



PART EIGHT

Woe If It Comes with Storm and Blood and Fire

15 The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion

STEPHEN B. OATES

While John Marshall was sitting on the bench, handing down judicial rulings aimed at stabilizing the Republic, there was another America, a black America, struggling on the underside of society to gain its freedom, its wholeness and humanity. Let us pick up the story of that struggle with the outbreak of the Revolution. The labor of slaves, as we have seen, was indispensable to the American cause. Hoping to disrupt the American war effort, the British invited the slaves to desert their American masters and join the British side, ultimately promising freedom if they did so. This promise horrified the American patriots. "Hell itself," one cried, "could not have vomited anything more black than this design of emancipating our slaves."

The Americans had reason to be worried, for their slaves went over to the British in ever increasing numbers. That blacks fought against the Revolution challenges the traditional notions of freedom and oppression in the Revolutionary era. From the view of fleeing slaves, the redcoats were the liberators, the American patriots the oppressors. To forestall mass slave defections, the Americans started recruiting blacks as soldiers too; some states even offered freedom in exchange for military service (South Carolina, however, offered white volunteers a bounty in slaves, in the form of one adult black to each private, three adult blacks and a child to each colonel). Altogether some 5,000 blacks served the American cause. But approximately 100,000 blacks, a fifth of the slave population in revolutionary America, were "loyalists," who sided with the British. When the war ended, General Washington, angry because some of his own slaves had fled, demanded that the defeated British

return the black loyalists to their American masters. The British, however, asserted that the blacks had been emancipated in accordance with royal policy. In the end, the British did give up blacks who had been seized by royal forces and refugees who had come to British lines after the war had ended. Other black loyalists wound up in slavery in the British West Indies; 3,000 more were colonized in Nova Scotia, where they braved discrimination and established a community that still exists.

The black patriots, by contrast, gained a measure of freedom when the northern states abolished slavery. New Jersey even allowed them to vote—for a while. But most “free” blacks in the North languished in the twilight zone between bondage and full liberty. As Leon Litwack observes in *North of Slavery* (1961), “Until the post-Civil War era, in fact, most northern whites would maintain a careful distinction between granting Negroes legal protection—a theoretical right to life, liberty, and property—and political and social equality. No statute or court decision could immediately erase from the public mind, North or South, that long and firmly held conviction that the African race was inferior and therefore incapable of being assimilated politically, socially, and most certainly physically with the dominant and superior white society.” As a contemporary said of northern blacks, “Chains of a stronger kind still manacled their limbs, from which no legislative act could free them; a mental and moral subordination and inferiority, to which . . . custom has here subjected all the sons and daughters of Africa.”

There were northern blacks, of course, who overcame the obstacles against them and managed to lead prominent and influential lives. Phillis Wheatley of Boston was an internationally known poet, whose *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was the first book published by a black woman in America and only the second by an American woman. Prince Hall, one of several thousand blacks who fought for America in the Revolution, formed the first black Masonic lodge. And Benjamin Banneker, born a free black in slaveholding Maryland, became a well-known astronomer and the most famous African American in the young Republic.

In the South, meanwhile, slavery took even deeper root with the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, and blacks on the booming plantations sank into bleak despair. Here “the human cattle moved,” recalled Frederick Douglass, a former slave, “hurried on by no hope of reward, no sense of gratitude . . . no prospect of bettering their condition; nothing, save the dread and terror of the slave-driver’s lash. So goes one day, and so comes and goes another.” Yet, as Vincent Harding observes, the slaves were anything but passive drones, submitting to their lot without complaint. They resisted bondage every way they could: they ran away, faked illness, broke hoes, and resorted to other forms of sabotage. Inspired by the charismatic Toussaint L’Ouverture and the great slave rebellion he led on Santo Domingo in the Caribbean, southern blacks also plotted insurrection, something their masters most feared from them. In 1800 Gabriel Prosser plotted an insurrection in Richmond, but the authorities found out about it and hanged the conspirators. The same thing happened in Charleston in 1821 when house slaves told authorities that Denmark Vesey, a free black man, was plotting a giant slave rebellion. Vesey and his followers were all hanged.

Then in 1831, in an obscure county in southern Virginia, the worst fears of southern whites became a brutal reality when Nat Turner staged the bloodiest slave rebellion in southern history. It made him the most famous slave insurgent America had ever known, the victim of a violent system that struck back with retributive violence. His rebellion illustrates a profound truth. As black historian Lerone Bennett says, “Nat Turner reminds us that oppression is a kind of violence which pays in coins of its own minting. He reminds us that the first and greatest of all gospels is this: that individuals and systems always reap what they sow.”

The following article attempts to transport you back into Nat Turner's time so that you might suffer with him and see the world through his eyes. That way you might gain melancholy insight into what it was like to be a slave. You might understand why Turner finally chose the sword as his instrument of liberation, and why he set out to fulfill the injunction in Exodus that "thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning." By placing Turner and his revolt in proper historical context, the article seeks to convey how the insurrection shocked the slave South to its foundations, exacerbated sectional tensions, and pointed the way toward civil war thirty years later.

GLOSSARY

BLUNT, SIMON The last plantation attacked by Nat Turner's insurgents. Blunt's own slaves helped him repel Nat's attack.

FLOYD, JOHN Governor of Virginia at the time of Nat Turner's insurrection and one of the first Virginians to blame Nat's rebellion on northern abolitionists.

FRANCIS, WILL One of Nat Turner's confederates, a violent and angry slave who did much of the killing, only to be killed instead when Turner's force attacked Simon Blunt's plantation.

GRAY, THOMAS Jerusalem lawyer and slaveholder who interrogated Nat Turner in his prison cell and published his "confession," which detailed the genesis and execution of the insurrection.

MOORE, PUTNAM When Thomas Moore died, his nine-year old son, Putnam, became Nat Turner's legal owner.

MOORE, THOMAS Nat Turner's third owner. Moore beat him in 1828 when Turner announced that the slaves ought to be free and would be "one day or other."

SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY Obscure Virginia county on the North Carolina border where Nat Turner lived all his life and launched his insurrection.

TRAVIS, JOSEPH AND SALLY After Thomas Moore's death, his widow, Sally, married Joseph Travis and took Putnam and the Moore slaves, including Nat Turner, to live at the Travis homestead. The Travis family was the first to die in Turner's insurrection.

TURNER, BENJAMIN Nat's first owner and the source of his last name. All slaves had to take the last names of their owners; when they were sold, they had to assume the last names of their new owners. It is a measure of the respect Nat Turner commanded that he retained his initial last name despite being sold to Thomas Moore.

WHITEHEAD, MARGARET The only white person Nat Turner himself killed during the revolt.

Some seventy miles below Richmond, in the southeastern part of Virginia along the North Carolina border, lay a little-known backwater called Southampton County. It was a rolling, densely forested area, with farms, plantations, and crossroad villages carved out of the woods. In 1831 most of the farms and smaller plantations were hardly

distinguishable from one another—the houses were charmless, two-story rectangles, surrounded by haystacks and corn and cotton patches. Around the "big house" were various satellite sheds, a one-room kitchen, a barn, and maybe some slave cabins. Out in back were pungent outhouses poised on the edge of a slope or a steep ravine. A typical homestead had a menagerie of dogs, chickens, hogs, cows, mules, and maybe a couple of horses. And it had an apple orchard, too, for the succulent fruit not only commanded a fair price at market, but was the source of Southampton's most cherished product—an apple

Stephen B. Oates, "The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion," adapted from Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

brandy potent enough to make a sailor reel. Not a homestead was complete without a brandy still, and the county's most popular citizens were those with well-stocked cellars.

The county seat or "county town" was Jerusalem, a smoky cluster of buildings where pigs rooted in the streets and old-timers spat tobacco juice in the shade of the courthouse. Consisting of some two thousand souls, Jerusalem lay on the forested bank of the Notoway River some fifty or sixty miles from Norfolk and the Atlantic Ocean. To the west of Jerusalem was Bethlehem Crossroads and to the southwest a loose cluster of homesteads called Cross Keys. Such villages were the nerve centers of Southampton's social life—here on Sundays and holidays white families gathered to hear preaching, dance to fiddles, enjoy a communal barbecue, joke, gossip, cheer on a shooting match or a horse race, get drunk, talk about the weather or argue about politics in their distinct Virginia accent ("hoose" for house). Most political discussions focused on local issues, for Southampton had no newspapers of its own and people here lived in considerable isolation from the outside world. What news they received came mainly from travelers and express riders, who brought mail in from Petersburg, Norfolk, and Murfreesboro down in North Carolina.

Although Southampton was a remote, generally lackluster neighborhood, it did have a planter class and in that respect was no different from most other Southern tidewater communities. If you had to own at least 20 slaves to rank as a planter, then 96 of Southampton's 734 slaveholders—about 13 percent—could claim that coveted distinction. Some fifteen men, with names like Newsom, Worrell, and Briggs, owned fifty slaves or more—which theoretically classified them as aristocrats. And Thomas Ridley, old man Urquhart, and John Kelly possessed large plantations with 145 to 179 Negroes apiece, which, in terms of slave wealth, placed *them* among the Old South's elite. Evidently these backwater squires had inherited or married into most of their possessions and had bought the rest. Some enterprising fellows had even constructed homes that were impressive by

Southampton standards—with columned front porches and imported finery—and now found themselves hard-pressed to meet their mortgage payments. Still, Southampton's large planters lacked the tradition and prestige—and the majestic, landscaped mansions—that characterized Virginia's established gentry, especially the patricians along the great tidewater rivers in the more eastern and northeastern counties.

As was true of the rest of Dixie, most of Southampton's slaveowners resided on modest farms, some fighting to climb up the social and economic scale, others scratching out a hardscrabble existence from their crops and livestock. What is more, over one-third of Southampton's white families owned no slaves, none at all, and the average for the entire county was ten or eleven per slaveowning family. Many small slaveholders could not afford overseers and worked alongside their Negroes in the orchards and cotton patches. Though Virginia was no longer in a depression in 1831, the state had suffered over the past decade, as soil exhaustion and ruinous farm prices—particularly in the early 1820s—had plagued farmers and planters alike. In Southampton, assessed land values had declined sharply during the last twenty years, and a number of whites had moved on to new cotton lands in Georgia and Alabama, so that the county's population was now almost 60 percent black, with some 6,500 whites and 9,500 Negroes residing there. While most of the blacks were still enslaved, an unusual number—some 1,745, in fact—were "free persons of color." Only three counties in all of tidewater Virginia had more free Negroes than that.

By southern white standards, enlightened benevolence did exist in Southampton County—and it existed in the rest of the state as well. Virginians liked to boast that slavery was not so harsh in the Old Dominion as it was on the brutal cotton plantations in the Deep South. Sure, Virginians conceded, there might be occasional mistreatment in the form of a sadistic overseer or a licentious poor white who hankered after slave girls, but respectable Virginians convinced themselves that all was sweetness and sunshine in their master-slave relations. Why, on Sundays



Deep in the woods near Cabin Pond, Nat and his confederates, all field slaves, work out their plans for rebellion. From an old print published by J. D. Torrey, New York. (Culver Pictures)

Virginia masters even took their darkies to white churches, where they got to sit at the back or up in the balcony, murmuring a rehearsed "Amen" from time to time. After church, the slaves often gathered in a field—a shack or a shed—to conduct their own praise meetings, to shout and sing in an arcane language that aroused little interest among picnicking whites, who dismissed the noise as innocuous "nigger gabble."

Southampton whites, too, were pretty lax toward their slaves, allowing them to gather for religious purposes, visit other farms, and even travel to Jerusalem on market Saturdays to see relatives and friends. After all, what was there to worry about? Southampton's slaves were well treated, whites said, and apart from a few solitary incidents the county had never had any severe slave troubles. True, the Negroes did get a bit carried away in their praise meetings these days, with much too much clapping and singing. And true, some white evangelists were coming in from outside the county and "ranting" about equality at local revivals. But generally things

were quiet and unchanged in this tidewater neighborhood, where time seemed to stand as still as a windless summer day.

But all was not so serene as whites liked to believe. For a storm was brewing in Southampton's backwoods, in the slave cabins northwest of Cross Keys. It blew up with shattering suddenness, an explosion of black rage that struck Southampton County like a tornado roaring out of the Southern night. In the early morning hours of August 22, 1831, a band of slave insurgents, led by a black mystic called Nat Turner, burst out of the forests with guns and axes, plunging southeastern Virginia—and much of the rest of the South—into convulsions of fear and racial violence. It turned out to be the bloodiest slave revolt in Southern history, one that was to have a profound and irrevocable impact on the destinies of Southern whites and blacks alike.

Afterward, white authorities described him as a small man with "distinct African features." Though his shoulders were broad from work in the fields, he was short, slender, and a little knock-kneed, with thin hair, a complexion like black pearl, and large, deep-set eyes. He wore a mustache and cultivated a tuft of whiskers under his lower lip. Before that fateful August day whites who knew Nat Turner thought him harmless, even though he was intelligent and did gabble on about strange religious powers. Among the slaves, though, he enjoyed a powerful influence as an exhorter and self-proclaimed prophet.

He was born in 1800, the property of Benjamin Turner of Southampton County and the son of two strong-minded parents. Tradition has it that his African-born mother threatened to kill him rather than see him grow up in bondage. His father eventually escaped to the North, but not before he had helped inculcate an enormous sense of self-importance in his son. Both parents praised Nat for his brilliance and extraordinary imagination; his mother even claimed that he could recall episodes that happened before his birth—a power that others insisted only the Almighty could have given him. His mother and father both told him that he was intended for some

great purpose, that he would surely become a prophet. Nat was also influenced by his grandmother, who along with his white masters taught him to pray and to take pride in his superior intelligence. He learned to read and write with great ease, prompting those who knew him to remark that he had too much sense to be raised in bondage—he “would never be of any service to any one as a slave,” one of them said.

In 1810 Benjamin Turner died, and Nat became the property of Turner’s oldest son Samuel. Under Samuel Turner’s permissive supervision Nat exploited every opportunity to improve his knowledge: he studied white children’s school books and experimented in making paper and gunpowder. But it was religion that interested him the most. He attended Negro religious meetings, where the slaves cried out in ecstasy and sang hymns that expressed their longing for a better life. He listened transfixed as black exhorters preached from the Bible with stabbing gestures, singing out in a rhythmic language that was charged with emotion and vivid imagery. He studied the Bible, too, practically memorizing the books of the Old Testament, and grew to manhood with the words of the prophets roaring in his ears.

Evidently Nat came of age a bit confused if not resentful. Both whites and blacks had said he was too intelligent to be raised a slave; yet here he was, fully grown and still in bondage. Obviously he felt betrayed by false hopes. Obviously he thought he should be liberated like the large number of free blacks who lived in Southampton County and who were not nearly so gifted as he. Still enslaved as a man, he zealously cultivated his image as a prophet, aloof, austere, and mystical. As he said later in an oral autobiographical sketch, “Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting myself to fasting and prayer.”

Remote, introspective, Turner had religious fantasies in which the Holy Spirit seemed to speak to him as it had to the prophets of old. “Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven,” the Spirit told him, “and all things shall be added unto you.” Convinced that he

“was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty,” Turner told his fellow slaves about his communion with the Spirit. “And they believed,” Turner recalled, “and said my wisdom came from God.” Pleased with their response, he began to prepare them for some unnamed mission. He also started preaching at black religious gatherings and soon rose to prominence as a leading exhorter in the slave church. Although never ordained and never officially a member of any church, he was accepted as a Baptist preacher in the slave community, and once he even baptized a white man in a swampy pond. There can be little doubt that the slave church nourished Turner’s self-esteem and his desire for independence, for it was not only a center for underground slave plottings against the master class, but a focal point for an entire alternate culture—a subterranean culture that the slaves sought to construct beyond the white man’s control. Moreover, Turner’s status as a slave preacher gave him considerable freedom of movement, so that he came to know most of Southampton County intimately.

Sometime around 1821 Turner disappeared. His master had put him under an overseer, who may have whipped him, and he fled for his freedom as his father had done. But thirty days later he voluntarily returned. The other slaves were astonished. No fugitive ever came back on his own. “And the negroes found fault, and murmured against me,” Turner recounted later, “saying that if they had my sense they would not serve any master in the world.” But in his mind Turner did not serve any earthly master. His master was Jehovah—the angry and vengeful God of ancient Israel—and it was Jehovah, he insisted, who had chastened him and brought him back to bondage.

At about this time Nat married. Evidently his wife was a young slave named Cherry who lived on Samuel Turner’s place. But in 1822 Samuel Turner died, and they were sold to different masters—Cherry to Giles Reese and Nat to Thomas Moore. Although they were not far apart and still saw each other from time to time, their separation was nevertheless a painful example of the wretched privations

that slavery placed on black people, even here in mellowed Southampton County.

As a perceptive man with a prodigious knowledge of the Bible, Turner was more than aware of the hypocrisies and contradictions loose in this Christian area, where whites gloried in the teachings of Jesus and yet discriminated against the "free coloreds" and kept the other blacks in chains. Here slave owners bragged about their benevolence (in Virginia they took care of their "niggers") and yet broke up families, sold Negroes off to whip-happy slave traders when money was scarce, and denied intelligent and skilled blacks something even the most debauched and useless poor white enjoyed: freedom. Increasingly embittered about his condition and that of his people, his imagination fired to incandescence by prolonged fasting and Old Testament prayers, Turner began to have apocalyptic visions and bloody fantasies in the fields and woods southwest of Jerusalem. "I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle," he declared later, "and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, 'Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it.'" He was awestruck, he recalled, but what did the voice mean? What must he bare? He withdrew from his fellow slaves and prayed for a revelation; and one day when he was plowing in the field, he thought the Spirit called out, "Behold me as I stand in the Heavens," and Turner looked up and saw forms of men there in a variety of attitudes, "and there were lights in the sky to which the children of darkness gave other names than what they really were—for they were the lights of the Saviour's hands, stretched forth from east to west, even as they extended on the cross on Calvary for the redemption of sinners."

Certain that Judgment Day was fast approaching, Turner strove to attain "true holiness" and "the true knowledge of faith." And once he had them, once he was "made perfect," then the Spirit showed him other miracles. While working in the field, he said, he discovered drops of blood on the corn. In the woods he found leaves with hieroglyphic characters

and numbers etched on them; other leaves contained forms of men—some drawn in blood—like the figures in the sky. He told his fellow slaves about these signs—they were simply astounded—and claimed that the Spirit had endowed him with a special knowledge of the seasons, the rotation of the planets, and the operation of the tides. He acquired an even greater reputation among the county's slaves, many of whom thought he could control the weather and heal disease. He told his followers that clearly something large was about to happen, that he was soon to fulfill "the great promise that had been made to me."

But he still did not know what his mission was. Then on May 12, 1828, "I heard a loud noise in the heavens," Turner remembered, "and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent." Now at last it was clear. By signs in the heavens Jehovah would show him when to commence the great work, whereupon "I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons." Until then he should keep his lips sealed.

But his work was too momentous for him to remain entirely silent. He announced to Thomas Moore that the slaves ought to be free and would be "one day or other." Moore, of course, regarded this as dangerous talk from a slave and gave Turner a thrashing.

In 1829 a convention met in Virginia to draft a new state constitution, and there was talk among the slaves—who communicated along a slave grapevine—that they might be liberated. Their hopes were crushed, though, when the convention emphatically rejected emancipation and restricted suffrage to whites only. There was also a strong backlash against antislavery publications thought to be infiltrating from the North, one of which—David Walker's *Appeal*—actually called on the slaves to revolt. In reaction the Virginia legislature enacted a law against teaching slaves to read and write. True, it was not yet rigorously enforced, but from the blacks' viewpoint slavery seemed more entrenched in "enlightened" Virginia than ever.

There is no evidence that Turner ever read anti-slavery publications, but he was certainly sensitive to the despair of his people. Still, Jehovah gave him no further signs, and he was carried along in the ebb and flow of ordinary life. Moore had died in 1828, and Turner had become the legal property of Moore's nine-year-old son—something that must have humiliated him. In 1829 a local wheelwright, Joseph Travis, married Moore's widow and soon moved into her house near the Cross Keys, a village located southwest of Jerusalem. Still known as Nat Turner even though he had changed owners several times, Nat considered Travis "a kind master" and later said that Travis "placed the greatest confidence in me."

In February, 1831, there was an eclipse of the sun. The sign Turner had been waiting for—could there be any doubt? Removing the seal from his lips, he gathered around him four slaves in whom he had complete trust—Hark, Henry, Nelson, and Sam—and confided what he was called to do. They would commence "the work of death" on July 4, whose connotation Turner clearly understood. But they formed and rejected so many plans that his mind was affected. He was seized with dread. He fell sick, and Independence Day came and passed.

On August 13 there was another sign. Because of some atmospheric disturbance the sun grew so dim that it could be looked at directly. Then it seemed to change colors—now pale green, now blue, now white—and there was much excitement and consternation in many parts of the eastern United States. By afternoon the sun was like an immense ball of polished silver, and the air was moist and hazy. Then a black spot could be seen, apparently on the sun's surface—a phenomenon that greatly aroused the slaves in southeastern Virginia. For Turner the black spot was unmistakable proof that God wanted him to move. With awakened resolution he told his men that "as the black spot passed over the sun, so shall the blacks pass over the earth."

It was Sunday, August 21, deep in the woods near the Travis house at a place called Cabin Pond. Around a crackling fire Turner's confederates feasted

on roast pig and apple brandy. With them were two new recruits—Jack, one of Hark's cronies, and Will, a powerful man who intended to gain his freedom or die in the attempt. Around midafternoon Turner himself made a dramatic appearance, and in the glare of pine-knot torches they finally made their plans. They would rise that night and "kill all the white people." It was a propitious time to begin, because many whites of the militia were away at a camp meeting. The revolt would be so swift and so terrible that the whites would be too panic-stricken to fight back. Until they had sufficient recruits and equipment, the insurgents would annihilate everybody in their path—women and children included. When one of the slaves complained about their small number (there were only seven of them, after all), Turner was quick to reassure him. He had deliberately avoided an extensive plot involving a lot of slaves. He knew that blacks had "frequently attempted similar things," but their plans had "leaked out." Turner intended for his revolt to happen completely without warning. The "march of destruction," he explained, "should be the first news of the insurrection," whereupon slaves and free blacks alike would rise up and join him. He did not say what their ultimate objective was, but possibly he wanted to fight his way into the Great Dismal Swamp some twenty miles to the east. This immense, snake-filled quagmire had long been a haven for fugitives, and Turner may have planned to establish a slave stronghold there from which to launch punitive raids against Virginia and North Carolina. On the other hand, he may well have had nothing in mind beyond the extermination of every white on the ten-mile route to Jerusalem. There are indications that he thought God would guide him after the revolt began, just as He had directed Gideon against the Midianites. Certainly Turner's command of unremitting carnage was that of the Almighty, who had said through his prophet Ezekiel: "Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children, and women. . . ."

The slaves talked and schemed through the evening. Night came on. Around two in the morning of August 22 they left the woods, by-passed Giles

Reese's farm, where Cherry lived, and headed for the Travis homestead, the first target in their crusade.

All was still at the Travis house. In the darkness the insurgents gathered about the cider press, and all drank except Turner, who never touched liquor. Then they moved across the yard with their axes. Hark placed a ladder against the house, and Turner, armed with a hatchet, climbed up and disappeared through a second-story window. In a moment he unbarred the door, and the slaves spread through the house without a sound. The others wanted Turner the prophet, Turner the black messiah, to strike the first blow and kill Joseph Travis. With Will close behind, Turner entered Travis' bedroom and made his way to the white man's bed. Turner swung his hatchet—a wild blow that glanced off Travis' head and brought him out of bed yelling for his wife. But with a sure killer's instinct Will moved in and hacked Travis to death with his axe. In minutes Will and the others had slaughtered the four whites they found in the house, including Mrs. Travis and young Putnam Moore, Turner's legal owner. With Putnam's death Turner felt that at last, after thirty years in bondage, he was free.

The rebels gathered up a handful of old muskets and followed "General Nat" out to the barn. There Turner paraded his men about, leading them through every military maneuver he knew. Not all of them, however, were proud of their work. Jack sank to his knees with his head in his hands and said he was sick. But Hark made him get up and forced him along as they set out across the field to the next farm. Along the way somebody remembered the Travis baby. Will and Henry returned and killed it in its cradle.

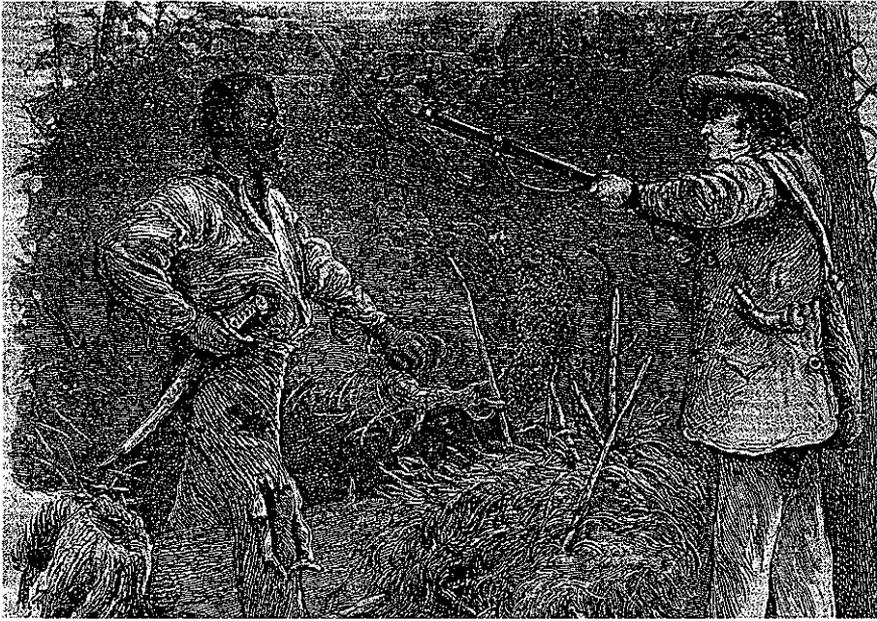
And so it went throughout that malignant night, as the rebels took farm after farm by surprise. They used no firearms, in order not to arouse the countryside, instead stabbing and decapitating their victims. Although they confiscated horses, weapons, and brandy, they took only what was necessary to continue the struggle, and they committed no rapes. They even spared a few homesteads, one because Turner believed the poor white inhabitants "thought

no better of themselves than they did of negroes." By dawn on Monday there were fifteen insurgents—nine on horses—and they were armed with a motley assortment of guns, clubs, swords, and axes. Turner himself now carried a light dress sword, but for some mysterious reason (a fatal irresolution? the dread again?) he had killed nobody yet.

At Elizabeth Turner's place, which the slaves stormed at sunrise, the prophet tried once again to kill. They broke into the house, and there, in the middle of the room, too frightened to move or cry out, stood Mrs. Turner and a neighbor named Mrs. Newsome. Nat knew Elizabeth Turner very well, for she was the widow of his second master, Samuel Turner. While Will attacked her with his axe the prophet took Mrs. Newsome's hand and hit her over the head with his sword. But evidently he could not bring himself to kill her. Finally Will moved him aside and chopped her to death as methodically as though he were cutting wood.

With the sun low in the east, Turner sent a group on foot to another farm while he and Will led the horsemen at a gallop to Caty Whitehead's place. They surrounded the house in a rush, but not before several people fled into the garden. Turner chased after somebody, but it turned out to be a slave girl, as terrified as the whites, and he let her go. All around him, all over the Whitehead farm, there were scenes of unspeakable violence. He saw Will drag Mrs. Whitehead kicking and screaming out of the house and almost sever her head from her body. Running around the house, Turner came upon young Margaret Whitehead hiding under a cellar cap between two chimneys. She ran crying for her life, and Turner set out after her—a wild chase against the hot August sun. He overtook the girl in a field and hit her again and again with his sword, but she would not die. In desperation he picked up a fence rail and beat her to death. Finally he had killed someone. He was to kill no one else.

After the Whitehead massacre the insurgents united briefly and then divided again, those on foot moving in one direction and Turner and the mounted slaves in another. The riders moved across the fields, kicking



On October 30, 1831, a Sunday, a white named Benjamin Phipps accidentally discovered Nat Turner in his hideout near

Cabin Pond. Since the white man had a loaded shotgun, Turner had no choice but to throw down his sword. (Brown Brothers)

their horses and mules faster and faster, until at last they raced down the lane to Richard Porter's house, scattering dogs and chickens as they went. But the Porters had fled—forewarned by their own slaves that a revolt was under way. Turner knew that the alarm was spreading now, knew that the militia would soon be mobilizing, so he set out alone to retrieve the other column. While he was gone Will took the cavalry and raided Nathaniel Francis' homestead. Young Francis was Will's owner, but he could not have been a harsh master: several free blacks voluntarily lived on his farm. Francis was not home, and his pregnant young wife survived Will's onslaught only because a slave concealed her in the attic. After killing the overseer and Francis' two nephews Will and his men raced on to another farm, and another, and then overran John Barrow's place on the Barrow Road. Old man Barrow fought back manfully while his wife escaped in the woods, but the insurgents overwhelmed him and slit his throat. As a tribute to his courage they

wrapped his body in a quilt and left a plug of tobacco on his chest.

Meanwhile Turner rode chaotically around the countryside, chasing after one column and then the other, almost always reaching the farms after his scattered troops had done the killing and gone. Eventually he found both columns waiting for him at another pillaged homestead, took charge again, and sent them down the Barrow Road, which intersected the main highway to Jerusalem. They were forty strong now and all mounted. Many of the new recruits had joined up eager "to kill all the white people." But others had been forced to come along as though they were hostages. A Negro later testified that several slaves—among them three teen-age boys—"were constantly guarded by negroes with guns who were ordered to shoot them if they attempted to escape."

On the Barrow Road, Turner's strategy was to put his twenty most dependable men in front and send them galloping down on the homesteads before

anybody could escape. But the cry of insurrection had preceded them, and many families had already escaped to nearby Jerusalem, throwing the village into pandemonium. By midmorning church bells were tolling the terrible news—*insurrection, insurrection*—and shouting men were riding through the countryside in a desperate effort to get the militia together before the slaves overran Jerusalem itself.

As Turner's column moved relentlessly toward Jerusalem one Levi Waller, having heard that the blacks had risen, summoned his children from a nearby schoolhouse (some of the other children came running too) and tried to load his guns. But before he could do so, Turner's advance horsemen swept into his yard, a whirlwind of axes and swords, and chased Waller into some tall weeds. Waller managed to escape, but not before he saw the blacks cut down his wife and children. One small girl also escaped by crawling up a dirt chimney, scarcely daring to breathe as the insurgents decapitated the other children—ten in all—and threw their bodies in a pile.

Turner had stationed himself at the rear of his little army and did not participate in these or any other killings along the Barrow Road. He never explained why. He had been fasting for several days and may well have been too weak to try any more killing himself. Or maybe as God's prophet he preferred to let Will and the eight or nine other lieutenants do the slaughtering. All he said about it afterward was that he "sometimes got in sight in time to see the work of death completed" and that he paused to view the bodies "in silent satisfaction" before riding on.

Around noon on Monday the insurgents reached the Jerusalem highway, and Turner soon joined them. Behind them lay a zigzag path of unredeemable destruction: some fifteen homesteads sacked and approximately sixty whites slain. By now the rebels amounted to fifty or sixty—including three or four free blacks. But even at its zenith Turner's army showed signs of disintegration. A few reluctant slaves had already escaped or deserted. And many others were roaring drunk, so drunk they could scarcely ride

their horses, let alone do any fighting. To make matters worse, many of the confiscated muskets were broken or too rusty to fire.

Turner resolved to march on Jerusalem at once and seize all the guns and powder he could find there. But a half mile up the road he stopped at the Parker farm, because some of his men had relatives and friends there. When the insurgents did not return, Turner went after them—and found his men not in the slave quarters but down in Parker's brandy cellar. He ordered them back to the highway at once.

On the way back they met a party of armed men—whites. There were about eighteen of them, as far as Turner could make out. They had already routed his small guard at the gate and were now advancing toward the Parker house. With renewed zeal Turner rallied his remaining troops and ordered an attack. Yelling at the top of their lungs, wielding axes, clubs, and gun butts, the Negroes drove the whites back into Parker's cornfield. But their advantage was short-lived. White reinforcements arrived, and more were on the way from nearby Jerusalem. Regrouping in the cornfield, the whites counterattacked, throwing the rebels back in confusion. In the fighting some of Turner's best men fell wounded, though none of them died. Several insurgents, too drunk to fight any more, fled pell-mell into the woods.

If Turner had often seemed irresolute earlier in the revolt, he was now undaunted. Even though his force was considerably reduced, he still wanted to storm Jerusalem. He led his men away from the main highway, which was blocked with militia, and took them along a back road, planning to cross the Cypress Bridge and strike the village from the rear. But the bridge was crawling with armed whites. In desperation the blacks set out to find reinforcements: they fell back to the south and then veered north again, picking up new recruits as they moved. They raided a few more farms, too, only to find them deserted, and finally encamped for the night near the slave quarters on Ridley's plantation.

All Monday night news of the revolt spread beyond Southampton County as express riders carried

the alarm up to Petersburg and from there to the capitol in Richmond. Governor John Floyd, fearing a statewide uprising, alerted the militia and sent cavalry, infantry, and artillery units to the stricken county. Federal troops from Fortress Monroe were on the way, too, and other volunteers and militia outfits were marching from contiguous counties in Virginia and North Carolina. Soon over three thousand armed whites were in Southampton County, and hundreds more were mobilizing.

With whites swarming the countryside, Turner and his lieutenants did not know what to do. During the night an alarm had stampeded their new recruits, so that by Tuesday morning they had only twenty men left. Frantically they set out for Dr. Simon Blunt's farm to get volunteers—and rode straight into an ambush. Whites barricaded in the house opened fire on them at pointblank range, killing one or more insurgents and capturing several others—among them Hark Travis. Blunt's own slaves, armed with farm tools, helped in the defense and captured a few rebels themselves.

Repulsed at Blunt's farm, Turner led a handful of the faithful back toward the Cross Keys, still hoping to gather reinforcements. But the signs were truly ominous, for armed whites were everywhere. At last the militia overtook Turner's little band and in a final, desperate skirmish killed Will and scattered the rest. Turner himself, alone and in deep anguish, escaped to the vicinity of the Travis farm and hid in a hole under some fence rails.

By Tuesday evening a full-scale manhunt was under way in southeastern Virginia and North Carolina as armed whites prowled the woods and swamps in search of fugitive rebels and alleged collaborators. They chased the blacks down with howling dogs, killing those who resisted—and many of them resisted zealously—and dragging others back to Jerusalem to stand trial in the county court. One free black insurgent committed suicide rather than be taken by white men. Within a week nearly all the bona fide rebels except Turner had either been executed or imprisoned, but not before white

vigilantes—and some militiamen—had perpetrated barbarities on more than a score of innocent blacks. Outraged by the atrocities committed on whites, vigilantes rounded up Negroes in the Cross Keys and decapitated them. Another vigilante gang in North Carolina not only beheaded several blacks but placed their skulls on poles, where they remained for days. In all directions whites took Negroes from their shacks and tortured, shot, and burned them to death and then mutilated their corpses in ways that witnesses refused to describe. No one knows how many innocent Negroes died in this reign of terror—at least a hundred twenty, probably more. Finally the militia commander of Southampton County issued a proclamation that any further outrages would be dealt with according to the articles of war. Many whites publicly regretted these atrocities but argued that they were the inevitable results of slave insurrection. Another revolt, they said, would end with the extermination of every black in the region.

Although Turner's uprising ended on Tuesday, August 24, reports of additional insurrections swept over the South long afterward, and dozens of communities from Virginia to Alabama were seized with hysteria. In North Carolina rumors flew that slave armies had been seen on the highways, that one—maybe led by Turner himself—had burned Wilmington, butchered all the inhabitants, and was now marching on the state capital. The hysteria was even worse in Virginia, where reports of concerted slave rebellions and demands for men and guns swamped the governor's office. For a time it seemed that thousands of slaves had risen, that Virginia and perhaps the entire South would soon be ablaze. But Governor Floyd kept his head, examined the reports carefully, and concluded that no such widespread insurrection had taken place. Actually no additional uprisings had happened anywhere. Out of blind panic whites in many parts of the South had mobilized the militia, chased after imaginary insurgents, and jailed or executed still more innocent blacks. Working in cooperation with other political and military authorities in Virginia and North Carolina,

Floyd did all he could to quell the excitement, to reassure the public that the slaves were quiet now. Still, the governor did not think the Turner revolt was the work of a solitary fanatic. Behind it, he believed, was a conspiracy of Yankee agitators and black preachers—especially black preachers. “The whole of that massacre in Southampton is the work of these Preachers,” he declared, and demanded that they be suppressed.

Meanwhile the “great bandit chieftain,” as the newspapers called him, was still at large. For more than two months Turner managed to elude white patrols, hiding out most of the time near Cabin Pond where the revolt had begun. Hunted by a host of aroused whites (there were various rewards totalling eleven hundred dollars on his head), Turner considered giving himself up and once got within two miles of Jerusalem before turning back. Finally on Sunday, October 30, a white named Benjamin Phipps accidentally discovered him in another hide-out near Cabin Pond. Since the man had a loaded shotgun, Turner had no choice but to throw down his sword.

The next day, with lynch mobs crying for his head, a white guard hurried Turner up to Jerusalem to stand trial. By now he was resigned to his fate as the will of Almighty God and was entirely fearless and unrepentant. When a couple of court justices examined him that day, he stated emphatically that *he* had conceived and directed the slaughter of all those white people (even though he had killed only Margaret Whitehead) and announced that God had endowed him with extraordinary powers. The justices ordered this “fanatic” locked up in the same small wooden jail where the other captured rebels had been incarcerated.

On November 1 one Thomas Gray, an elderly Jerusalem lawyer and slaveholder, came to interrogate Turner as he lay in his cell “clothed with rags and covered with chains.” In Gray’s opinion the public was anxious to learn the facts about the insurrection—for whites in Southampton could not fathom why their slaves would revolt. What Gray wanted was to take down and publish a confession from Turner that

would tell the public the truth about why the rebellion had happened. It appears that Gray had already gathered a wealth of information about the outbreak from other prisoners, some of whom he had defended as a court-appointed counsel. Evidently he had also written unsigned newspaper accounts of the affair, reporting in one that whites had located Turner’s wife and lashed her until she surrendered his papers (remarkable papers, papers with hieroglyphics on them and sketches of the Crucifixion and the sun). According to Gray and to other sources as well, Turner over a period of three days gave him a voluntary and authentic confession about the genesis and execution of the revolt, recounting his religious visions in graphic detail and contending again that he was a prophet of Almighty God. “Do you not find yourself mistaken now?” Gray asked. Turner replied testily, “Was not Christ crucified?” Turner insisted that the uprising was local in origin but warned that other slaves might see signs and act as he had done. By the end of the confession Turner was in high spirits, perfectly “willing to suffer the fate that awaits me.” Although Gray considered him “a gloomy fanatic,” he thought Turner was one of the most articulate men he had ever met. And Turner could be frightening. When, in a burst of enthusiasm, he spoke of the killings and raised his manacled hands toward heaven, “I looked on him,” Gray said, “and my blood curdled in my veins.”

On November 5, with William C. Parker acting as his counsel, Turner came to trial in Jerusalem. The court, of course, found him guilty of committing insurrection and sentenced him to hang. Turner, though, insisted that he was not guilty because he did not feel so. On November 11 he went to his death in resolute silence. In addition to Turner, the county court tried some forty-eight other Negroes on various charges of conspiracy, insurrection, and treason. In all, eighteen blacks—including one woman—were convicted and hanged. Ten others were convicted and “transported”—presumably out of the United States.

But the consequences of the Turner revolt did not end with public hangings in Jerusalem. For southern

whites the uprising seemed a monstrous climax to a whole decade of ominous events, a decade of abominable tariffs and economic panics, of obstreperous antislavery activities, and of growing slave unrest and insurrection plots, beginning with the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in Charleston in 1822 and culminating now in the worst insurrection Southerners had ever known. Desperately needing to blame somebody besides themselves for Nat Turner, Southerners linked the revolt to some sinister Yankee-abolitionist plot to destroy their cherished way of life. Southern zealots declared that the antislavery movement, gathering momentum in the North throughout the 1820's, had now burst into a full-blown crusade against the South. In January, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison had started publishing *The Liberator* in Boston, demanding in bold, strident language that the slaves be immediately and unconditionally emancipated. If Garrison's rhetoric shocked Southerners, even more disturbing was the fact that about eight months after the appearance of *The Liberator* Nat Turner embarked on his bloody crusade—something southern politicians and newspapers refused to accept as mere coincidence. They charged that Garrison was behind the insurrection, that it was his "bloodthirsty" invective that had incited Turner to violence. Never mind that there was no evidence that Turner had ever heard of *The Liberator*; never mind that Garrison categorically denied any connection with the revolt, saying that he and his abolitionist followers were Christian pacifists who wanted to free the slaves through moral suasion. From 1831 on, northern abolitionism and slave rebellion were inextricably associated in the southern mind.

But if Virginians blamed the insurrection on northern abolitionism, many of them defended emancipation itself as the only way to prevent further violence. In fact, for several months in late 1831 and early 1832 Virginians engaged in a momentous public debate over the feasibility of manumission. Out of the western part of the state, where antislavery and anti-Negro sentiment had long been smoldering, came petitions demanding that Virginia eradicate the "accursed," "evil" slave system and colonize all blacks at state

expense. Only by removing the entire black population, the petitions argued, could future revolts be avoided. Newspapers also discussed the idea of emancipation and colonization, prompting one to announce that "Nat Turner and the blood of his innocent victims have conquered the silence of fifty years." The debate moved into the Virginia legislature, too, and early in 1832 proslavery and antislavery orators harangued one another in an unprecedented legislative struggle over emancipation. In the end most delegates concluded that colonization was too costly and too complicated to carry out. And since they were not about to manumit the blacks and leave them as free men in a white man's country, they rejected emancipation. Indeed, they went on to revise and implement the slave codes in order to restrict blacks so stringently that they could never mount another revolt. The modified codes not only strengthened the patrol and militia systems, but sharply curtailed the rights of free blacks and all but eliminated slave schools, slave religious meetings, and slave preachers. For Turner had taught white Virginians a hard lesson about what might happen if they gave slaves enough education and religion to think for themselves.

In the wake of the Turner revolt, the rise of the abolitionists, and the Virginia debates over slavery, the other southern states also expanded their patrol and militia systems and increased the severity of their slave codes. What followed was the Great Reaction of the 1830's and 1840's, during which the South, threatened it seemed by internal and external enemies, became a closed, martial society determined to preserve its slave-based civilization at whatever cost. If Southerners had once apologized for slavery as a necessary evil, they now trumpeted that institution as a positive good—"the greatest of all the great blessings," as James H. Hammond phrased it, "which a kind providence has bestowed." Southern postmasters set about confiscating abolitionist literature, lest these "incendiary" tracts invite the slaves to violence. Some states actually passed sedition laws and other restrictive measures that prohibited Negroes and whites alike from criticizing slavery. And slave

owners all across the South tightened up slave discipline, refusing to let blacks visit other plantations and threatening to hang any slave who even looked rebellious. By the 1840's the Old South had devised such an oppressive slave system that organized insurrection was all but impossible.

Even so, southern whites in the ante-bellum period never escaped the haunting fear that somewhere, maybe even in their own slave quarters, another Nat Turner was plotting to rise up and slit their throats. They never forgot him. His name became for them a symbol of terror and violent retribution.

But for ante-bellum blacks—and for their descendants—the name of Nat Turner took on a profoundly different connotation. He became a legendary black hero who broke his chains and murdered white people because slavery had murdered Negroes. Turner, said an elderly black man in Southampton County only a few years ago, was "God's man. He was a man for war, and for legal rights, and for freedom."

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- 1 Why did Nat Turner decide to strike back at the slave system with retributive violence? Was he abused as a slave? What role did the Old Testament, the slave church, the slave underground, and extensive fasting play in the genesis of Turner's insurrection? Do you believe that he actually heard wind voices in the trees, saw angels in the sky, and heard the call of Jehovah?
- 2 Why did Turner command great respect in the slave community? Why did he exclude privileged house slaves from his plot? Who were his confederates, and why did they agree to follow him? When did he finally decide to move? What do you think was Turner's ultimate objective?
- 3 The details of the revolt—women hacked to death with axes, children decapitated—are grisly indeed. But the slave system was a brutal system that daily maimed and murdered its victims. In light of that, do you think Turner's actions were justifiable?
- 4 Why did most African Americans in Southampton County refuse to join Turner's revolt? Why do you think it failed? Or, to put it another way, how did Nat and his followers, hopelessly outnumbered and facing the tremendous firepower of the slave system, manage to get as far as they did?
- 5 Why did the Virginia legislators debate and then decide against abolishing slavery in their state? Who or what did the governor and other white leaders blame for the insurrection? How could they not put the blame on the cruelties of the slave system? In what ways do you think that the southern reaction to the insurrection fueled sectional tensions and precipitated the Civil War?