

1831

Nat Turner's Rebellion

Nat Turner was born on October 2, 1800, in Southampton County, Virginia, the week before Gabriel was hanged. While still a young child, Nat was overheard describing events that had happened before he was born. This, along with his keen intelligence, and other signs marked him in the eyes of his people as a prophet "intended for some great purpose." A deeply religious man, he "therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped [him]self in mystery, devoting [his] time to fasting and praying."



In 1821, Turner ran away from his overseer, returning after thirty days because of a vision in which the Spirit had told him to "return to the service of my earthly master." The next year, following the death of his master, Samuel Turner, Nat was sold to Thomas Moore. Three years later, Nat Turner had another vision. He saw lights in the sky and prayed to find out what they meant. Then "... while laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn, as though it were dew from heaven, and I communicated it to many, both white and black, in the neighborhood; and then I found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens."

On May 12, 1828, Turner had his third vision: "I heard a loud noise in the heavens, 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, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first... And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work, and until the first sign appeared I should conceal it from the knowledge of men; and on the appearance of the sign... I should arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons."

At the beginning of the year 1830, Turner was moved to the home of Joseph Travis, the new husband of Thomas Moore's widow. His official owner was Putnum Moore, still a young child. Turner described Travis as a kind master, against whom he had no complaints.

Then, in February, 1831, there was an eclipse of the sun. Turner took this to be the sign he had

been promised and confided his plan to the four men he trusted the most, Henry, Hark, Nelson, and Sam. They decided to hold the insurrection on the 4th of July and began planning a strategy. However, they had to postpone action because Turner became ill.

On August 13, there was an atmospheric disturbance in which the sun appeared bluish-green. This was the final sign, and a week later, on August 21, Turner and six of his men met in the woods to eat a dinner and make their plans. At 2:00 that morning, they set out to the Travis household, where they killed the entire family as they lay sleeping. They continued on, from house to house, killing all of the white people they encountered. Turner's force eventually consisted of more than 40 slaves, most on horseback.

By about mid-day on August 22, Turner decided to march toward Jerusalem, the closest town. By then word of the rebellion had gotten out to the whites; confronted by a group of militia, the rebels scattered, and Turner's force became disorganized. After spending the night near some slave cabins, Turner and his men attempted to attack another house, but were repulsed. Several of the rebels were captured. The remaining force then met the state and federal troops in final skirmish, in which one slave was killed and many escaped, including Turner. In the end, the rebels had stabbed, shot and clubbed at least 55 white people to death.

Nat Turner hid in several different places near the Travis farm, but on October 30 was discovered and captured. His "Confession," dictated to physician Thomas R. Gray, was taken while he was imprisoned in the County Jail. On November 5, Nat Turner was tried in the Southampton County Court and sentenced to execution. He was hanged, and then skinned, on November 11.

In total, the state executed 55 people, banished many more, and acquitted a few. The state reimbursed the slaveholders for their slaves. But in the hysterical climate that followed the rebellion, close to 200 black people, many of whom had nothing to do with the rebellion, were murdered by white mobs. In addition, slaves as far away as North Carolina were accused of having a connection with the insurrection, and were subsequently tried and executed.

The state legislature of Virginia considered abolishing slavery, but in a close vote decided to retain slavery and to support a repressive policy against black people, slave and free.

Source

Nat Turner's Rebellion, [PBS.org](https://www.pbs.org)