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The Impact of Nat Turner’s Rebellion

Prior to 1831, relatively few significant slave revolts occurred in North America despite the comparatively large slave population. Many southern slave owners attributed this aspect of American slave culture to the supposed complacency and passivity of their slaves, and though most knew of the major insurrections in other countries, they probably felt that they had secure control over their slaves. Nat Turner’s rebellion overturned this notion entirely. It demonstrated slaves’ capability of organizing and planning resistance and showed that they were not always willing to accept oppression. Though the revolt was unsuccessful in that it was suppressed within two days, it ultimately had a lasting negative impact on the condition of slaves in the South.

In understanding the severity of southern whites’ response to Nat Turner’s revolt, one must consider its historical context. The relatively recent insurrections in Barbados and Demerara had already caused a fair amount of heightened anxiety in the South about slave resistance. The 1816 Barbados rebellion resulted in the destruction of a fourth of the sugar cane crop, while the revolt in Demerara in 1823 involved about 10,000 slaves. News of these and other revolts reached most states in North America, and slave owners became cognizant and wary of the possibility that their slaves would hear about them. The large number of slaves involved in these rebellions also caused southerners alarm even though very few of them succeeded.

The works of Northern abolitionists also contributed to the fear of resistance, since slave owners worried that they gave blacks ideas of escaping slavery and gaining freedom. One of the most significant of these tracts was David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, which he published in 1829 in Boston. Walker reminded blacks that “the inhuman system of slavery is the source from which most of [their] miseries proceed” and encouraged slaves to
unite and revolt against their masters (Walker). Within a few months of its publication, copies of the *Appeal* reached most southern states despite bans and other restrictions on its distribution. The extent of the slaveholders’ efforts to prevent slaves and blacks from reading the document had the converse effect of ensuring that the majority of them at least heard about it, and its message contributed to southerners’ fears of insurrections. This social climate helps explain the pervasive harshness of the response to Nat Turner’s rebellion in the South.

Turner, one of the main leaders of the rebellion, was a literate preacher. He and a small number of other slaves initiated the revolt on the night of August 21, 1831 in Southampton, Virginia. The group continued from house to house, killing about sixty whites and freeing slaves, many of whom then joined the revolt. Over seventy rebels had joined the revolt by the time state and federal troops put it down. City officials executed many of the slaves involved, including Turner when they captured him on October 30th.

In the immediate aftermath, whites panicked about other slaves being involved in or learning of the revolt, and the hysteria “resulted in imprisonments, mass deportations, lynchings, and executions” (Schafer 361). Despite the newspapers that reported that the “insurrection was not the result of concert to any extent” and did not have “the least chance of success”, whites accused blacks in other southern states of being involved, and mobs murdered nearly two hundred slaves, many of whom had not participated in the revolt (Baltimore). For instance, Harriet Ann Jacobs describes in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* how groups of white men searched the houses and possessions of slaves, looking for any sign that could connect them to the rebellion. (Jacobs). Jacobs, writing from a town almost seventy miles south of Southampton County, mentions that many innocent blacks were targeted, and in some cases whites planted
evidence to implicate them. Clearly, widespread fears and suspicions about slaves conspiring to plan other revolts spread to many southern states besides Virginia.

The author of one of the earliest reports from the Richmond *Enquirer* comments on the “horrible ferocity of these monsters,” while remarking that he could not assign any “cause or provocation” to the revolt. The same article attempts to mitigate whites’ fear by quoting General Broadnax, the militia commander of Greensville County, who claimed that he was "convinced, from various sources" of the "entire ignorance on the subject of all the slaves in the counties around Southampton ("Nat Turner’s Rebellion"). In a similar manner, the *Raleigh Register* attempts to convince its readers that the uprising is over, and notes that even though Turner had not yet been captured, “he cannot elude justice much longer” (Tresvant). The *New Orleans Bee*, which had initially “deemed it more prudent to abstain from noticing” the insurrection, decided to acknowledge it in order to downplay the danger and assert the inevitability of the slaves’ failure by emphasizing that any remaining escaped rebels “will probably be taken,” and that there is “entire ignorance on the subject” of the rebellion in the counties neighboring Southampton (New Orleans). In many cases in the southern states, the press did not publish any accounts of slave rebellions “for fear of inciting further conspiracies” (Schafer 369). If slaves learned about the fear that any attempted resistance could provoke in whites, they might have been encouraged to instigate their own rebellions. The common theme in public literature of downplaying both the events and significance of Turner’s rebellion served the dual purpose of lessening slave owners’ anxiety and preventing blacks from taking inspiration from the insurrection. The fact that *The Bee* and other papers felt the need to mitigate their readers’ anxiety shows that their fears did not subside with the end of the revolt.
A much smaller portion of the southern population reached the conclusion that Nat Turner’s rebellion signaled that slavery should be abolished. In a letter to a relative, Rachel Lazarus concluded that white southerners “can have no security but in a state of unremitted vigilance” until they freed their slaves (Lazarus). She advocates transporting freed blacks to “their own land”, though by this time few slaves in America had actually been born in Africa. An issue of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* entitled “The Insurrection” and published shortly after the revolt also called for immediate emancipation, claiming that the rebels “deserve no more censure than … our fathers in slaughtering the British” (Garrison). Similar arguments contended that the violence of Turner’s rebellion illustrated the danger of allowing slavery to continue.

In Virginia, this argument led to a debate about whether the state should gradually abolish slavery. Virginia was split between slave owners in the eastern areas of state and the greater numbers of non-slaveholders in the western part. Of the non-slaveholders, some suggested emancipation followed by removing free blacks from America. Prior to the next session of Virginia’s General Assembly, a local paper outlined the main issues arising from the insurrection that most whites felt needed to be dealt with. These issues included the idea that “the Commonwealth must get rid of the Free People of color,” the belief that slaves “must be more effectually governed” with restrictions on slave literacy and kept from “all the means of concert and conspiracy,” and the question of whether slaves should be emancipated (Richmond). Several plans for gradual emancipation were proposed at the conventions that met in 1831 and 1832, but the legislature failed to pass any of them. Instead, the threat of potential emancipation led slaveholders to realize the need to secure the stability of their slave system. Many agreed on the “necessity” of “adopting some measure to reassure public confidence” and to “prevent as far as practicable the recurrence of” similar incidents (“Legal Proceedings”). In addition, some argued
that instituting plans for emancipation so soon after Nat Turner’s rebellion would show slaves that violent insurrections were the way bring about their freedom, so slaveholders wanted harsher restrictions to prevent this.

Many newspapers noted Turner’s literacy and association with religion and asserted that these at least partially caused his decision to revolt. One paper indicated that Turner’s actions of comparing “his pretended prophecies with passages in the Holy Scriptures” were the means with which “he obtained the complete control of his followers” prior to the rebellion (“Nat Turner”). In a letter to the governor of Virginia, Colonel Norborne Sutton wrote of his suspicions of “traveling preachers and peddlers” in having a role in Nat Turner’s revolt and suggested that the governor institute measures to prevent slaves from listening to preachers and from contracting their own jobs (Sutton). Farther south, Georgia’s Macon Weekly Telegraph emphasized that the “infernal brigandage” of the rebellion was instigated by a “fanatic preacher…who had been taught to read and write and permitted to go about preaching” (“Horrible Butchery”). These ideas were apparently common enough to merit the establishment of harsher slave codes that often also reduced the rights of free blacks. The institution of new literacy laws was common to most southern states since slaveholders worried about the influence of radical abolitionist and antislavery writings, though Nat Turner’s rebellion was almost never mentioned in connection with these new laws.

The General Assemblies of both Virginia and North Carolina passed new ordinances in 1831 as a result of the insurrection. The legislation in Virginia made it a crime to teach slaves, free blacks, or mulattoes how to read or write, while North Carolina enacted laws prohibiting slaves and free blacks from preaching or leading any form of gathering for worship. North Carolina also prohibited slaves form hiring out their labor and skills, even if permitted by their owner (North
Carolina). Even states further removed from the location of Turner’s revolt enacted similar harsher laws. For example, the Alabama slave code of 1833 forbade slaves from leaving their master without written permission. Slaves were not permitted to have any type of weapon unless carrying it for their master, and slave owners could not have slaves who did not belong to them to be on their property for more than four hours. Furthermore, any slave convicted of planning to rebel would be executed (Alabama). The fear of rebellions led Louisiana to carry out additional measures, including “a law requiring that all slaves brought into New Orleans on or after [October 20, 1831] be registered with the mayor's office”. Any slave that was to be brought into the state had to have their master vouch for their good character, and slaves could be denied entry if they had ever been suspected of participating in a slave revolt or even if they had “lived in any county where a slave insurrection occurred or was rumored to have been planned (Schafer 365). Louisiana did not repeal the measures against importing slaves until 1834.

In general, Nat Turner’s rebellion intensified the divisions between the North and the South. Southern slave owners blamed Northern abolitionists for inciting their slaves to rebel and worried that they would encourage revolts in the future. As a result, both abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates became more determined. The widespread illiteracy caused by the slave literacy laws lasted until after the Civil War. The strength of white southerners’ response to the rebellion is evidence of lasting significance, as is the fact that it ignited talk of emancipation. Furthermore, the sectional tensions caused by Nat Turner’s revolt were a part of the long chain of events that would contribute to the Civil War.
Bibliography


