

Breathing new life into a story that has been rife with controversy and prejudice for more than two centuries, the film follows the rise of the visionary Virginian slave, hired out by his owner to preach to and placate slaves on drought-plagued plantations. Turner eventually transforms into an inspired, impassioned, and fierce anti-slavery leader. *The Birth of a Nation* is the epic tale of one man championing the spirit of resistance as he unites a rough-and-tumble revolt into a battle against injustice and a rebellion against slavery.

Beautifully illustrated, the book features an essay by Nate Parker, the film's director/producer and star, on the making of the film; essays by Erica Armstrong Dunbar, Daina Ramey Berry, Alfred L. Brophy, and Kelley Fanto Deetz that provide historical context; illustrated time lines by Ruramai Musekiwa documenting Nat Turner's life and other slave rebellions; and commentary by cast, crew, and others, along with an essay by Brian and Lurie Favors exploring Turner's relevance to contemporary dialogues on race and resistance.

**NATE PARKER** is an award-winning actor, writer, director, and producer who has played lead characters and held starring roles in several films, including *Beyond the Lights*, *Red Tails*, and *The Great Debaters*. In 2015, Parker launched the Nate Parker Foundation to support education, cultural enrichment, and social and economic justice. He wrote, produced, and stars in *The Birth of a Nation*, which won both of Sundance's most sought-after honors: the Audience Award and the Grand Jury Prize.



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*The Birth of a Nation*

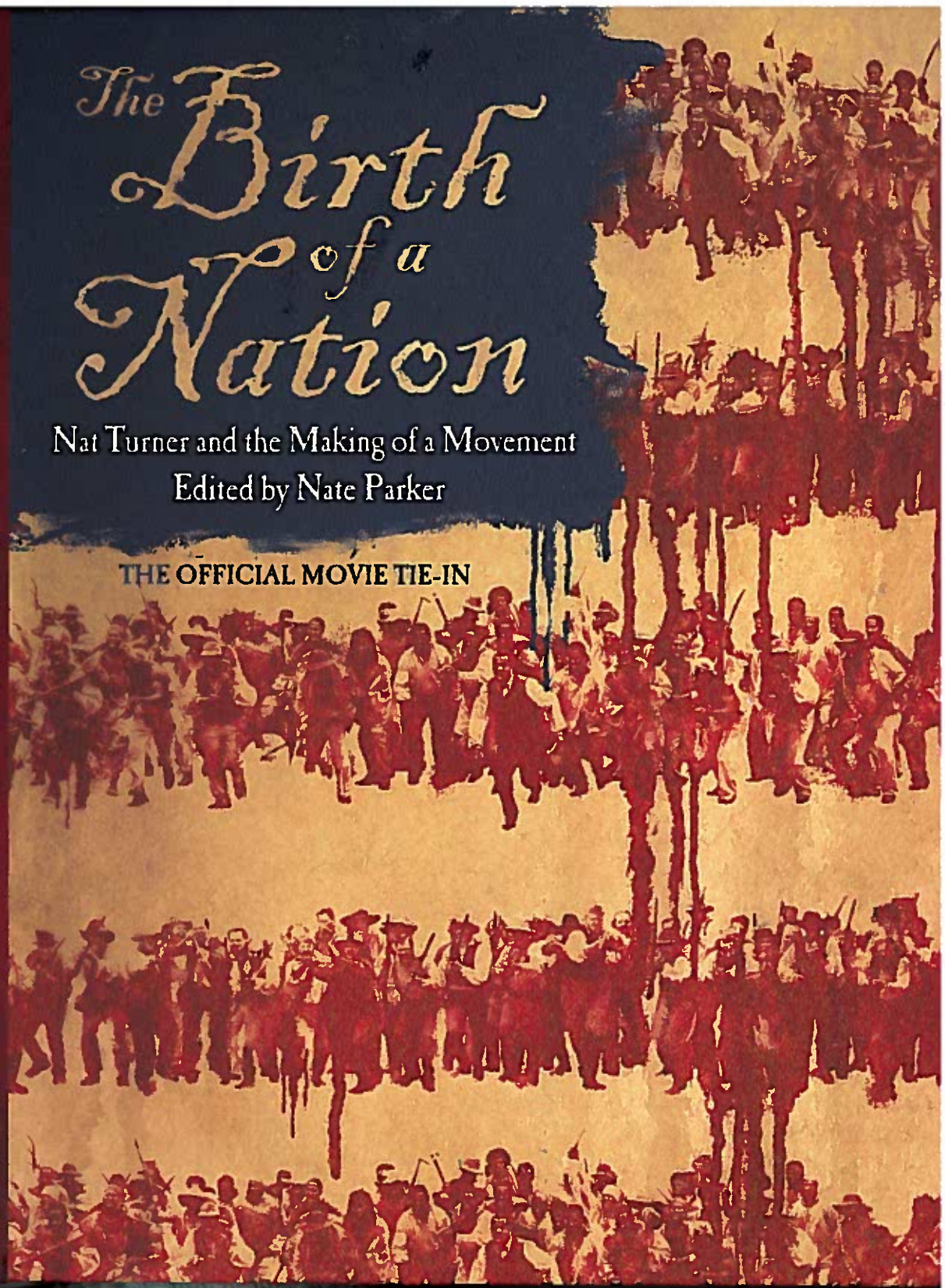
Edited by Nate Parker



*The Birth  
of a  
Nation*

Nat Turner and the Making of a Movement  
Edited by Nate Parker

THE OFFICIAL MOVIE TIE-IN





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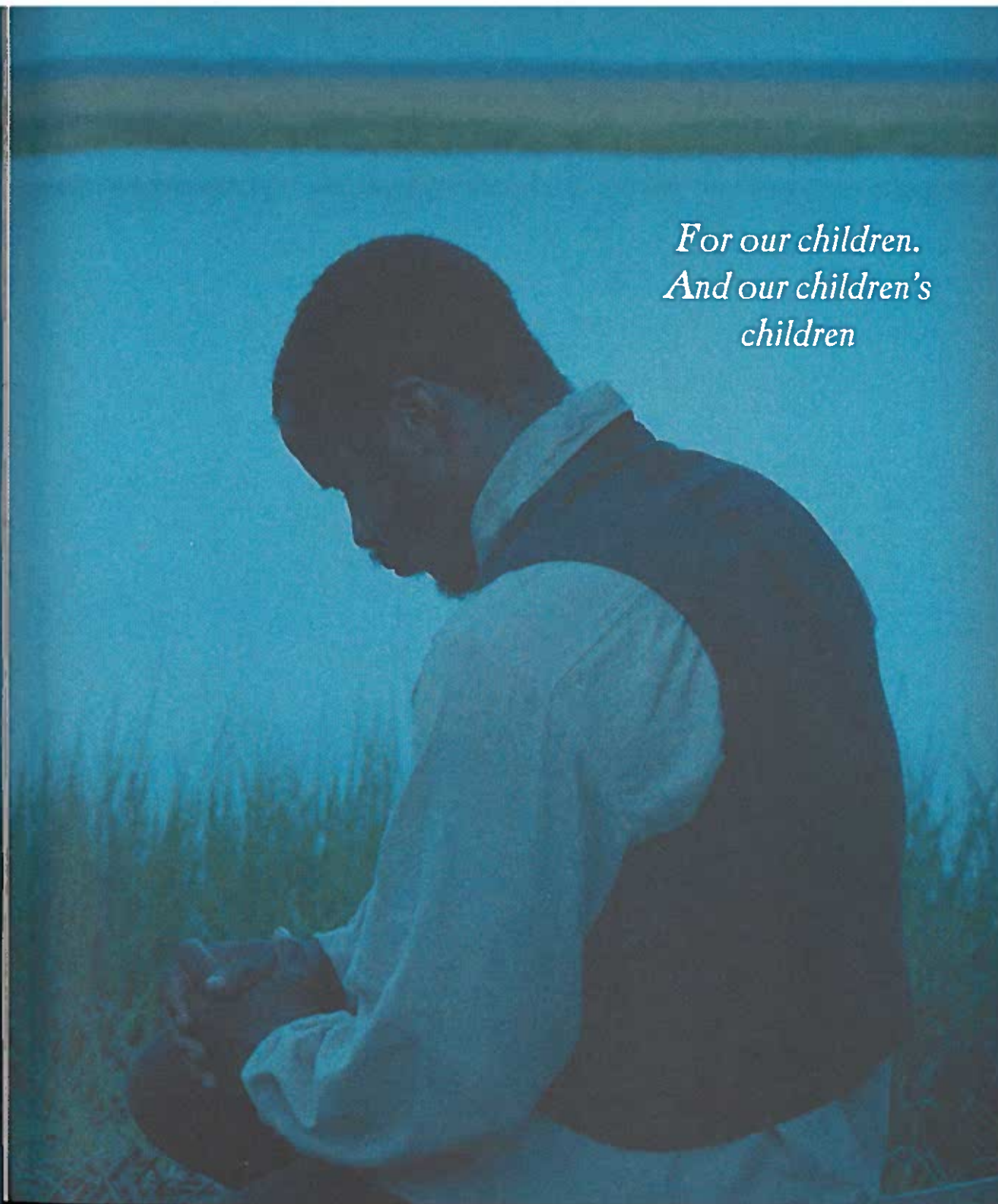
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*For our children.  
And our children's  
children*





# The Unbroken Chain of Enslaved African Resistance and Rebellion

BY *ERICA ARMSTRONG DUNBAR*  
AND *DAINA RAMEY BERRY*

## INTRODUCTION

On October 2, 1831, Nat Turner turned thirty-one years old. It was a Sunday, perhaps the most important day of the week for this deeply religious man who typically spent his Sabbath in deep prayer and meditation. But this Sabbath and birthday would be different from all others. Turner did not celebrate the day of his birth with friends or family, nor did he preach to the enslaved men and women who lived on the Travis farm in Southampton County, Virginia. He was in hiding, and knew that it was just a matter of time before he was captured and forced to answer for his actions.

He hid in a makeshift den—a simple depression in the ground that was covered by old fence rails. His cracked lips and hollow stomach reminded him on his birthday morning that he had spent the last forty days in an earthen coffin. It was only the human body's need for water and food that pulled him away from his hideout. His stiffened body moved without detection in the dead of night, in search of water from a nearby pond and provisions from local farm homes. He avoided capture for more than two months.

Turner had orchestrated the most powerful act of resistance—a slave insurrection that would become one of the most notorious rebellions in the history of the United States. At its end, close to sixty white men, women, and children lay dead. In the rebellion's immediate aftermath, hundreds of black people would pay the ultimate price. Their tortured and slaughtered bodies absorbed the anger and fear of white slaveholders, serving as a cautionary tale for any other future black rebels.

The rebellion was not an oddity or a spontaneous reaction to personal circumstance. Instead, this was a carefully planned and executed attack against the institution of American slavery that by 1830 had claimed more than two million souls. Turner's rebellion was a powerful example of black resistance, and a reminder that black people fought, and would continue to fight, against the system that labeled them human chattel. Beginning with the moment they were kidnapped and stolen from their homelands, black men, women, and children resisted—sometimes in calculated and elaborate

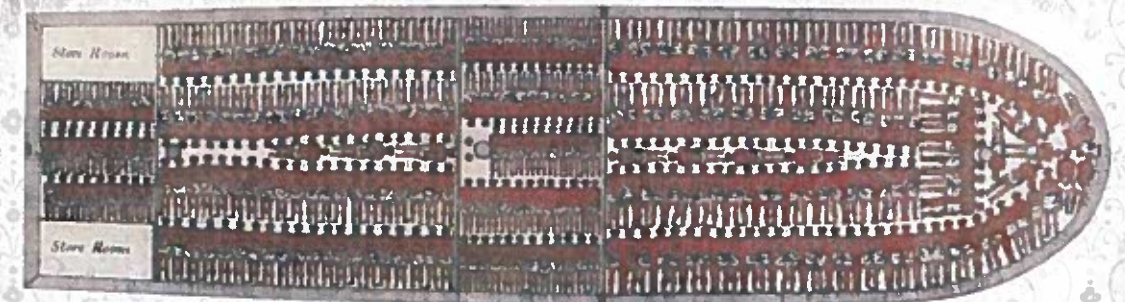
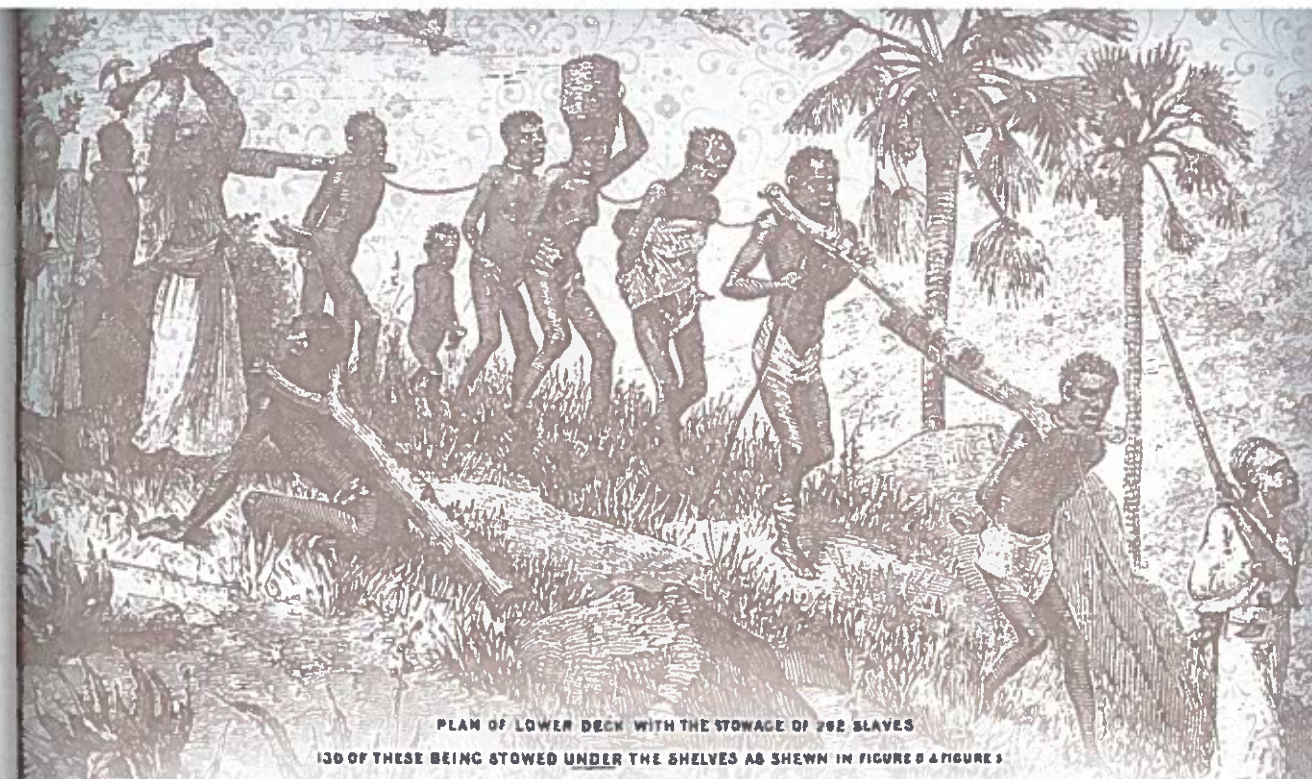
ways that involved maps and tools, and other times with slow and barely noticeable opposition. And on occasion, violence begat violence, as enslaved people committed assault, arson, and murder. The mere act of survival *was* resistance.

The film *The Birth of a Nation* and this essay follow a similar tradition of black resistance. By sharing the stories of Nat Turner, Gabriel Prosser, and Osborne Anderson in Virginia; Denmark Vesey and Jemmy in South Carolina; Lear Green in Maryland; and David Walker in Massachusetts, we continue the work of

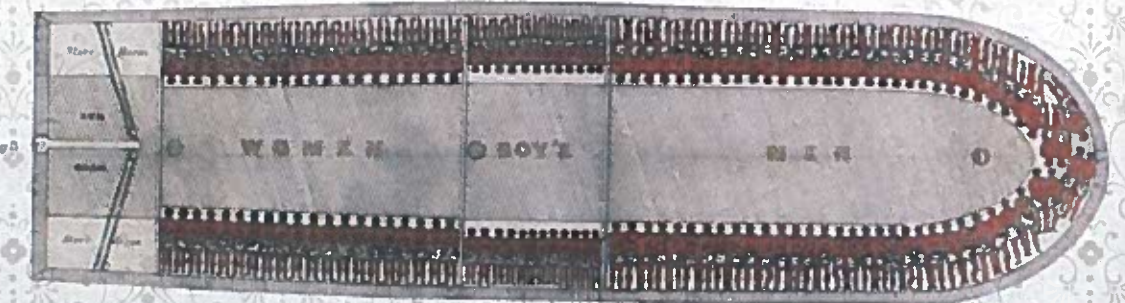
reframing American history. This essay highlights only a few clear moments of resistance within centuries of this black freedom struggle. These stories dismantle the mythology of complacent slavery—the image of enslaved men and women who were too docile or timid to fight the evils of human bondage. From the arson in New York, to the beating drums of the Stono Rebellion, and the marching in New Orleans, blacks fought for their freedom and found it via conspiracy and insurrection, in their faith, in literacy, in mutiny and escape, and ultimately in death. Their stories tell us in the most unapologetic and clear fashion that oppression always meets with reactive and proactive resistance.

OPPOSITE TOP  
Depiction of the slave trade and the town of Mombassa.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM  
Illustration showing deck plans and cross sections of the British slave ship *Brookes*.



PLAN SHewing THE STOWAGE OF 130 ADDITIONAL SLAVES ROUND THE WINDS OR SIDES OF THE LOWER DECK BY MEANS OF PLATFORMS OR SHELVES IN THE MANNER OF GALLERIES IN A CHURCH THE SLAVES STOWED ON THE SHELVES AND BELOW THEM HAVE ONLY A HEIGHT OF 2 FEET 7 INCHES BETWEEN THE BEAMS AND FAR LESS UNDER THE BEAMS. See Fig 9.





We will never know exactly how many Africans were stolen from their homelands. Some historians suggest that more than fifteen million men, women, and children were kidnapped, tortured, branded, and shuttled onto disease-ridden ships anchored off the coast of western Africa. Once the ships set sail, Africans lay chained in the most degraded of conditions, enduring a Middle Passage that deposited them in the Caribbean, the jaws of Atlantic world slavery. A smaller number of kidnapped Africans, near five hundred thousand, were forced to survive another voyage, one that landed them on the shores of the English colonies in America. In 1619, twenty Africans arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, and were sold as servants into an America that had not yet clearly defined black slavery. These Africans, and the ones who would follow in their footsteps, watched Virginia and the other colonies prosper from black labor as tobacco, rice, indigo, and other cash crops strengthened America's economy. Massachusetts was the first colony in America to legalize African slavery, an institution that spread like contagion through the English empire in America.

## TO SET FIRE

Africans held on to memories of their homelands and passed down their traditions from one generation to the next, always looking for an opportunity to reinstate what they believed they were owed: liberty. Although outnumbered in most of the colonies, Africans plotted and conspired to gain their freedom. The steady stream of slaves from the Caribbean carried news of slave rebellion in Jamaica and Antigua, stories that reminded all who conspired in the American colonies that they were not alone in their intentions. Slave insurrection terrified white colonists, and in April of 1712 the fears of New York slaveholders became a reality.

By the early 1700s, one out of every five residents in New York was enslaved, and on April 6, 1712, twenty-three slaves, armed with guns and hatchets, met in an orchard and set fire to a slaveholder's house. Violence erupted, nine whites were killed, and six others were injured. Militia units put down what was called the first slave insurrection

in colonial America. They arrested scores of black people and sent twenty-one Africans to be executed. Shocked and horrified, white colonists tightened the laws in New York, making arson a crime that was punishable by death. This rebellion would not be the last time that Africans and their descendants fought the oppression of slavery with guns, knives, and fire. It was the birth of a tradition of resistance that refused to die, as long as slavery lived.

## TO BEAT DRUMS

Jemmy may not have known about the rebellion in New York. Twenty-seven years had passed since the uprising, and he lived seven hundred miles away, just outside Charleston, South Carolina. Jemmy had been kidnapped from Africa and was likely Congolese or Angolan. He probably learned to speak both Portuguese and Spanish, and in addition to learning how to read, he listened carefully to the hushed stories of slave rebellion in the South Carolina colony where blacks outnumbered whites two-to-one. While he may not have known about the insurrection in New York, he most certainly knew about Spanish Florida's free black town, Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose. Although it was located almost three hundred miles away, Jemmy knew that black fugitives had found freedom in

*Tired of abuse and ready to die for their freedom,  
close to one hundred slaves joined Jemmy and his  
comrades as they marched toward Spanish Florida.*

this newly established town. For Jemmy and the thousands of slaves who lived in South Carolina and Georgia, Florida represented hope, an escape from the degraded life of enslavement. During the early morning hours of Sunday, September 9, 1739, Jemmy and some twenty slaves gathered near the Stono River, discussed their plan, and broke into a local store/warehouse in order to arm themselves with guns and powder.

The group marched south, raiding homes and killing slave owners. And as they traveled, they collected more recruits. Tired of abuse and ready to die for their freedom,

close to one hundred slaves joined Jemmy and his comrades as they marched toward Spanish Florida.

The marchers beat drums, and cries of "Liberty!" came from the mouths of the growing rebel force. Their momentum continued, and death came quickly to the unfortunate whites who crossed their path. A white innkeeper was spared because he "was a good man and kind to his slaves," but the exceptions were few.

The band of slaves advanced, vowing to let nothing stand in their way. But their will could not overpower mounted and armed slave owners who pursued them. By nightfall, some of the rebel slaves had been wounded, captured, or killed, but it would take almost a week for a white militia to catch most of the rest of those who had fled. Jemmy and his comrades killed close to thirty whites in this full-scale revolt against slavery. Forty-four blacks were executed or killed; some were shot to death, others were hanged. Only one of the marchers was able to escape—he remained at large for three years but was eventually found and immediately hanged.

The Stono Rebellion set off alarm bells throughout the colonies. In an attempt to preempt any other slave insurrections, the South Carolina Assembly passed the Negro Act of 1740, a law that limited the lives of blacks and native people, all of whom were to be considered slaves. There were many restrictions written into this new law, such as forbidding slaves to assemble in large groups, to use loud instruments such as drums, and to learn to write English. The Negro Act was a reminder to white slaveholders across the colonies that in order for African slavery to continue, black people must be controlled.

## ➤ TO BURN AGAIN ➤

But there was no foolproof plan that could suppress the anger and the will of enslaved people. A year after the Negro Act was passed, black slaves were at it again. But this time there would be no band of armed marchers. Instead, fire was the weapon of choice. On Wednesday, March 18, 1741, the lieutenant governor of New York watched his mansion within the walls of Fort George burn to the ground. Initially, New Yorkers presumed the fire to be accidental, but over the course of a few short weeks, ten fires were set across the city, destroying property and the peace of mind of slave owners.

Rumors spread that the arson was the work of angry slaves, with a plan to burn down the city and to murder every white person. A manhunt began in haste, and over the course of the spring and summer of 1741, 152 enslaved and free black New Yorkers were arrested. Caesar Varick, Prince Auboyneau, and Cuffee Philipse were the alleged masterminds, accused by a sixteen-year-old white maidservant of plotting the entire affair. One of the accused chose to slit his own throat rather than face punishment by the hands of his captors. Eighty men and one woman admitted to their involvement, and according to the confessions of the alleged arsonists, they planned not only to murder white colonists, but to also depose the governor of New York. They would replace him with a black man. This would never happen.

*But this time there would be no band of armed marchers. Instead, fire was the weapon of choice.*

Thirteen people were burned at the stake and seventeen went to the gallows. Two hanging black bodies were left to bloat and rot in public, a reminder of the steep consequences of a failed rebellion. Eighty-four men and women were removed from the colony and sold into the death grip of slavery in the Caribbean. No one knows what happened to those who made the reverse trip back to the islands. They most likely did not live to witness what would be the greatest slave insurrection on record. It was a rebellion that secured black freedom for a Caribbean colony and gave birth to the first free black republic of the western hemisphere. Her name was Haiti.

## ➤ TO REVOLT ➤

The Caribbean islands were pockmarked with constant revolts and slave resistance as men and women escaped the cruelest of conditions. Those who could fled to the maroon communities of the mountains and forests; others stole livestock, physically fought with their owners, and looked for any and every way to end the bone-crushing labor of sugar and coffee production. Toussaint Louverture was born into this world of Caribbean



Toussaint Louverture was the leader of the Haitian independence movement, the most successful slave revolt in modern history.

slavery, in Saint-Domingue, but lived closely with relatives who came from Africa. They reminded Louverture that his roots were those of a free African, no matter his imposed status by French slave owners. Once he procured his freedom, Louverture became an experienced soldier and led enslaved comrades on a journey that would end their bondage and become a symbol of black resistance around the world. In August of 1791, the slaves and free people of color rose in rebellion against their French captors. The rebellion was fierce and lasted for more than a decade, but freedom would not be denied. Even after the capture and imprisonment of Louverture in 1803, the fight did not end until January 1, 1804, when the Republic of Haiti was born.

All who read the newspapers, and even those who didn't, concluded one thing: Slavery could be and was destructible. Haiti's slave rebellion reminded Americans that black freedom could

be won, an uplifting symbol for black slaves and a terrifying one for white slave holders.

While the Caribbean was in an uproar, the turn of a new century in the United States marked the expansion of slavery into new territories. Planters in Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas looked for fresh soil to plant and produce cotton, sugar, and rice. Land that had been exhausted from tobacco production pushed farmers to move farther south and west. They migrated and set up homes in new states such as Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas. Change also brought new technologies such as cotton gins, printing presses, and railroad lines. These innovations helped perfect crops, print newspapers, and transport goods and people to faraway places. Enslaved people felt the brunt of these changes as many of the changes centered on the continued exploitation of their labor.

## TO PLOT

Just as cotton spread across the South, so too did plans for black rebellion. Enslaved men and women knew about the hard-fought war for black liberation in the Caribbean, and they had witnessed American colonists win their independence from British rule. The feel of revolution was simply palpable, and on a farm in Henrico County, Virginia, an enslaved man named Gabriel Prosser seized the opportunity to revolt. He was born in 1776, on the eve of the Revolution, and by the turn of the nineteenth century, Prosser was six feet two inches tall and a skilled blacksmith who could both read and write. In September of 1799, he was found guilty of stealing a pig and assaulting a white man, crimes that led Prosser to a public branding and a month in jail. It was at this moment that Prosser decided he would be a slave no more. He began to plan and believed that if slaves stood up, demanded their rights, and rebelled, poor whites would join them in their revolt. Prosser planned to take hold of Capitol Square in Richmond and to hold the governor hostage in order to bargain with authorities. Over time, Prosser collected close to thirty men, both enslaved and free, who stood ready to fight for freedom.

Prosser announced that the rebellion would take place on August 30, 1800, and their plans included capturing Norfolk and Petersburg. However, a violent rainstorm postponed the revolt, allowing enough time for a few slaves to buckle under the pressure of what was to come. Once their owners were informed of the plot, white patrols and state militia scoured the countryside and rounded up suspected conspirators. Prosser remained at large for more than two weeks but was eventually captured aboard a schooner in Norfolk. The trials of the suspected conspirators lasted almost two months, and at their close, twenty-six slaves were executed and a number of slaves were sold out of state, most likely to the new and expanding lower South. Some of these men might have ended up in Louisiana, where slavery would once again be challenged in the bloodiest of ways.

## TO MARCH

Charles Deslondes knew about revolution. He had been born into slavery in Haiti and was quickly shuttled to the Louisiana Territory by a slave owner who feared the worst. During the Haitian Revolution, he saw the terror on the faces of whites who fled from their homes with whatever possessions they could carry, including their human property. Deslondes had earned his new owner's trust and was assigned the notorious job of overseer. Using his close connection to the slaves on the German Coast of Louisiana, he plotted with them, using the same techniques as had Jemmy and Gabriel. On January 8, 1811, Deslondes led a small band of slaves into the home of a white planter, wounded the slave owner, and murdered his son. Deslondes and his followers desperately searched the home for weapons in preparation for the fight of their lives. After arming themselves, they dressed in militia uniforms.

They marched for close to three days to New Orleans, beating drums and crying

*There would be no trial for Deslondes.*

out for liberty. They burned farms and destroyed livestock on their way to meet with other black revolutionaries in the port city. Deslondes watched the number of followers swell from several dozen into the hundreds. Reports of the black insurrection prompted federal troops and private militias to respond with crushing severity, and by January 11, Deslondes and his five hundred followers were outgunned. No one knows how many black lives were lost in the aftermath of the rebellion. Eighteen men were tried and executed by firing squad. Just like the Stono Rebellion insurgents', their bodies were decapitated and placed on public display. There would be no trial for Deslondes. Once captured, the rebel leader watched as his hands were severed from his arms. He was shot multiple times and beaten to death. His dead body was set ablaze.

## TO PREACH

The consequences for violent resistance were known by all, but for some, rebellion began not with a gun, but with a book—the Bible. By the 1820s, hundreds of thousands of black men and women had adopted Christianity, often combining their ancestral beliefs in Islam and indigenous religions with their faith in a New Testament and Jesus Christ. Such was the case with Telemaque, better known as Denmark Vesey.

He would become a South Carolinian preacher, but like Deslondes, he knew the

*He must have believed that it was the  
grace of God that brought him the most  
cherished blessing—his freedom.*

intimacies of slavery in the Caribbean. Born sometime around 1767 on the Danish sugar island of St. Thomas, Telemaque was purchased by a Charleston-based slave trader, Captain Joseph Vesey. The fourteen-year-old cabin boy sailed the Atlantic with his new owner, eventually arriving in South Carolina, where, as a young man, he would join the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church. Vesey led classes and Bible study from his home and earned the reputation and honor of becoming one of Charleston's black preachers. He must have believed that it was the grace of God that brought him the most cherished blessing—his freedom.

In November of 1799, Denmark Vesey won fifteen hundred dollars in the city lottery, a blessing that would eventually set him free. Vesey immediately negotiated the terms of his freedom, purchasing himself for six hundred dollars on New Year's Eve. But while Vesey was blessed with his liberty, his wife remained enslaved—her owner refusing Vesey the ability to purchase her or his children. Vesey's happiness slowly evaporated, and the thirty-two-year-old carpenter realized that his freedom meant very little if his family remained enslaved. It was perhaps his faith that helped him endure the next twenty years, but eventually, Vesey began to preach from the Old Testament.

He declared that the enslaved were the chosen people—the New Israelites. Their God would punish all who participated in the fiendish institution of slavery, and he would lead the charge.

Vesey began to plan an insurrection. Free and enslaved blacks would rise up, kill their masters as they slept, steal guns from the city arsenal, and make their way to the docks with a plan to leave for Haiti. The attack would take place on July 14, 1822, a Sunday. But just like Gabriel Prosser's plan, it never happened. The plot was foiled, hundreds of black people were arrested, and panic spread throughout the city. Thirty-five people, including Vesey, were sentenced to death at the gallows. His church was destroyed, and once again white authorities tightened the slave codes in and around the state of South Carolina.

## ➤ TO READ AND WRITE ➤

In the North, however, a movement to end slavery was expanding. Northern blacks capitalized on new technologies in printing, using newspapers to fight the system of human bondage. The black press offered a safe space to galvanize support for the immediate abolition of slavery, and in the spring of 1827, free black abolitionists, such as Rev. Peter Williams, Jr., of New York published the first black-owned newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*. Williams offered reports about black rebellions, meetings, and anti-slavery activism, and began a long legacy of newspaper reporting by black men and women, Frederick Douglass and Mary Ann Shadd Cary among them.

Northern black revolutionaries and their allies organized themselves collectively and individually. Some participated in anti-slavery societies while others, such as David Walker, chose more radical actions. Born free in Wilmington, North Carolina, yet surrounded by enslaved people, Walker left his hometown and moved to Charleston, South Carolina. He lived through the aftermath of the Denmark Vesey plot and eventually headed north in search of opportunity. Walker settled in Boston, Massachusetts, where his hatred for slavery spilled onto the pages of what would become the most infamous anti-slavery pamphlet published in the United States. On September 28, 1829, Walker published an *Appeal . . . to the Colored Citizens of the World*, a radical seventy-six-page

A New York  
African-American  
newspaper,  
edited by John B.  
Russwurm and  
Samuel Cornish.



pamphlet that challenged blacks worldwide to unify and combat whites in the fight to end slavery. Walker declared that whites were an “unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings,” who constantly “sought power and authority.” The pamphleteer threw down the gauntlet, challenging the humanity of slave owners without fear of white retaliation.

Southern enslavers despised Walker and prohibited the sale and circulation of his work or any other “seditious” literature in their states. Georgia lawmakers placed a \$10,000 bounty on Walker's head (equivalent to \$262,000 today), but this did not stop him. He smuggled his call to action into the South by secretly sewing the *Appeal* into the lining of jackets worn by black sailors. Walker's life ended in 1830, when his dead body was found in his home. Many believed that Walker had been poisoned; however, more recent scholarship suggests that he died from tuberculosis.

Walker's life was cut short at the age of thirty-three, but committed abolitionists did not forget his words. His legacy prompted organizations such as the American Anti-Slavery Society to host rallies, publish newspapers, introduce legislation, aid runaways, and share their platforms with the world. Walker proved that the pen was powerful, but so too was the sword. The authority of his words was evident, threatening, and prophetic. He warned of a future leader of a great rebellion, and many believe this leader was Nat Turner.

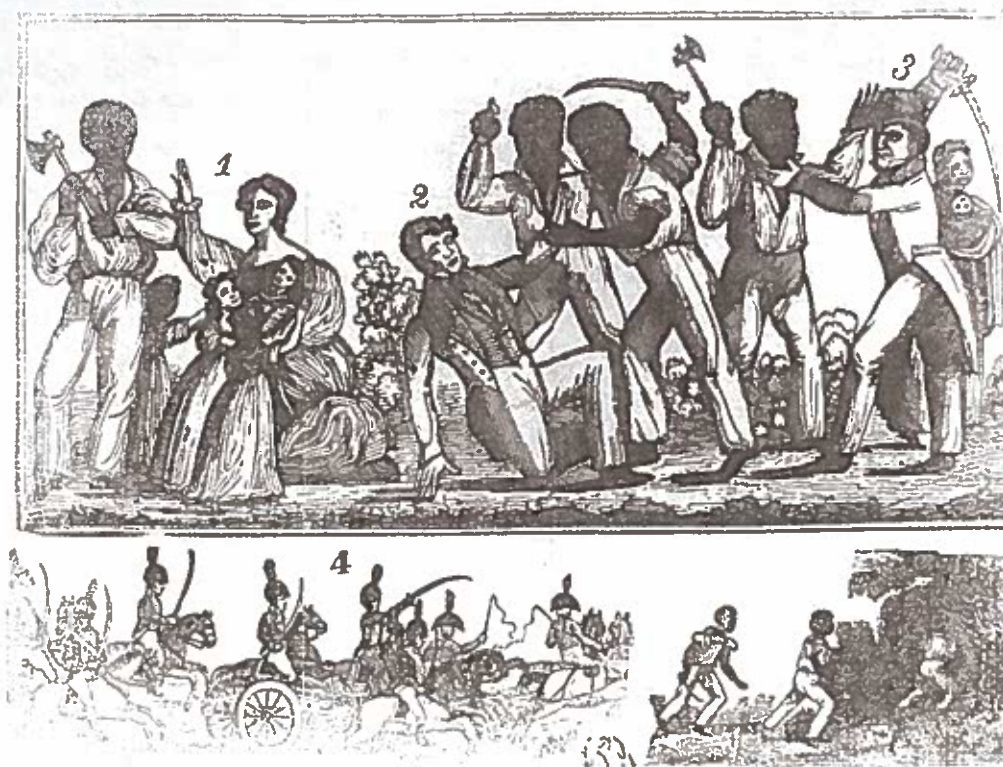
## TO PROPHESIZE

Perhaps it was his birth year that marked him: 1800 was a year filled with change, both turbulent and promising, when Americans watched slave owner Thomas Jefferson win a presidential election. His victory was later called the "revolution of 1800." For the enslaved, however, life became more vulnerable, perhaps more violent, as white farmers moved south and west to paint the countryside white with cotton. As the young nation celebrated a new president-elect, it did so with the recent memory of a foiled slave insurrection. Just a few months before the election, Gabriel Prosser was betrayed, destroying what could have been one of the most powerful and devastating examples of black resistance. But in the same year that Prosser's plot was exposed, two baby boys were born, one in Connecticut and another in Virginia. The New Englander would be named John Brown; the Southerner, Nat Turner.

*Life was difficult on remote farms, and the enslaved were reminded of their bondage every time they came in contact with one of the seventeen hundred free blacks who lived in Southampton.*

Born in October, the week before Gabriel Prosser was hanged, Nat grew up on the farm of Benjamin Turner in Southampton County, Virginia. Located just seventy miles south of Richmond, along the North Carolina border, Southampton counted a total population of a little over sixteen thousand people, and nearly half of them were enslaved. These men and women worked the fields to produce crops like corn, cotton, and tobacco, but the county was known for its bacon and its brandy. Life was difficult on remote farms, and the enslaved were reminded of their bondage every time they came in contact with one of the seventeen hundred free blacks who lived in Southampton. Very little is known about Nat's parents, except that he knew and lived with them. This is worth mentioning, as many children were torn from their parents at the earliest of ages, but Turner was among the fortunate in that he had the support and guidance of

## HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA



The engraving is designed to represent:—Fig. 1. A white man attacking a black family. Fig. 2. A white man attacking a black man. Fig. 3. A group of white men attacking a group of black people. Fig. 4. A group of black people running away from a group of white men.

parents and his grandmother. A nuclear family was the bedrock of Turner's formative years.

Oral tradition tells us that Nat Turner's mother arrived in Norfolk, Virginia, during the 1790s. Her owner, who fled from the slave revolt of Saint-Domingue, brought her to America, where she was eventually purchased by Benjamin Turner. Her name was Nancy. We have less in the way of records or folklore to describe Nat Turner's father, other than that he was supportive of his son, even under the most difficult of conditions. But his time with Nat Turner would be short-lived, for he

Engraving depicting Nat Turner's Rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia.

made the desperate and risky decision to leave his family—he escaped. We do not know if Nat Turner's father made it to one of the free Northern states or if he perished along the way. However, he made an indelible impression on his son, perhaps teaching him that a release from slavery was worth any cost. No matter who was hurt in the process.

As a boy, Turner became known for his keen intelligence, learning to read at an early age, an act that earned him a reputation as gifted. His literacy was admired by everyone in his community and led him to a relationship with the Bible. Turner himself said that his faith was marked early by distinct growths that appeared on his head and chest. His deep belief in God and his religious practice would remain steadfast.

In 1809, Nat, his mother Nancy, and a handful of slaves were loaned out to Benjamin Turner's son, Samuel. This arrangement would become permanent the following year, after the death of the Turner family's patriarch. Old Bridget, Nat's grandmother, would remain at the old plantation, separated from her family until sometime before 1822. Nat Turner became a man on Samuel Turner's farm. He grew to about five feet seven inches tall, weighed close to 160 pounds, and would later be described as having "a bright complexion but not a mulatto." As he matured, his faith deepened, perhaps enough to make him believe that an escape from Southampton County was possible.

*As a boy, Turner became known for his keen intelligence, learning to read at an early age, an act that earned him a reputation as gifted.*

Some accounts suggest that in 1821 or 1822, Nat ran away from Samuel Turner's farm and remained at large for more than thirty days, eventually returning by his own volition. Perhaps his temporary escape had everything to do with a forced separation from his wife, a woman named Cherry. The couple endured what millions of other slaves experienced; they were sold away from each other.

Although the historical records around Nat Turner's wife are spotty at best, we know that she had lived at Samuel Turner's farm since 1807 and gave birth to at least one child, perhaps a son named Riddick. In 1822, Nat and his wife Cherry were torn

apart when they were sold to new owners, a common family-fracturing event that often occurred when owners died or found themselves mired in debt. Cherry and her son were sold to Giles Reese. Nat Turner was sold to Thomas Moore for \$400. The couple would have to carry on their relationship apart from each other.

Nat Turner's ownership would change hands again in 1830, following the death of Thomas Moore. He would become the property of Moore's young son Putnam, and would eventually be managed by the widow Moore's new husband, Joseph Travis, a wheelwright and carriage maker. Children often inherited enslaved people, but they

*Nat and his wife Cherry were torn apart when they were sold to new owners, a common family-fracturing event that often occurred when owners died or found themselves mired in debt.*

required an adult to supervise their human property. By 1831, Nat Turner had suffered under four separate owners, and had watched the devastation of slavery claim the lives of his family and friends. He looked to his Lord for an answer, and he received the Word.

As a child, Turner came to love God, the Bible, and the power of prayer. His faith was overpowering and prompted a self-baptism sometime around 1827. From this point forward, he relied on religious and spiritual gifts to survive enslavement, and like all enslaved people who believed in a higher power, Turner looked to his God for signs in times of trouble. His material possessions were few, but his Bible had to have been his most valued belonging. Many believe that he was always in communication with God and that Turner had an unusual command over the clouds. Turner paid close attention to what he believed were signs from God manifested in the natural world.

Shortly after his baptism, while working in the fields Turner saw drops of blood fall from the sky and land on the corn he held in his hands. To him, this was the blood of Christ returning to earth like early morning dew. It was his maker speaking to him, his God sharing the blood of life with him, and the spirit of the most high acknowledging his presence. Turner continued to look for God in everything.

When a solar eclipse occurred on February 12, 1831, Turner saw this event as a message from his Lord. This was no inexplicable vision; instead, it was an event documented by many almanacs, all of which acknowledged this exceptional occasion. There appeared in the sky a luminous ring around the sun, one that resembled a halo. It was at this moment that Turner knew his God had spoken. Six months later, on August 13, 1831, another solar eclipse turned the sun to a shade of bluish green. Turner believed it was his signal to act.

On Sunday, August 21, 1831, Nat Turner met with six enslaved comrades in the woods near Cabin Pond. His group of trusted rebels had expanded over the course of the spring and summer, but discretion remained a priority. This gathering was a final meeting and last meal before the fighting commenced. Hark brought a pig for roasting, and Henry Porter contributed a sample of the county's well-known brandy. Nelson Edwards, Sam, Will, and Jack arrived and waited. Nat Turner was the last of the men to join the group. They ate and they plotted. Turner drew a map of the county in pokeberry juice and strategically planned their revolt. They would kill all who owned slaves, beginning with the white men, women, and children who claimed the rebels as their personal property. Their attack began in the early morning hours of August 22, and it would be the Travis family, Nat Turner's enslavers, who would die first. Turner was armed with a hatchet, Hark had an axe, Will held a broadaxe, and the others armed themselves with other sharp tools that would carry out their mission.

By the middle of the day the rebels had grown in size, numbering nearly sixty insurgents. They had already killed people on eleven different farms. Turner and his growing militia believed that they were strong enough to attack Jerusalem, the county's seat, so they continued with their tour of duty. Eventually, the local militia would gather its might to suppress the rebellion. On the next day, a partial lunar eclipse signaled the end of Turner's revolt, and the capture and killing of most of the insurgents commenced. Nat Turner remained at large, not captured until October 30. Once he was handed over to local law enforcement, he was kept in isolation, but he was at peace and ready to meet his maker. Few people saw him, with the exception of guards and an attorney. His trial would be speedy.

He had been alone for nearly six weeks before his capture, while the community



around him was thrown into utter chaos. Throughout Virginia and North Carolina, blacks, enslaved and free, were beaten, murdered, and hung as a response to the rebellion. Turner's insurrection had been so bloody, so terrifying, that it prompted Virginians to rethink the institution of slavery. They wondered if white lives would be better protected if slavery were to cease. These questions would go unanswered because the state of Virginia had too much invested in the system of human bondage. Virginians would never agree to voluntarily turn over their property.

Much of what is known about the early life of Nat Turner descends from an important yet troublesome document. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* was published in November of 1831 by Thomas Gray, a thirty-one-year-old attorney who had access to Nat Turner as he awaited trial. In 1829, Gray was a fairly prosperous planter, owning twenty-one

After sixty-eight days in hiding, Nat Turner was captured by local farmer Benjamin Phipps.

slaves on an eight-hundred-acre farm. But by 1831 his farm had been reduced in size by nearly 60 percent and he held only one remaining slave. After being cut out of his father's will, Gray was in desperate need of cash, and a publication based on the most sensationalized slave rebellion would most certainly end his financial calamity.

For many years, *The Confessions* was the central source used to study the rebellion in Southampton County, which is problematic. Confessionals must be read carefully, as they are often coerced, or even fabricated. No one knows exactly what was said between Gray and Turner as they talked in his jail cell, days before he was condemned to hang. Gray's supposed notes and the first draft of his manuscript are still missing to this day. The attorney-turned-writer did not hang around Southampton County long enough to witness Nat Turner's hanging. He was on his way to Baltimore, to meet with a publisher.

On November 6, Nat Turner took a short walk to the courthouse, where he calmly awaited his fate. The justice of the peace sentenced him to hang until he was "dead! dead! dead!" Nat Turner and his followers turned the system of slavery upside down, and in 1841, so too would Madison Washington and his comrades.

## ➤ TO MUTINY ➤

A ship named the *Creole* left Hampton Roads, Virginia, at midnight on October 17, 1841, carrying 135 enslaved people. Aboard the ship was Madison Washington, a fugitive who had once successfully escaped bondage by fleeing to Canada. But as with Denmark Vesey, his freedom meant nothing without his wife. Washington made the risky trip back to Virginia to collect her but was apprehended, taken to Richmond, and placed onto a ship that would deposit him at a New Orleans slave market. The former fugitive conspired with fellow shipmates Ben Blacksmith and Elijah Morris, and on November 7, 1841, the human cargo overpowered the ship's crew, stabbed a slave trader to death, and steered the vessel to the Bahamas. They knew that the island was free territory, as the British had abolished slavery there in the 1830s. The mutineers were greeted by black Bahamians, who eventually boarded the ship and declared that the passengers were free. Nineteen of the mutineers were temporarily imprisoned while U.S. agents argued that all of the enslaved cargo should be returned to New Orleans. This would never happen. All

the mutineers were released from prison, and along with most of their other shipmates, they made new lives for themselves in the Bahamas and Jamaica.

Enraged over their loss of property, a handful of enslavers filed claims with insurance companies and used the courts to sue for compensation. Some of the cases were heard by the Louisiana Supreme Court, however the majority were dismissed. Insurance policies were canceled under certain circumstances, particularly if an enslaved person committed suicide or participated in a rebellion or conspiracy. Nearly ten years later, the Anglo-American Claims Commission paid the United States \$110,000 for the loss of enslaved property. Today, that same claim would be worth \$3.5 million dollars.

## ➤ TO ESCAPE ➤

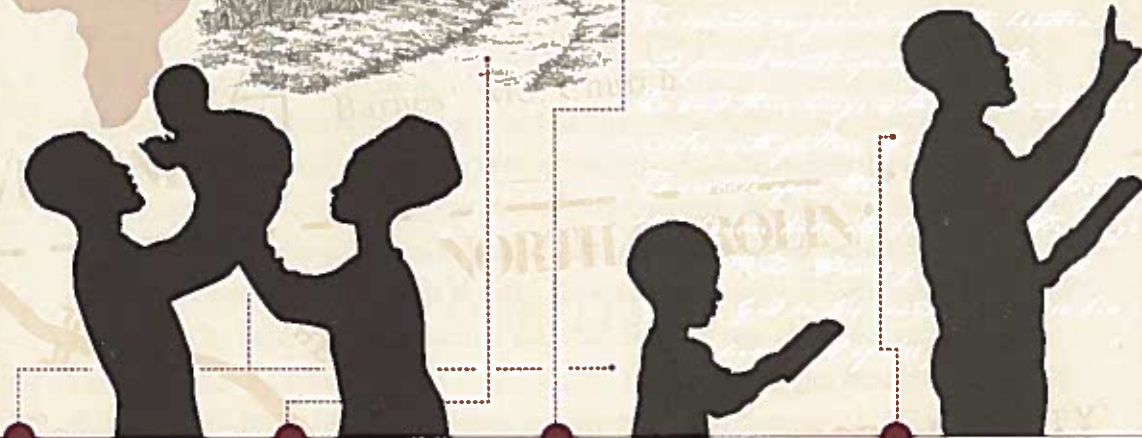
Slave owners were always willing to spend a little money to make a lot of money. When enslaved men and women made the decision to take a chance and run for freedom, slave owners often placed paid advertisements in local newspapers. Financial rewards proved a successful incentive as slave catchers roamed the cities of the urban North looking for human property. Handsome payouts were likely if slaves were returned healthy and relatively unharmed. This was the case for Lear Green, who in the fall of 1850 had a \$150 bounty placed on her head.

The Maryland woman fled from her owner so that she could marry her love, William Adams, a free black barber. Adams had proposed to her, but Green hesitated, knowing all too well that their marriage would never be legally recognized because she remained enslaved. Any children that came from their union would add to her owner's wealth, as their enslaved status would be inherited from their mother. These future children could be sold away at a moment's notice, and Green would not begin her family under these circumstances. She accepted his proposal and thought of ways to guarantee marriage in a free state.

Her escape was carefully planned as she prepared to ship herself to freedom. She climbed into a box, smaller than a coffin, and prepared for the dangerous voyage ahead. With the help of Adams's mother, Green entered a sailor's chest about the size of the overhead compartment on a contemporary airplane. She equipped herself with a quilt,

# Nat Turner

1800-1831



1

October 2, 1800:

An enslaved African woman named Nancy Turner gave birth to Nat Turner on a plantation in Southampton County, Virginia.

As a child, Nat Turner was said to be prophetic, and was taught how to read and write, and studied religion.

2

Unknown Date, 1810-1811:

Nat's father escapes from the Turner plantation.

3

Unknown Date, 1821/22:

Turner marries an enslaved woman named Cherry.

4

Unknown Date, 1822-1825:

Turner begins preaching and experiencing religious visions.

He soon becomes known as "the slave preacher."

5

February 12, 1831:

Nat believed that a solar eclipse was a sign to revolt. He begins holding secret meetings with fellow slaves to outline the strategy for a revolution.

6

August 21, 1831:

In the afternoon Turner and his rebels met at Cabin Pond and by the middle of the night they started the revolt at the Travis Farm.

Turner and the rebels travel from house to house, killing slave-owning family members by knife, ax, and club.

7

August 23, 1831:

The slave rebellion marches toward the armory in nearby Jerusalem, where they are confronted by a large militia, including state and federal troops. Though Turner escapes, dozens of slaves are captured and hanged without trial.

8

Fall 1831:

Brutal reprisals begin, with hundreds of innocent enslaved and free blacks indiscriminately killed in retribution.

Severed heads are displayed atop posts throughout the county and surrounding region to promote fear among enslaved populations.





**The Haitian Revolution** was a successful antislavery and anticolonial insurrection that took place in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which lasted from 1791 until 1804.

The revolution resulted in the liberation of the enslaved population and the expulsion of the French, and made Haiti the first free black nation in the Western Hemisphere. It impacted the institution of slavery throughout the slave-holding colonies and is considered a major turning point in antislavery thought.



1804  
Haitian Revolution

August 30, 1800  
Gabriel's Conspiracy  
(Henrico County, VA)



An enslaved blacksmith, **Gabriel Prosser**, organized a plot to attack Richmond. The plans for the revolt were leaked prior to its execution, and he and 25 followers were taken captive and hanged.

This plot resulted in the refinement of Virginia's slave laws: deportation as an alternative to capital punishment, abolition of private manumissions, and mandatory deportation of free blacks. In the end, 72 men were tried, and 26 were found guilty and hanged, 8 were transported, 13 declared guilty, but pardoned by the governor due to economic reasons, and 25 were acquitted.

During the harvest season in 1811, Haitian-born slave driver **Charles Deslondes** led close to 500 slaves, armed with guns, pikes, hoes, and axes, who carried banners and marched to the beat of drums while chanting "Freedom or Death" along the east bank of the Mississippi River, in what is now the St. John the Baptist and St. Charles Parishes.

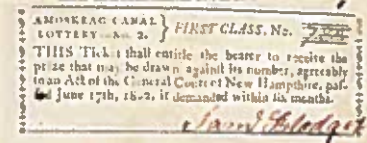
66 rebels were killed during the fighting, 17 went missing, and 18 were arrested, convicted, executed and their heads were removed and put on stakes along the Mississippi River. Deslondes was executed, mutilated, and put on public display. While this was the largest slave revolt in American history, only two white men were killed.

January 8-9, 1811  
German Coast Slave Uprising  
(Louisiana)

**Nat Turner's Rebellion** took place in Southampton County, Virginia, during August 1831. Nat Turner's army killed between 55 to 65 people, the highest number of white fatalities caused by any slave uprising in the United States.

The rebellion was quelled within a few days, but Turner survived in hiding for more than two months afterward. Turner and his rebels were tried, convicted, and executed: their heads were put on posts, and it is said that Turner's headless body was skinned, boiled, and turned into souvenirs.

In the aftermath, whites tortured and terrorized innocent blacks as a way to suppress further rebellion.



**Denmark Vesey** (also named *Telemague*) was born on the Danish island of St. Thomas and was sold to Charleston at the age of 14. He was a literate, skilled carpenter, and a preacher at the African Methodist Church in Charleston. At the age of 32, he won a lottery, and purchased his own freedom.

In his mid-50s, Vesey planned a revolution, where enslaved blacks would kill their masters and escape to Haiti. His plan was leaked before it was enacted, and as a result 35 blacks were hanged at the gallows.

June-July 1822 Denmark Vesey  
Conspiracy of 1822  
(Charleston, South Carolina)

August 21-23, 1831  
Nat Turner's Rebellion  
(Southampton County, VA)

During the height of the U.S. domestic slave trade, a ship carrying 135 enslaved people from Richmond to New Orleans was overthrown by the captives. The revolt was led by an enslaved man named **Madison Washington**, who had recently learned details about the Amistad case.

The 18 rebels killed a slave trader, wounded the captain, seized control of the ship, and steered it to nearby Nassau, ultimately liberating 130 enslaved African-Americans and deeming it the most successful slave revolt in U.S. history.



*Creole Case*  
1841



The **Amistad Revolt** took place on board the Spanish schooner *La Amistad*, which was carrying 53 Mende captives from Sierra Leone. A 25-year old **Sengbe Pieh (Cinque)** led the fight, which took control of the ship. The rebels successfully overthrew the crew and demanded a return to West Africa. The navigators intentionally took them to Long Island, NY, in an attempt to keep them in bondage. The rebels were jailed for 18 months, and stood trial, and the 35 survivors were eventually set free and returned to their native land.

July 1-August 24, 1839  
The Amistad Revolt  
(The coast of Long Island, NY)

November 7, 1841  
The Creole Revolt  
(Eastern Shore of the United States)

a pillow, and a few articles of clothing, perhaps to protect her from a bumpy journey. She had only a small amount of food and a bottle of water to sustain her aboard a steamship from Baltimore to Philadelphia.

Her soon to be mother-in-law traveled with the chest, checking on Green in the middle of the night to make certain that she was still alive. She lifted the lid on the chest to allow for fresh air, an act that allowed Green to survive her harrowing voyage.

After an eighteen-hour journey, a stagecoach delivered the sailor's chest to the office of black abolitionist William Still. A famed conductor of the Underground Railroad, Still described Green as a "dark-brown color," with a "countenance . . . of peculiar modesty and grace." Still was one of many black abolitionists who placed their lives in danger to help fugitives such as Green, a task that became more and more difficult as the 1850s progressed. In the end Lear Green and William Adams married and settled in Elmira, New York.

## ≡ TO SURVIVE ≡

In the years leading up to the Civil War, America moved at lightning speed into two different orbits. Southerners clung to slavery while Northerners divested themselves of it, creating a thick tension that would erupt in violence and bloodshed. But on October 16 and 17 of 1859, a Connecticut-born tanner by the name of John Brown led a small interracial group of followers to attack the institution of slavery. The mission was simple and their objective mighty, as followers planned to raid the federal arsenal in Virginia (today West Virginia), steal weapons, and start an uprising in hopes of abolishing slavery. It was a two-day war and only one survivor lived to tell about the raid on Harper's Ferry. Osborne P. Anderson, a free black man, managed to avoid death via battle or the gallows. He fled from the bloody scene, venturing on a five-hundred-mile journey to Canada. Osborne Anderson's *A Voice from Harper's Ferry* offered America a firsthand account of all that transpired at the most infamous attack on slavery's grip. It would mark the survival of a people and a legacy of resistance that continues today.



Blacks, enslaved and free, resisted oppression by asserting themselves as human beings with rights. Nat Turner used multiple forms of resistance to free himself from slavery. He organized, he plotted, he marched, he preached, he read, and he mutinied against the oppressive system. Others, like those in New York, set fire to their farms and homesteads or shipped themselves to freedom, while some survived by escaping to free territory in Canada, the Bahamas, or other parts of the world. We know that their brave acts of liberty occurred on a daily basis and sometimes created a path of destruction that led to the brutal deaths of enslavers of all ages. About this, Turner allegedly believed that "nits make lice" and that no lives should be spared. He was not alone in his thinking. However, it is for us to decide what slaves thought on the eve of rebellious events. Did they understand the magnitude of their actions? Or were they simply trying to survive? History tells us that their courage and tenacity were evident.

*This time, he took a deep breath, calmly exhaled, and said, "I'm ready."*

Nat Turner never had the opportunity to say good-bye to his family. Never again would he lay eyes upon his wife, Cherry, or his progeny. Instead, he prepared himself to meet his God. Most prisoners were given a last meal prior to execution, but Nat Turner's Last Supper was with friends, in the woods at Cabin Pond nearly twelve weeks earlier.

On a chilly winter morning in Jerusalem, Virginia, Nat Turner was escorted to the gallows. We do not know what he was thinking, but it is likely that he focused on God and the scriptures that had sustained him for thirty-one years. Those who came to witness his death jeered at him as he calmly took his place on the platform. They were angry because Turner and his followers had stood up to a brutal system and confirmed slave owners' greatest fears. Enslaved people rebelled. As a result, legislation throughout the North and South placed greater restrictions on blacks (enslaved and free). But on

this day, November 11, 1831, a community stood still. It was Nat Turner's last day on earth. Soon he would join his ancestors in a higher spiritual place. Turner knew God and had been preaching the gospel for most of his life. Perhaps he turned to Him, and looked up at the sky as he had done on so many occasions. This time, he took a deep breath, calmly exhaled, and said, "I'm ready." After he'd been hung, he was decapitated, and folklore tells us that his body parts were made into souvenirs. He never received a proper burial. But today, the spirit of Nat Turner lives in *The Birth of a Nation*.

## NOTE

We have chosen to use the word "slave" throughout the text of this essay for the purpose of narrative flow. As scholars, we prefer to use the term "enslaved" when referring to men and women who were held in bondage. The word "enslaved" shifts the attention to the action that was placed upon the bodies of black people. It is a term that reinforces their status as human property (chattel).

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