

[Close this Window]

Newspaper Report of Nat Turner's Insurrection **Digital History ID 356**

Date: 1831

Annotation:

It was a basic tenet of the proslavery argument that slaves were docile, contented, faithful, and loyal. In fact, there is no evidence that the majority of slaves were contented. Many slaves who did not rebel directly made their masters' lives miserable through a variety of indirect protests against slavery, including sabotage, stealing, malingering, murder, arson, and infanticide.

Four times during the first 31 years of the nineteenth century, slaves attempted major insurrections. In 1800, a 24-year-old Virginia blacksmith named Gabriel led a march on Richmond. The plot failed when a storm washed out the road to Richmond, giving the Virginia militia time to arrest the rebels. White authorities executed Gabriel and 25 other conspirators.

In 1811, Charles Deslondes, a free mulatto from Haiti, and between 180 and 500 slaves marched on New Orleans. Slave owners retaliated by killing 82 blacks and placing the heads of 16 leaders on pikes.

In 1822, Denmark Vesey, a former slave who had been born in Africa, lived in St. Domingue (Haiti), and purchased his freedom after winning a lottery, devised a plan to take over Charleston, South Carolina, on a summer Sunday when many whites would be vacationing outside the city. Before the revolt could take place, however, a domestic slave informed his master. The authorities proceeded to arrest 131 blacks and to hang 37.

The most famous slave revolt took place nine years later in Southampton County in southern Virginia, where in 1830 there were 6573 whites, 1745 free blacks, and 7756 slaves. On August 22, 1831, Nat Turner (1800-1831), a Baptist preacher, led a small group of fellow slaves into the home of his master Joseph Travis and killed the entire Travis household. By August 23, Turner's force had increased to between 60 and 80 slaves joined by at least 4 free blacks, and had killed more than 50 whites, mostly women and children. The local militia counter-attacked and killed about 100 blacks. Twenty more slaves, including Turner, were later executed. The following published accounts document Turner's insurrection.

Document:

Disagreeable rumors have reached this city of an insurrection of the slaves in Southampton County, with loss of life, in order to correct exaggerations, and at the same time to induce all salutary caution, we state the following particulars.

An express from the Hon. James Trezevant states that an insurrection had broken out, that several families had been murdered, and that the Negroes were embodied, requiring a considerable military force to reduce them....

Serious danger, of course, there is none. The deluded wretches have rushed on assured destruction....

We understand that the insurrection in Southampton is little more than the irruption of 150 or 200 runaway slaves from the Dismal Swamp, incited by a spirit of plunder and rapine. It will be quickly suppressed.

Copyright 2012 Digital History