NAT TURNER: HERO OR VILLAIN?
ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY

• Undergirded nation’s economy
• Dominated politics of antebellum period
• Ultimately caused Civil War
• Continued to influence nation during Reconstruction and the struggle for civil rights a century later
• After introduction of cotton gin (1793), slavery deeply ingrained in Lower South; expansion increased demand for slave labor
• Emergence of a vast new slave empire as southerners moved west
ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY

- Slave population: 1790 (697,624); 1800 (893,602); 1810 (1,191,362); 1820 (1,538,022); 1830 (2,009,043); 1850 (3,204,313); 1860 (3,953,760)
- After 1808 slavery in the United States, unlike the rest of the New World, self-sustaining; population tripled and adapted to American culture
- Slavery highly diverse; slave holdings varied according to size, location, and crops produced; cities vs. countryside; different masters = different methods
- Slaves served as skilled craftsmen, preachers, nurses, drivers, house servants, field hands, and mill workers
- Slave-master relationship intense and unstable
ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY

• Masters and overseers subjected slaves to countless arbitrary regulations, resorted frequently to the lash, took sexual liberties with slave women, separated family members more often than they admitted, and strove to become their human property in a state of complete dependence.

• Unique sectional nature of antebellum slavery led to an increasingly bitter political struggle between North and South that culminated in civil war.

• Militant abolitionists (1830s): “free labor” argument that slavery was backward, inefficient, socially degrading and must not be allowed to expand.
ANTEBELLUM SLAVERY

• Southern spokesmen defended slavery to the end: argued slaves inferior, necessary for their economic well being, slavery sanctioned by Bible, and created social harmony not found in Britain or the North

• Slavery defended as a “positive good”

• In 1860 only 25% of southern whites owned slaves; 1% owned 100 or more slaves; 88% of all slaveholders owned fewer than 20 slaves

• Majority of nonslaveholding southerners supported slavery—hoped to become slaveholders themselves and feared freedmen would demand social and political equality with whites; whites shared racist beliefs and feared race war
TROUBLESOME PROPERTY

• Despite frequent declarations of slave contentment and loyalty, few masters truly believed African Americans were naturally docile and submissive
• Resistance constant feature ("silent sabotage")
  – Sabotage (thievery, breaking tools, destroying property)
  – Poor work, slowdowns
  – Arson, poisoning, and other criminal activity
  – Feigning illness
  – Running away
  – Forming “maroon” colonies (Great Dismal Swamp, Piedmont, and Everglades)
• Open rebellion less common
DAY-TO-DAY RESISTANCE

• Although there was extensive cooperation among slaves resisting authority, this cooperation was almost always that of individuals.
• Trigger usually a violation by white authorities of commonly accepted behavior
“No matter how much slaves detested slavery, the balance of forces—and the need to get on with their lives, even under harsh conditions—prevented slaves from engaging in constant struggle against it;... In short, although a general hatred of slavery and yearning for freedom underlay slave resistance, particular circumstances provoked individual decisions to resist. Despite their bitter detestation of bondage, on a day-to-day level most slaves came to terms with their conditions—because they had little choice—striving all the while to maximize their autonomy and preserve as ‘rights’ the little privileges they were allowed to enjoy. When those rights were violated, however, slaves were likely to respond.... If most slave resistance represented specific responses by individuals to intolerable situations rather than revolutionary efforts to overthrow the system, the consequences were nevertheless often far-reaching. Unlike armed revolt, which invariably called forth severe repression, flight and confrontation produced highly variable—indeed unpredictable results.... Every slave owner, overseer, and hirer had to consider on a daily basis, how individual slaves would respond to specific treatment and whether a particular action—a whipping or a new rule—was worth the risk of the response it might provoke. Slaves who gained a reputation for standing up to authority often gained a measure of respect and tolerance from white authorities and secured for themselves greater freedom of action.” --Historian Peter Kolchin
HAUNTING SPECTER

- NYC (1712): 25 armed slaves set fire to northern edge; 18 executed (burned alive and tortured)
- Stono Rebellion (1739): 80 slaves burned and terrorized countryside on way to Spanish FL; 44 executed and body parts impaled; only 21 whites killed
- Gabriel Prosser’s Rebellion (1800): organized by a slave preacher; inspired by Israelites triumph over Egyptians and the Declaration of Independence; storm and slave spy prevented a successful seizure of Richmond’s arsenal; planned to kill all whites except Quakers, Methodists, and French
- Denmark Vesey (1822): inspired by Toussaint L’Ouverture and speech by Rufus King; democratic and Christian beliefs; Charleston, SC; slave carpenter and seaman who won $ in a lottery to purchase freedom; plot betrayed; Vesey and followers violently executed
CHRONOLOGY

1800
• Nat Turner born Oct. 2 in Southampton County, Virginia, the slave of Benjamin Turner.

1803-1804
• Nat Turner’s mother overhears him talking to other children about events which occurred before he was born. In Nat Turner’s memory, this is the first time he becomes aware that he is a special child with unusual powers.

1810
• Benjamin Turner dies. Nat Turner becomes the property of Benjamin’s younger brother, Samuel.

1822
• Nat Turner probably marries Cherry Turner. Samuel Turner dies, and Nat Turner is sold to Thomas Moore. Cherry Turner is sold to Giles Reese.
Circa 1822-1825

- Nat Turner experiences his first vision of “the Spirit.” While praying at his plow the Spirit speaks to him, saying “Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you.” Two years later, the revelation is repeated.

- Nat Turner runs away and spends 30 days in the woods. The Spirit visits him again and tells him to return to his “earthly master” in order to fulfill his special purpose.

1825

- Nat Turner begins to receive “the true knowledge of faith.” He feels the Holy Ghost is with him, and he sees in the sky “the forms of men in different attitudes” and “the lights of the Saviour’s hands.” Later, Turner sees drops of blood on the corn as well as hieroglyphic characters and numbers on leaves in the woods. He interprets all this as a sign that “the Saviour was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and the great day of judgment was at hand.”

- Nat Turner baptizes himself and the white man, Etheldred Brantley.
1828

- On May 12, the Spirit visits Turner once again and tells him “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.”
- Nat Turner’s owner, Thomas Moore, dies. Turner becomes the property of nine-year-old Putnam Moore.

1829

- David Walker, a Boston African American, publishes his *Appeal*, a militant attack on slavery. Many southern whites believe this essay will stimulate rebellion if it falls into the hands of their slaves.
- Sally Moore (Thomas Moore’s widow and the mother of Turner’s master, Putnam Moore) marries local wheelwright Joseph Travis. Travis assumes responsibility for the supervision of Nat Turner.
1831

- **January 1**: William Lloyd Garrison begins publication of the abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*.
- **February 12**: Nat Turner interprets a solar eclipse as a heavenly sign to prepare for the rebellion. He informs Henry, Hark, Nelson and Sam about the great work he has been commissioned to perform.
- **July 4**: Nat Turner originally plans the rebellion to begin on this day. It is postponed when he becomes ill.
- **August 13**: The sun appears to turn bluish-green to observers all along the east coast of the United States. Turner interprets this as a final sign that he can no longer delay the rebellion.
CHRONOLOGY

- **August 20, evening**: Turner meets with Henry and Hark. They agree to prepare a dinner the next day for all the conspirators. They hope to finalize plans for the rebellion.
- **August 21, early afternoon**: The conspirators gather for their dinner at Cabin Pond. Hark, Henry, Nelson, Sam, Jack, and Will cook a pig and drink brandy. Nat Turner joins them belatedly at around 3:00 p.m.
- **August 22, around 2:00 a.m.**: The rebellion begins with the murder of the Joseph Travis family.
- **August 22, early morning**: The rebels kill Salathiel Francis at his house. They move to the Piety Reese farm where they kill Mrs. Reese and her son, and they severely wound a farm manager.
CHRONOLOGY

• **August 22, sunrise**: The rebels kill Elizabeth Turner, Mrs. Newsome (a neighbor), and Hartwell Peebles (an overseer).

• **August 22, morning**: The rebels now divide into two groups. One mounted party of nine reaches the Catherine Whitehead farm. They kill her, her mother, four daughters, a son, and a grandchild. One daughter, Margaret Whitehead, is the only person directly killed by Nat Turner during the course of the rebellion. Another group of six rebels attacks the Bryant farm where they kill Henry Bryant, his wife and child, and his wife’s mother. The two groups temporarily rejoin at the Whitehead house and then divide again. One group goes to the home of Richard Porter, but finds that he has fled. This is the first sign that news of the rebellion has spread. This group then proceeds to the Nathaniel Francis home where they kill two of his nephews and the overseer, Henry Doyle. Some of this group meet and kill Mrs. Williams and her child. The second group of rebels finds that the Howell Harris family has left their residence. While on the road, they meet and kill Trajan Doyle. Nat Turner and his group move on to the home of Peter Edwards, but find no one. They then travel to John T. Barrow’s place where they discover he has already been killed by the other group.
August 22, 9:00 or 10:00 a.m.: The two groups reunite at the farm of Captain Newit Harris. According to Turner, the rebels now number around forty. They proceed to the Levi Waller home where they kill Mrs. Waller and at least 10 children attending school. Levi Waller observes the murders from hiding and he later offers eyewitness testimony at several trials.

August 22, afternoon: On their way to Jerusalem, the rebels stop to pick up relatives at the James W. Parker farm. A few who remain at the gate are attacked by a party of 18 whites. The main body of rebels rejoin them and exchange shots with the attackers. Other white militia in the area hear the shots and arrive to reinforce their comrades. The rebels scatter and retreat. Nat Turner tries to regroup with a sufficient number of rebels to attack the town of Jerusalem. He fails.
August 22-23, night: Nat Turner and a force of forty rebels spend the night near the slave cabins on Major Ridley’s plantation. A false alarm frightens many away and their total number is reduced to twenty by morning.

August 23, just before daybreak: Nat Turner leads an attack on the farm of Dr. Simon Blunt. The house is defended by the residents and several of the rebels are shot. It is possible that some of Dr. Blunt’s slaves assisted their master in this defense.

August 23: The remaining rebels encounter a party of whites at the Newitt Harris house and breaks up as an unorganized group. Nat Turner conceals himself in the woods with two other rebels and to gather them at Cabin Pond.
CHRONOLOGY

**August 24:** Nat Turner remains all day alone at Cabin Pond, waiting in vain for other rebels to join him.

**August 25:** Nat Turner steals supplies from the Travis residence and finds a hiding place in a hole under a pile of fence rails in a field. Turner remains in hiding between August 25 and October 30. He changes hiding places several times, but never wanders far from the vicinity of his original home on the Travis farm.

**August 31:** The first rebels are tried at the Southampton County Court of Oyer and Terminer.

**September 4:** The beginning of executions.

**October 30, near noon:** Nat Turner captured by Benjamin Phipps.
October 31: Nat Turner delivered to the Southampton County jail.

November 1-3: Nat Turner interviewed in his cell by Thomas R. Gray.

November 5: Nat Turner tried, convicted, and sentenced to be executed.

November 10: Thomas R. Gray procures a copyright for *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.

November 11: Nat Turner is hanged.

November 25: Gray publishes *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.
1832

**January and February:** The Virginia House of Delegates debates the issue of emancipation.

**January:** New England Anti-Slavery Society founded in Boston.

**March:** The Virginia House of Delegates restricts black preaching and tightens the slave code.

**September:** Thomas R. Dew of William and Mary College publishes “Abolition of Negro Slavery,” in *The American Quarterly Review*. It is a summary of the Virginia legislative debate over emancipation.

1833

- American Anti-Slavery Society founded in Philadelphia

1840

- The antislavery Liberty party formed in Albany, New York.

1850

- Compromise of 1850 settles the bitter dispute over whether new territories acquired in the war with Mexico should be admitted as slave or free states. Part of the compromise involves an act reaffirming federal responsibility for the return of fugitive slaves.
1854
• Kansas-Nebraska Act repeals the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and allows local voters to determine whether their territory should be admitted as a slave or a free state.

1856
• The Republican party, an antislavery party opposed to the extension of slavery into the territories, nominates John C. Fremont as its presidential candidate.

1857
• *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision holds that slaves or their descendants could not be citizens.

1859
• John Brown raids Harpers Ferry, Virginia in the hope of inciting a general insurrection of the slaves. He and his followers are captured, tried, and hanged.
1860
• The Republican party nominates and elects Abraham Lincoln president. South Carolina secedes from the Union.

1861
• Confederate States of America formed.
• Virginia secedes.
• Fort Sumter attacked and the Civil War begins.

1863
• Emancipation Proclamation frees slaves in states currently in rebellion.

1865
• Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution abolishes slavery.
SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY

• Isolated, economically stagnant, and impoverished region of southeastern Virginia
• Predominantly comprised of small farms and villages
• Forested, swampy in places, poor soil
• At least one-third of the white families owned no slaves. The vast majority of masters owned fewer than ten slaves, with only 13 percent owning twenty or more.
• The census of 1830 reported 6,573 whites and 7,756 slaves. A high percentage of free blacks lived in the county, 1,745. The county was 60 percent black in 1831.
• Mixed agriculture
• Blacks and whites lived and worked with each other every day in small numbers and in close proximity. “Intimate” rebellion
CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

• Taught to believe he was intended for some great purpose and unfit for slavery
• Highly intelligent, literate, mystical, fervent preacher
• Deep and painful resentment over his status and the condition of his people; violence and injustice of slavery
• Experience as an accepted Baptist preacher in a slave community nurtured Turner’s self-esteem and intensified his desire for freedom
• Acutely aware of the hypocrisies and contradictions committed by white Christians of Southampton County
• Ardently believed in angry, vengeful God
• Fugitive (1821); separated from wife Cherry and family (1822); convention failed to abolish slavery (1829)
• Apocalyptic visions and bloody fantasies; prophet, martyr
MISSION

• Freedom?
• Instill terror?
• Exterminate?
• Foment general slave rebellion?
• Martyrdom?
• Strike without warning
• God guide revolt
The Scenes which the above Plate is designed to represent, are—Fig. 1. A Mother intreating for the lives of her children. —2. Mr. Ford, cruelly murdered by his own Slaves. —3. Mr. Harrow, who bravely defended himself until his wife escaped. —4. A camp of mounted Dragoons in pursuit of the Blacks.
AFTERMATH

• Wave of terror and hysteria swept over Virginia and the rest of the South
• Violence of retribution; scores of innocent blacks tortured and atrociously murdered by bands of white vigilantes
• Turner captured, tried, convicted, and finally executed on November 11, 1831
• Virginia legislature debated proposals for gradual abolition of slavery as a threat to public order, but instead chose to stiffen slave codes
• Slavery in U.S. so carefully policed that rebellion became a near impossibility
• Achieve martyrdom? Hasten or delay civil war and emancipation? Hero or villain?
• Abolitionists vs. defenders of slavery
SIGNIFICANCE

The injustice and cruelty of the slave system created Nat Turner and his rebellion. The insurrection was an explosion of black rage that rocked Southampton County and much of the nation to its foundations. As Stephen B. Oates argues, Turner came to be viewed as both a hero and villain. To southern whites he symbolized “black terror and violent retribution.” But to blacks and some abolitionists he represented a “martyred soldier of slave liberation.” His spirit lived on and may well have hastened the onset of civil war and the abolition of slavery. Undoubtedly, Turner and his insurrection helped to make slavery even more of an explosive national issue.


