose racism with moral arguments and determined nonviolence. One way or another, people eventually had to make a choice.

In this way, long after his demise, Turner's specter haunted the disputes between influential blacks. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois were prime examples as they argued over the best way to achieve black advancement. Like all civil rights leaders, then or since, Washington and Du Bois had at their disposal sharply contrasting means to the same end. Washington, for example, promoted a form of black achievement that purposefully avoided creating fear and suspicion among America's whites. Washington's calls for accommodation comforted white people because of their emphasis on quiet, peaceful, and productive racial coexistence; his proposals carried not the slightest hint of aggression.

On the contrary, Du Bois demanded a full and equal share of the American promise for the nation's black citizens. Du Bois openly and forcefully challenged institutionalized racial discrimination and run-of-the-mill racial hatred. He welcomed confrontation; white anxiety was not a concern for him. At one point, Du Bois went so far as to urge black Americans to arm themselves if threatened. In stark, Turner-like terms, Du Bois asked rhetorically, "What can America do against a mass of people who . . . stand as one unshaken group in battle? Nothing."

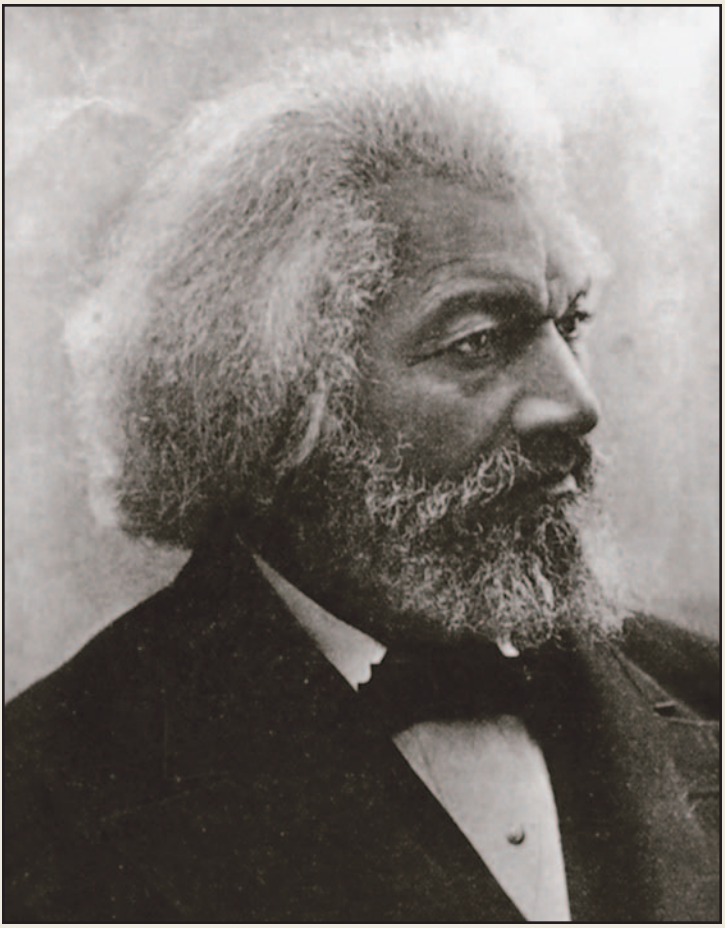
Later, in the mid-twentieth century, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., took up where Du Bois and Washington left off—arguing the merits and demerits of confrontation—if not outright violence—in the cause of black liberty. Nat Turner

hovered over civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, shaping the decisions not only of Malcolm X and Dr. King but of an entire generation of prominent black spokesmen, from Stokely Carmichael and Huey Newton to Jesse Jackson and Andrew Young. The debate was always the same: lash out, meeting violence with violence as Turner had done, and face whatever consequences, or renounce physical force in favor of peaceful yet determined political and social action?

Malcolm X initially chose the former route, promising to combat white oppression "by whatever means necessary." His warning to white racists was loud and unequivocal—he assured his enemies that he would only "be nonviolent with those who are nonviolent with me." As for others, he made it clear: "If someone puts a hand on you, send him to the cemetery." A famous photograph of Malcolm X brandishing an automatic rifle in self-defense drove home his point.

In much the same way, Huey Newton and his Black Panther Party opted for a Nat Turner–like response. Based in Oakland, California, the Black Panthers urged members and nonmembers alike to take up the gun in defiance of white power. Newton and his followers proved how serious they were when, in 1967, they traveled to Sacramento, California's capital, fully armed. As Newton explained it, the plan was simple "We're going to take the best Panthers we got and we're going to the Capitol steps with our guns . . . We've got to get a message over to the people." Once they had the attention of the media, Newton's contingent brazenly disrupted government operations by bringing shotguns and rifles into the state assembly, making the point that black Americans never again would suffer the indignities of racism quietly.

Martin Luther King, Jr., wanted nothing to do with modern-day Nat Turners such as Huey Newton. King was convinced that violence bred only more violence, and, in the end, it resulted only in more pain and suffering. King also knew that white violence often was aided and abetted by the power of



Black leaders throughout history have debated Turner's legacy, arguing the merits of fighting violence with violence versus taking strong yet peaceful action. But no matter what their opinion, leaders from Frederick Douglass, seen here, to Malcolm X have been influenced by Turner's spirit and strength in his quest for freedom.

governments securely controlled by whites. Violence in the cause of civil rights would amount only to a ready-made excuse for white America to reject black demands and lash out in vengeance.

Throughout his life, King steadfastly refused to tolerate anything that even remotely resembled the tactics of Nat Turner. He once commented on the futility of any kind of mob action, no matter how well intentioned: "There is something painfully sad about a riot. One sees youngsters and angry adults fighting hopelessly and aimlessly against impossible odds. Deep down within them you perceive a desire for self-destruction, a suicidal longing." Turner's mission had failed, and his cause died with him on the gallows. King was determined to build a movement that would succeed and, if need be, outlast its architect.

The questions sparked by Nat Turner's rebellion still echo, and the debate about how to achieve equality continues. The Los Angeles riots of the 1990s, as well as simmering grievances among urban blacks in cities throughout the nation—which occasionally result in violence—seem to show Turner's lasting influence. Yet blacks' gains in politics and business, not to mention many other areas of American society and culture, argue strongly against crude tools such as urban uprisings and in favor of incremental but lasting advances through education, legal action, and political activism.

The shadow of Nat Turner will continue to hang over the American racial debate. Turner will stay with us, if for no other purpose than to serve as an example of what happens when desperate people resort to desperate measures in the cause of freedom.

1800 Born in Southampton County, Virginia

1821 Runs away from, but returns to, Samuel Turner's estate; marries Cherry

1822 Sold to Thomas Moore and is forced to live apart from his family

1825 Becomes a self-ordained preacher

1828 Begins to recruit men for a slave rebellion

1831 ***August 22*** Slave rebellion begins

October 30 Turner captured

November 1 *Confessions* recorded by Thomas Gray

November 5 Put on trial

November 11 Found guilty and is hanged in Jerusalem, Virginia

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