

Nat Turner Slave Rebellion - III

**Lead:** In the summer of 1831, Nat Turner, a religious mystic convinced that God had called him as a prophet, led a group of followers on a bloody rampage through south-side Virginia in the most serious slave rebellion in U.S. history.

**Intro.:** *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

**Content:** Nat Turner was a gifted and powerful, mesmerizing slave preacher. Nearly all his life Nat Turner could read and write. His owners from the early days encouraged him to read those portions of the Bible that tell slaves to live lives of dutiful and submissive obedience. Yet, he also read subversive portions of the scriptures that gave him hope that one day he might achieve freedom. By the mid-1820s, Nat Turner was attracting large groups of slaves to his preaching services on Sundays near Cross Keys in Southampton County or down near the North Carolina border.

His owners at that time, Thomas and Sally Moore, indulged his enthusiastic preaching. He was otherwise a hard worker during the week, sober, smart, honest and respectful. Other whites were less charitable, hearing in his prophetic preaching an ominous threat. They were not far wrong because Nat Turner raged inside. He may have had prodigious preaching ability and could speak with power, but he was still a cotton-patch Negro, slaving behind a mule. He began having visions and speaking of a momentous event by which God would accomplish great things.

By 1831 Tom Moore had died and Sally had married a wheelwright, a carriage maker, Joseph Travis. Nat was assembling a group of trusted comrades, all disaffected slaves, warning them to prepare and recruit others for an uprising to destroy their oppressors and free their people. In mid-August an atmospheric phenomenon caused the sun to dim and change colors. Turner saw this as the divine signal for which he had been waiting. On August 21 and for part of the two following days Nat and his lieutenants joined by a number of slaves killed, beginning with Nat's owners, at least fifty-seven whites, men women and children. White reaction was swift and brutal. Dozens of blacks, many having nothing to do with the insurrection were killed. Turner escaped and was not captured until October 30. He spoke extensively of his motives in interviews prior to his execution less than two weeks later.

Nat Turner's Rebellion was the most extensive of any slave revolt in the American South prior to the Civil War. Among whites, it aggravated already intense fear of the huge number of slaves in their midst, slaves whose anger at the south's peculiar institution smoldered just beneath the surface and, if appropriately organized and inspired, might sweep them all away. Research assistance by Mae Jackson, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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