

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

SURE THAT HE WAS DIVINELY APPOINTED, NAT TURNER LED FELLOW SLAVES IN A BLOODY ATTEMPT TO OVERTHROW THEIR MASTERS



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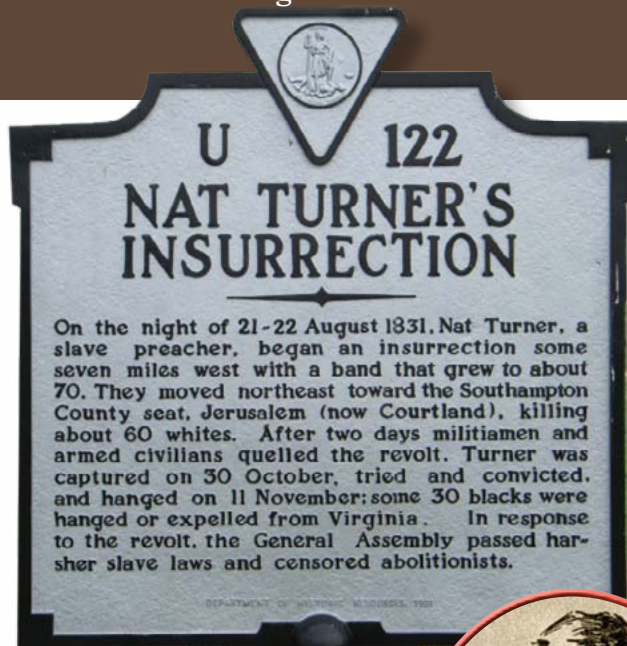
BY STEPHEN B. OATES

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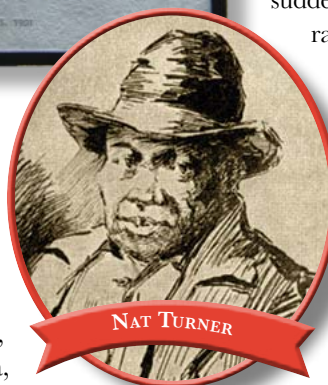
Until August, 1831, most Americans had never heard of Virginia's Southampton County, an isolated, impoverished neighborhood located along the border in the southeastern part of the state. It was mostly a small farming area, with cotton fields and apple orchards dotting the flat, wooded landscape. The farmers were singularly fond of their apple crops: from them they made a potent apple brandy, one of the major sources of pleasure in this hardscrabble region. The county seat, or "county town," was Jerusalem, a lethargic little community where pigs rooted in the streets and old-timers spat tobacco juice in the shade of the courthouse. Jerusalem lay on the bank of the Nottoway River some seventy miles south of Richmond. There had never been any large plantations in Southampton County, for the soil had always been too poor for extensive tobacco or cotton cultivation. Although one gentleman did own eighty slaves in 1830, the average was around three or four per family. A number of whites had moved on to new cotton lands in Georgia and Alabama, so that Southampton now had a population that was nearly 60 per cent black. While most of the blacks were still enslaved, an unusual number—some seventeen hundred, in fact—were "free persons of color."

By southern white standards, enlightened benevolence did exist in Southampton County—and it existed in the rest of the state, too. Virginia whites allowed a few slave schools to operate—then a crime by state law—and almost without complaint permitted slaves to hold illegal religious meetings. Indeed, Virginians liked to boast



that slavery was not so harsh in their "enlightened" state as it was in the brutal cotton plantations in the Deep South. Still, this was a dark time for southern whites—a time of sporadic insurrection panics, especially in South Carolina, and of rising abolitionist militancy in the North—and Virginians were taking no chances. Even though their slaves, they contended, were too happy and too submissive to strike back, Virginia was nevertheless almost a military garrison, with a militia force of some hundred thousand men to guard against insurrection.

Southampton whites, of course, were caught in the same paradox: most of the white males over twenty-one voluntarily belonged to the militia and turned out for the annual drills, yet none of them thought a slave revolt would happen here. *Their* blacks, they told themselves, had never been more content, more docile. True, they did get a bit carried away in their religious meetings these days, with much too



much singing and clapping. And true, there were white preachers who punctuated their sermons with what a local observer called "ranting cant about equality" and who might inspire black exhorters to retail that doctrine to their congregations. But generally things were quiet and unchanged in this remote tidewater county, where time seemed to stand as still as a windless summer day.

It happened with shattering suddenness, an explosion of black rage that rocked Southampton County to its foundations. On August 22, 1831, a band of insurgent slaves, led by a black mystic called Nat Turner, rose up with axes and plunged southeastern Virginia—and much of the rest of the South—into convulsions of fear and racial violence. It turned out to be the bloodiest slave

insurrection in southern history, one that was to have a profound and irrevocable impact on the destinies of southern whites and blacks alike.

Afterward, white authorities described him as a small man with "distinct African features." Though his shoulders were broad from work in the fields, he was short, slender, and a little knock-kneed, with thin hair, a complexion like black pearl, and large, deep-set eyes. He wore a mustache and cultivated a tuft of whiskers under his lower lip. Before that fateful August day whites who knew Nat Turner thought him harmless, even though he was intelligent and did gabble on about strange religious powers. Among the slaves, though, he

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enjoyed a powerful influence as an exhorter and self-proclaimed prophet.

He was born in 1800, the property of Benjamin Turner of Southampton County and the son of two strong-minded parents. Tradition has it that his African-born mother threatened to kill him rather than see him grow up in bondage. His father eventually escaped to the North, but not before he had helped inculcate an enormous sense of self-importance in his son. Both parents praised Nat for his brilliance and extraordinary imagination; his mother even claimed that he could recall episodes that happened before his birth—a power that others insisted only the Almighty could have given him. His mother and father both told him that he was intended for some great purpose, that he would surely become a prophet. Nat was also influenced by his grandmother, who along with his white masters taught him to pray and to take pride in his superior intelligence. He learned to read and write with great ease, prompting those who knew him to remark that he had too much sense to be raised in bondage—he “would never be of any service to any one as a slave,” one of them said.

In 1810 Benjamin Turner died, and Nat became the property of Turner’s oldest son Samuel. Under Samuel Turner’s permissive supervision Nat exploited every opportunity to improve his knowledge: he studied white children’s school books and experimented in making paper and gunpowder. But it was religion that interested him the most. He attended Negro religious meetings, where the slaves cried out in ecstasy and sang hymns that expressed their longing for a better life. He listened transfixed as black exhorters preached from the Bible with stabbing gestures, singing out in a rhythmic language that was charged with emotion and vivid imagery. He studied the Bible, too, practically memorizing the books of the Old Testament, and grew to manhood with the words of the prophets roaring in his ears.

Evidently Nat came of age a bit confused if not resentful. Both whites and blacks had said he was too intelligent to be raised a slave; yet here he was, fully grown and still in bondage. Obviously he felt betrayed by false hopes. Obviously he thought he should be liberated like the large number of free blacks who lived in Southampton County and who were not nearly so gifted as he. Still enslaved as a man, he zealously cultivated his image as a prophet; aloof, austere, and mystical. As he said later in an oral autobiographical sketch, “Having soon discovered to be great, I must appear so, and therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery, devoting myself to fasting and prayer.”

Remote, introspective, Turner had religious fantasies in which the Holy Spirit

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seemed to speak to him as it had to the prophets of old. “Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven,” the Spirit told him, “and all things shall be added unto you.” Convinced that he “was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty,” Turner told his fellow slaves about his communion with the Spirit. “And they believed,” Turner recalled, “and said my wisdom came from God.” Pleased with their response, he began to prepare them for some unnamed mission. He also started preaching at black religious gatherings and soon rose to prominence as a leading exhorter in the slave church. Although never ordained and never officially a member of any church, he was accepted as a Baptist preacher in the slave community,

and once he even baptized a white man in a swampy pond. There can be little doubt that the slave church nourished Turner’s self-esteem and his desire for independence, for it was not only a center for underground slave plottings against the master class, but a focal point for an entire alternate culture—a subterranean culture that the slaves sought to construct beyond the white man’s control. Moreover, Turner’s status as a slave preacher gave him considerable freedom of movement, so that he came to know most of Southampton County intimately.

Sometime around 1821 Turner disappeared. His master had put him under an overseer, who may have whipped him, and he fled for his freedom as his father had done. But thirty days later he voluntarily returned. The other slaves were astonished. No fugitive ever came back on his own. “And the negroes found fault, and murmured against me,” Turner recounted later, “saying that if they had my sense they would not serve any master in the world.” But in his mind Turner did not serve any earthly master. His master was Jehovah—the angry and vengeful God of ancient Israel—and it was Jehovah, he insisted, who had chastened him and brought him back to bondage.

At about this time Nat married. Evidently his wife was a young slave named Cherry who lived on Samuel Turner’s place. But in 1822 Samuel Turner died, and they were sold to different masters—Cherry to Giles Reese and Nat to Thomas Moore. Although they were not far apart and still saw each other from time to time, their separation was nevertheless a painful example of the wretched privations that slavery placed on black people, even here in mellowed Southampton County.

As a perceptive man with a prodigious knowledge of the Bible, Turner was more than aware of the hypocrisies and

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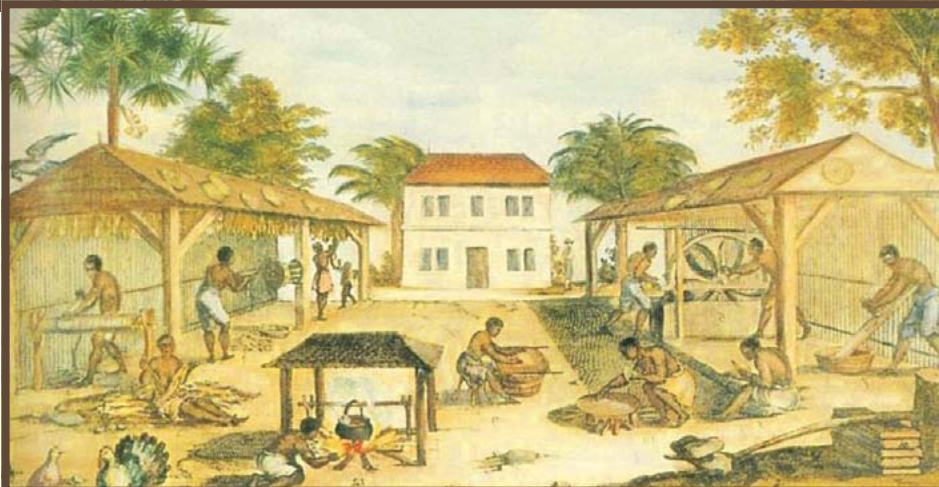
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contradictions loose in this Christian area, where whites gloried in the teachings of Jesus and yet discriminated against the “free coloreds” and kept the other blacks in chains. Here slave owners bragged about their benevolence (in Virginia they took care of their “niggers”) and yet broke up families, sold Negroes off to whip-happy slave traders when money was scarce, and denied intelligent and skilled blacks something even the most debauched and useless poor whites enjoyed: freedom. Increasingly embittered about his condition and that of his people, his imagination fired to incandescence by prolonged fasting and Old Testament prayers, Turner began to have apocalyptic visions and bloody fantasies in the fields and woods southwest of Jerusalem. “I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle,” he declared later, “and the sun was darkened—the thunder rolled in the heavens, and blood flowed in streams—and I heard a voice saying, ‘Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it.’” He was awestruck, he recalled, but what did the voice mean? What must he bare?

He withdrew from his fellow slaves and prayed for a revelation; and one day when he was plowing in the field, he thought the Spirit called out, “Behold me as I stand in the Heavens,” and Turner looked up and saw forms of men there in a variety of attitudes, “and there were

lights in the sky to which the children of darkness gave other names than what they really were—for they were the lights of the Saviour’s hands, stretched forth from east to west, even as they extended on the cross on Calvary for the redemption of sinners.”

THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT TURNER EVER READ ANTISLAVERY PUBLICATIONS, BUT HE WAS CERTAINLY SENSITIVE TO THE DESPAIR OF HIS PEOPLE.



Slaves processing tobacco in 17th-century Virginia.

Certain that Judgment Day was fast approaching, Turner strove to attain “true holiness” and “the true knowledge of faith.” And once he had them, once he was “made perfect,” then the Spirit showed him other miracles. While working in the field, he said, he discovered drops of blood on the corn. In the woods he found leaves with hieroglyphic characters and numbers etched on them; other leaves contained forms of men—some drawn in blood—like the figures in the sky. He told his fellow slaves about these signs

—they were simply astounded—and claimed that the Spirit had endowed him with a special knowledge of the seasons, the rotation of the planets, and the operation of the tides. He acquired an even greater reputation among the county’s slaves, many of whom thought he could control the weather and heal disease. He told his followers that clearly something large was about to happen, that he was soon to fulfill “the great promise that had been made to me.”

But he still did not know what his mission was. Then on May 12, 1828, “I heard a loud

noise in the heavens,” Turner remembered, “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.” Now at last it was clear. By signs in the heavens, Jehovah would show him when to commence the great work, whereupon “I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons.” Until then he should keep his lips sealed.

But his work was too momentous for him to remain entirely silent. He announced to Thomas Moore that the slaves ought to be free and would be “one day or other.” Moore, of course, regarded this as dangerous talk from a slave and gave Turner a thrashing.

In 1829 a convention met in Virginia to draft a new state constitution, and there was talk among the slaves—who communicated along a slave grapevine—that they might be liberated. Their hopes were crushed, though, when the convention emphatically rejected emancipation and restricted suffrage to whites only. There was also a strong backlash against antislavery publications thought to be infiltrating from the North, one of which—David Walker’s *Appeal*—actually called on the slaves to revolt. In reaction the Virginia legislature enacted a law against teaching slaves to read and

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write. True, it was not yet rigorously enforced, but from the blacks' viewpoint slavery seemed more entrenched in "enlightened" Virginia than ever.

There is no evidence that Turner ever read antislavery publications, but he was certainly sensitive to the despair of his people. Still, Jehovah gave him no further signs, and he was carried along in the ebb and flow of ordinary life. Moore had died in 1828, and Turner had become the legal property of Moore's nine-year-old son—something that must have humiliated him. In 1829 a

local wheelwright, Joseph Travis, married Moore's widow and soon moved into her house near the Cross Keys, a village located southwest of Jerusalem. Still known as Nat Turner even though he had changed owners several times, Nat considered Travis "a kind master" and later said that Travis "placed the greatest confidence in me."

In February, 1831, there was an eclipse of the sun. The sign Turner had been waiting for—could there be any doubt? Removing the seal from his lips, he gathered around him four slaves in whom he had complete trust—Hark, Henry, Nelson, and Sam—and confided what he was called to do. They would commence "the work of death" on July 4, whose connotation Turner clearly understood. But they formed and rejected so many plans that his mind was affected. He was seized with dread. He fell sick, and Independence Day came and passed.

On August 13 there was another sign. Because of some atmospheric disturbance the sun grew so dim that it could be looked at directly. Then it seemed to change colors—now pale green, now blue, now white—and there was much excitement and consternation in many parts of the eastern United States. By afternoon the sun



Nat Turner's Rebellion was a slave rebellion that took place in Southampton County, Virginia during August 1831. Led by Nat Turner, rebel slaves killed anywhere from 55–65 white people, the highest number of fatalities caused by any slave uprising in the South. The rebellion was put down within a few days, but Turner survived in hiding for over two months afterward.

was like an immense ball of polished silver, and the air was moist and hazy. Then a black spot could be seen, apparently on the sun's surface—a phenomenon that greatly aroused the slaves in southeastern Virginia. For Turner the black spot was unmistakable proof that God wanted him to move. With awakened resolution he told his men that "as the black spot passed over the sun, so shall the blacks pass over the earth."

It was Sunday, August 21, deep in the woods near the Travis house at a place called Cabin Pond. Around a crackling fire Turner's confederates feasted on roast pig and apple brandy. With them were two new recruits—Jack, one of Hark's cronies, and Will, a powerful man who intended to gain his freedom or die in the attempt. Around midafternoon Turner himself made a dramatic appearance, and in the glare of pine-knot torches they finally made their plans. They would rise that night and "kill all the white people." It was a propitious time to begin, because many whites of the militia were away at a camp meeting. The revolt would be so swift and so terrible that the whites would be too panic-stricken to fight back. Until they had sufficient recruits and equipment, the insurgents

would annihilate everybody in their path—women and children included. When one of the slaves complained about their small number (there were only seven of them, after all), Turner was quick to reassure him. He had deliberately avoided an extensive plot involving a lot of slaves. He knew that blacks had "frequently attempted similar things," but their plans had "leaked out." Turner intended for his revolt to happen completely without warning. The "march of destruction," he explained, "should be the first news of the

insurrection," whereupon slaves and free blacks alike would rise up and join him. He did not say what their ultimate objective was, but possibly he wanted to fight his way into the Great Dismal Swamp some twenty miles to the east. This immense, snake-filled quagmire had long been a haven for fugitives, and Turner may have planned to establish a slave stronghold there from which to launch punitive raids against Virginia and North Carolina. On the other hand, he may well have had nothing in mind beyond the extermination of every white on the ten-mile route to Jerusalem. There are indications that he thought God would guide him after the revolt began, just as He had directed Gideon against the Midianites. Certainly Turner's command of unremitting carnage was that of the Almighty, who had said through his prophet Ezekiel: "Slay utterly old and young, both maids and little children, and women...."

The slaves talked and schemed through the evening. Night came on. Around two in the morning of August 22 they left the woods, by-passed Giles Reese's farm, where Cherry lived, and headed for the Travis homestead, the first target in their crusade.

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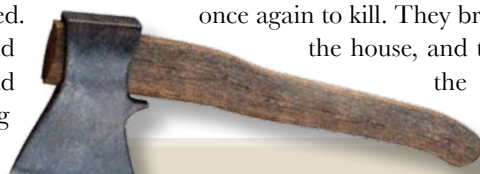
All was still at the Travis house. In the darkness the insurgents gathered about the cider press, and all drank except Turner, who never touched liquor. Then they moved across the yard with their axes. Hark placed a ladder against the house, and Turner, armed with a hatchet, climbed up and disappeared through a second-story window. In a moment he unbarred the door, and the slaves spread through the house without a sound. The others wanted Turner the prophet, Turner the black messiah, to strike the first blow and kill Joseph Travis. With Will close behind, Turner entered Travis' bedroom and made his way to the white man's bed. Turner swung his hatchet—a wild blow that glanced off Travis' head and brought him out of bed yelling for his wife. But with a sure killer's instinct Will moved in and hacked Travis to death with his axe. In minutes Will and the others had slaughtered the four whites they found in the house, including Mrs. Travis and young Putnam Moore, Turner's legal owner. With Putnam's death Turner felt that at last, after thirty years in bondage, he was free.

The rebels gathered up a handful of old muskets and followed "General Nat" out to the barn. There Turner paraded his men about, leading them through every military maneuver he knew. Not all of them, however, were proud of their work. Jack sank to his knees with his head in his hands and said he was sick. But Hark made him get up and forced him along as they set out across the field to the next farm. Along the way somebody remembered the Travis baby. Will and Henry returned and killed it in its cradle.

And so it went throughout that malignant night, as the rebels took farm after farm by surprise. They used no firearms, in order not to arouse the countryside, instead stabbing and decapitating their victims. Although they confiscated horses, weapons, and brandy, they took only what

was necessary to continue the struggle, and they committed no rapes. They even spared a few homesteads, one because Turner believed the poor white inhabitants "thought no better of themselves than they did of negroes." By dawn on Monday there were fifteen insurgents—nine on horses—and they were aimed with a motley assortment of guns, clubs, swords, and axes. Turner himself now carried a light dress sword, but for some mysterious reason (a fatal irresolution? the dread again?) he had killed nobody yet.

At Elizabeth Turner's place, which the slaves stormed at sunrise, the prophet tried once again to kill. They broke into the house, and there, in the middle



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of the room, too frightened to move or cry out, stood Mrs. Turner and a neighbor named Mrs. Newsome. Nat knew Elizabeth Turner very well, for she was the widow of his second master, Samuel Turner. While Will attacked her with his axe the prophet took Mrs. Newsome's hand and hit her over the head with his sword. But evidently he could not bring himself to kill her. Finally Will moved him aside and chopped her to death as methodically as though he were cutting wood.

With the sun low in the east, Turner sent a group on foot to another farm while he and Will led the horsemen at a gallop to Caty Whitehead's place. They surrounded the house in a rush, but not before several people fled into the garden. Turner chased

after somebody, but it turned out to be a slave girl, as terrified as the whites, and he let her go. All around him, all over the Whitehead farm, there were scenes of unspeakable violence. He saw Will drag Mrs. Whitehead kicking and screaming out of the house and almost sever her head from her body. Running around the house, Turner came upon young Margaret Whitehead hiding under a cellar cap between two chimneys. She ran crying for her life, and Turner set out after her—a wild chase against the hot August sun. He overtook the girl in a field and hit her again and again with his sword, but she would not die. In desperation he picked up a fence rail and beat her to death. Finally he had killed someone. He was to kill no one else.

After the Whitehead massacre the insurgents united briefly and then divided again, those on foot moving in one direction and Turner and the mounted slaves in another. The riders moved across the fields, kicking their horses and mules faster and faster, until at last they raced down the lane to Richard Porter's house, scattering dogs and chickens as they went. But the Porters had fled—forewarned by their own slaves that a revolt was under way. Turner knew that the alarm was spreading now, knew that the militia would soon be mobilizing, so he set out alone to retrieve the other column. While he was gone Will took the cavalry and raided Nathaniel Francis' homestead. Young Francis was Will's owner, but he could not have been a harsh master: several free blacks voluntarily lived on his farm. Francis was not home, and his pregnant young wife survived Will's onslaught only because a slave concealed her in the attic. After killing the overseer and Francis' two nephews Will and his men raced on to another farm, and another, and then overran John Barrow's place on the Barrow Road. Old man Barrow fought back manfully while his wife escaped in the woods, but the insurgents overwhelmed him and slit his throat. As

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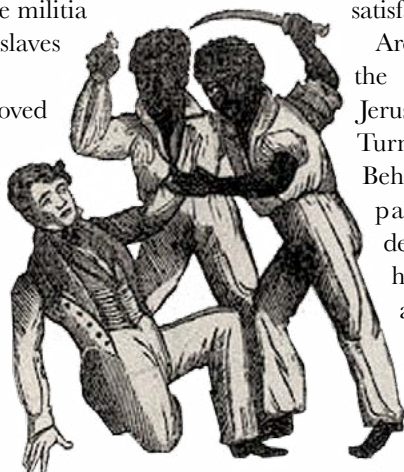
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a tribute to his courage they wrapped his body in a quilt and left a plug of tobacco on his chest.

Meanwhile Turner rode chaotically around the countryside, chasing after one column and then the other, almost always reaching the farms after his scattered troops had done the killing and gone. Eventually he found both columns waiting for him at another pillaged homestead, took charge again, and sent them down the Barrow Road, which intersected the main highway to Jerusalem. They were forty strong now and all mounted. Many of the new recruits had joined up eager “to kill all the white people.” But others had been forced to come along as though they were hostages. A Negro later testified that several slaves—among them three teen-age boys—“were constantly guarded by negroes with guns who were ordered to shoot them if they attempted to escape.”

On the Barrow Road, Turner’s strategy was to put his twenty most dependable men in front and send them galloping down on the homesteads before anybody could escape. But the cry of insurrection had preceded them, and many families had already escaped to nearby Jerusalem, throwing the village into pandemonium. By midmorning church bells were tolling the terrible news—*insurrection, insurrection*—and shouting men were tiding through the countryside in a desperate effort to get the militia together before the slaves overran Jerusalem itself.

As Turner’s column moved relentlessly toward Jerusalem one Levi Waller, having heard that the blacks had risen, summoned his children from a nearby schoolhouse (some of the other children came running too) and tried to load his guns. But



before he could do so, Turner’s advance horsemen swept into his yard, a whirlwind of axes and swords, and chased Waller into some tall weeds. Waller managed to escape, but not before he saw the blacks cut down his wife and children. One small girl also escaped. In crawling up a dirt chimney, scarcely daring to breathe as the insurgents decapitated the other children—ten in all—and threw them bodies in a pile.

Turner had stationed himself at the rear of his little army and did not participate in these or any other killings along the Barrow Road. He never explained why. He had been fasting for several days and may well have been too weak to try any more killing himself. Or maybe as God’s prophet he preferred to let Will and the eight or nine other lieutenants do the

TURNER “SOMETIMES GOT IN SIGHT IN TIME TO SEE THE WORK OF DEATH COMPLETED” AND THAT HE PAUSED TO VIEW THE BODIES “IN SILENT SATISFACTION”.

slaughtering. All he said about it afterward was that he “sometimes got in sight in time to see the work of death completed” and that he paused to view the bodies “in silent satisfaction” before founding on.

Around noon on Monday the insurgents reached the Jerusalem highway, and Turner soon joined them. Behind them lay a zigzag path of unredeemable destruction: some fifteen homesteads sacked and approximately sixty whites slain. By now the rebels amounted to fifty or sixty—including three or four free blacks. But

even at its zenith Turner’s army showed signs of disintegration. A few reluctant slaves had already escaped or deserted. And many others were roaring drunk, so drunk they could scarcely ride their horses, let alone do any fighting. To make matters worse, many of the confiscated muskets were broken or too rusty to fire.

Turner resolved to march on Jerusalem at once and seize all the guns and powder he could find there. But a half mile up the road he stopped at the Parker farm, because some of his men had relatives and friends there. When the insurgents did not return, Turner went after them—and found his men not in the slave quarters but down in Parker’s brandy cellar. He ordered them back to the highway at once.

On the way back they met a party of armed men—whites. There were about eighteen of them, as far as Turner could make out. They had already routed his small guard at the gate and were now advancing toward the Parker house. With renewed zeal Turner rallied his remaining troops and ordered an attack. Yelling at the top of their lungs, wielding axes, clubs, and gun butts, the Negroes drove the whites back into Parker’s cornfield. But their advantage was short-lived. White reinforcements arrived, and more were on the way from nearby Jerusalem. Regrouping in the cornfield, the whites counterattacked, throwing the rebels back in confusion. In the fighting some of Turner’s best men fell wounded, though none of them died. Several insurgents, too drunk to fight any more, fled pell-mell into the woods.

If Turner had often seemed irresolute earlier in the revolt, he was now undaunted. Even though his force was considerably reduced, he still wanted to storm Jerusalem. He led his men away from the main highway, which was blocked with militia, and took them along a back road, planning to cross the Cypress Bridge and strike the village from the rear. But the bridge was crawling with armed whites. In desperation

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the blacks set out to find reinforcements: they fell back to the south and then veered north again, picking up new recruits as they moved. They raided a few more farms, too, only to find them deserted, and finally encamped for the night near the slave quarters on Ridley's plantation.

All Monday night news of the revolt spread beyond Southampton County as express riders carried the alarm up to Petersburg and from there to the capitol in Richmond. Governor John Floyd, fearing a statewide uprising, alerted the militia and sent cavalry, infantry, and artillery units to the stricken county. Federal troops from Fortress Monroe were on the way, too, and other volunteers and militia outfits were marching from contiguous counties in Virginia and North Carolina. Soon over three thousand armed whites were in Southampton County, and hundreds more were mobilizing.

With whites swarming the countryside, Turner and his lieutenants did not know what to do. During the night an alarm had stampeded their new recruits, so that by Tuesday morning they had only twenty men left. Frantically they set out for Dr. Simon Blunt's farm to get volunteers—and rode straight into an ambush. Whites barricaded in the house opened fire on them at pointblank range, killing one or more insurgents and capturing several others—among them Hark Travis. Blunt's own slaves, armed with farm tools, helped in the defense and captured a few rebels themselves.

Repulsed at Blunt's farm, Turner led a handful of the faithful back toward the Cross Keys, still hoping to gather reinforcements. But the signs were truly ominous, for armed whites were everywhere. At last the militia overtook Turner's little band and in a final, desperate skirmish killed Will and scattered the rest. Turner himself, alone and in deep anguish, escaped to the vicinity of the Travis farm and hid in a hole under some fence rails.

By Tuesday evening a full-scale manhunt was under way in southeastern Virginia and North Carolina as armed whites prowled the woods and swamps in search of fugitive rebels and alleged collaborators. They chased the blacks down with howling dogs, killing those who resisted—and many of them resisted zealously—and dragging others back to Jerusalem to stand trial in the county court. One free black insurgent committed suicide rather than be taken by white men. Within a week nearly all the bona fide rebels except Turner had either been executed or imprisoned, but not before white vigilantes—and some militiamen—had perpetrated barbarities on more than a

ALTHOUGH TURNER'S UPRISING ENDED, REPORTS OF ADDITIONAL INSURRECTIONS SWEEPED OVER THE SOUTH LONG AFTERWARD, AND DOZENS OF COMMUNITIES FROM VIRGINIA TO ALABAMA WERE SEIZED WITH HYSTERIA.

score of innocent blacks. Outraged by the atrocities committed on whites, vigilantes rounded up Negroes in the Cross Keys and decapitated them. Another vigilante gang in North Carolina not only beheaded several blacks but placed their skulls on poles, where they remained for days. In all directions whites took Negroes from their shacks and tortured, shot, and burned them to death and then mutilated their corpses in ways that witnesses refused to describe. No one knows how many innocent Negroes died in this reign of terror—at least a hundred twenty, probably more. Finally the militia commander of Southampton County issued a proclamation that any

further outrages would be dealt with according to the articles of war. Many whites publicly regretted these atrocities but argued that they were the inevitable results of slave insurrection. Another revolt, they said, would end with the extermination of every black in the region.

Although Turner's uprising ended on Tuesday, August 24, reports of additional insurrections swept over the South long afterward, and dozens of communities from Virginia to Alabama were seized with hysteria. In North Carolina rumors flew that slave armies had been seen on the highways, that one—maybe led by Turner himself—had burned Wilmington, butchered all the inhabitants, and was now

marching on the state capital. The hysteria was even worse in Virginia, where reports of concerted slave rebellions and demands for men and guns swamped the governor's office. For a time it seemed that thousands of slaves had risen, that Virginia and perhaps the entire South would soon be ablaze. But Governor Floyd kept his head, examined the reports carefully, and concluded that no such widespread insurrection had taken place. Actually no additional uprisings had happened anywhere. Out of blind panic whites in many parts of the South had mobilized the

militia, chased after imaginary insurgents, and jailed or executed still more innocent blacks. Working in cooperation with other political and military authorities in Virginia and North Carolina, Floyd did all he could to quell the excitement, to reassure the public that the slaves were quiet now. Still, the governor did not think the Turner revolt was the work of a solitary fanatic. Behind it, he believed, was a conspiracy of Yankee agitators and black preachers—especially black preachers. "The whole of that massacre in Southampton is the work of these Preachers," he declared, and demanded that they be suppressed.

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

— CONTINUED —

Meanwhile the “great bandit chieftain,” as the newspapers called him, was still at large. For more than two months Turner managed to elude white patrols, hiding out most of the time near Cabin Pond where the revolt had begun. Hunted by a host of aroused whites (there were various rewards totalling eleven hundred dollars on his head), Turner considered giving himself up and once got within two miles of Jerusalem before turning back. Finally on Sunday, October 30, a white named Benjamin Phipps accidentally discovered him in another hideout near Cabin Pond. Since the man had a loaded shotgun,



Nat Turner captured by Mr. Benjamin Phipps, a local farmer.

Turner had no choice but to throw down his sword.

The next day, with lynch mobs crying for his head, a white guard hurried Turner up to Jerusalem to stand trial. By now he was resigned to his fate as the will of Almighty God and was entirely fearless and unrepentant. When a couple of court justices examined him that day, he stated emphatically that *he* had conceived and directed the slaughter of all those white people (even though he had killed only Margaret Whitehead) and announced that God had endowed him with extraordinary powers. The justices ordered this “fanatic” locked up in the same small wooden jail where the other captured rebels had been incarcerated.

On November 1 one Thomas Gray, an elderly Jerusalem lawyer and slaveholder, came to interrogate Turner as he lay in his cell “clothed with rags and covered with chains.” In Gray’s opinion the public was anxious to learn the facts about the insurrection—for whites in Southampton

could not fathom why their slaves would revolt. What Gray wanted was to take down and publish a confession from Turner that would tell the public the truth about why the rebellion had happened. It appears that Gray had already gathered a wealth of information about the outbreak from other prisoners, some of whom he had defended as a court-appointed counsel. Evidently he had also written unsigned newspaper accounts of the affair, reporting in one that whites had

NAT TURNER has been convicted by the special court of Southampton county. He was sentenced to be hung on Friday, the 11th of November: no doubt the sentence was carried into execution yesterday. We also learn that three other slaves were to be executed at the same time and place; one of them taken previously to the apprehension of Nat,—the other two subsequently, and upon Nat’s information.

located Turner’s wife and lashed her until she surrendered his papers (remarkable papers, papers with hieroglyphics on them and sketches of the Crucifixion and the sun). According to Gray and to other sources as well, Turner over a period of

three days gave him a voluntary and authentic confession about the genesis and execution of the revolt, recounting his religious visions in graphic detail and contending again that he was a prophet of Almighty God. “Do you not find yourself mistaken now?” Gray asked. Turner replied testily, “Was not Christ crucified?” Turner insisted that the uprising was local in origin but warned that other slaves might see signs and act as he had done. By the end of the confession Turner was in high spirits, perfectly “willing to suffer the fate that awaits me.” Although Gray considered him “a gloomy fanatic,” he thought

Turner was one of the most articulate men he had ever met. And Turner could be frightening. When, in a burst of enthusiasm, he spoke of the killings and raised his manacled hands toward heaven, “I looked on him,” Gray said, “and my blood curdled in my veins.”

On November 5, with William C. Parker acting as his counsel, Turner came to trial in Jerusalem. The court, of course, found him guilty of committing insurrection and sentenced him to hang. Turner, though, insisted that he was not guilty because he did not feel so. On November 11 he went to his death in resolute silence. In addition to Turner, the county court tried some forty-eight other Negroes on various charges of conspiracy, insurrection, and treason. In all,

eighteen blacks—including one woman—were convicted and hanged. Ten others were convicted and “transported”—presumably out of the United States.

But the consequences of the Turner revolt did not end with public hangings in

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

— CONTINUED —

Jerusalem. For southern whites the uprising seemed a monstrous climax to a whole decade of ominous events, a decade of abominable tariffs and economic panics, of obstreperous antislavery activities, and of growing slave unrest and insurrection plots, beginning with the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in Charleston in 1822 and culminating now in the worst insurrection Southerners had ever known. Desperately needing to blame somebody besides themselves for Nat Turner, Southerners linked the revolt to some sinister Yankee-abolitionist plot to destroy their cherished way of life. Southern zealots declared that the antislavery movement, gathering momentum in the North throughout the 1820's, had now burst into a full-blown crusade against the South. In January, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison had started publishing *The Liberator* in Boston, demanding in bold, strident language that the slaves be immediately and unconditionally emancipated. If Garrison's rhetoric shocked Southerners, even more disturbing was the fact that about eight months after the appearance of *The Liberator* Nat Turner embarked on his bloody crusade—something southern politicians and newspapers refused to accept as mere coincidence. They charged that Garrison was behind the insurrection, that it was his “bloodthirsty” invective that had incited Turner to violence. Never mind that there was no evidence that Turner had ever heard of *The Liberator*; never mind that Garrison categorically denied any connection with the revolt, saying that he and his abolitionist followers were Christian pacifists who wanted to free the slaves through moral suasion. From 1831 on, northern abolitionism and slave rebellion were inextricably associated in the southern mind.

But if Virginians blamed the insurrection on northern abolitionism, many of them defended emancipation itself as the only

way to prevent further violence. In fact, for several months in late 1831 and early 1832 Virginians engaged in a momentous public debate over the feasibility of manumission. Out of the western part of the state, where antislavery and anti-Negro sentiment had long been smoldering, came petitions demanding that Virginia eradicate the “accursed,” “evil” slave system and colonize all blacks at state expense. Only by removing the entire black population, the petitions argued, could future revolts be avoided. Newspapers also discussed the idea of emancipation and colonization, prompting one to announce that “Nat Turner and the blood of his innocent victims have conquered the silence of fifty years.” The

FOR THE WHITES, NAT TURNER'S
NAME BECAME A SYMBOL OF TERROR
AND VIOLENT RETRIBUTION.

debate moved into the Virginia legislature, too, and early in 1832 proslavery and antislavery orators harangued one another in an unprecedented legislative struggle over emancipation. In the end most delegates concluded that colonization was too costly and too complicated to carry out. And since they were not about to manumit the blacks and leave them as free men in a white man's country, they rejected emancipation. Indeed, they went on to revise and implement the slave codes in order to restrict blacks so stringently that they could never mount another revolt. The modified codes not only strengthened the patrol and militia systems, but sharply curtailed the rights of free blacks and all but eliminated slave schools, slave religious meetings, and slave preachers. For Turner had taught white Virginians a hard lesson about what might happen if they gave slaves enough education and religion to think for themselves.

In the wake of the Turner revolt, the rise of the abolitionists, and the Virginia

debates over slavery, the other southern states also expanded their patrol and militia systems and increased the severity of their slave codes. What followed was the Great Reaction of the 1830's and 1840's, during which the South, threatened it seemed by internal and external enemies, became a closed, martial society determined to preserve its slave-based civilization at whatever cost. If Southerners had once apologized for slavery as a necessary evil, they now trumpeted that institution as a positive good—“the greatest of all the great blessings,” as James H. Hammond phrased it, “which a kind providence has bestowed.” Southern postmasters set about confiscating abolitionist literature,

lest these “incendiary” tracts invite the slaves to violence. Some states actually passed sedition laws and other restrictive measures that prohibited Negroes and whites alike from criticizing slavery. And slave owners all across

the South tightened up slave discipline, refusing to let blacks visit other plantations and threatening to hang any slave who even looked rebellious. By the 1840's the Old South had devised such an oppressive slave system that organized insurrection was all but impossible.

Even so, southern whites in the antebellum period never escaped the haunting fear that somewhere, maybe even in their own slave quarters, another Nat Turner was plotting to rise up and slit their throats. They never forgot him. His name became for them a symbol of terror and violent retribution.

But for ante-bellum blacks—and for their descendants—the name of Nat Turner took on a profoundly different connotation. He became a legendary black hero who broke his chains and murdered white people because slavery had murdered Negroes. Turner, said an elderly black man in Southampton County only a few years ago, was “God's man. He was a man for war, and for legal rights, and for freedom.” ♦

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

COURT PROCEEDINGS AND TESTIMONY REGARDING THE DENMARK VESEY REBELLION

<http://www.teachingushistory.org/lessons/denmarkveseytrial1822.htm>



Slave with club standing over body of white man holding whip.

DESCRIPTION

In May of 1822, Charlestonians uncovered a plot for a slave insurrection planned for July. Denmark Vesey, a free black man who purchased his freedom in 1800, was the leader of the alleged insurrection, which planned to take the city of Charleston. After a lengthy trial, Vesey and over thirty others were condemned to death and hanged. After the insurrection scare, laws were passed to restrict the movement of slaves and free blacks.

This document provides an excerpt of the 202-page court report of the examination of slaves during the trial. This excerpt includes the testimonies of six enslaved men in Charleston who had some connection to Denmark Vesey or his alleged co-conspirators. The first names of all but one of the six enslaved men in this excerpt are provided along with the names of their slaveowner. Interestingly, one slave is only given the name of “Y*”, which seems to indicate that the slaveowner or someone wanted to protect this person’s identity. The six testimonials were identified in the following way:

- 1) Pompey, “a negro man belonging to Mr. Bryants;”
- 2) Edwin, “a Negro man belonging to Mr. Paul;”
- 3) Frank, “a Negro man belonging to Mr. Ferguson;”
- 4) Pharo, “belonging to Mr. Thompson;”
- 5) Patrick, “belonging to Miss Datty;” and
- 6) “Y* belonging to Colonel George W. Cross.”

Citation: “Court Proceedings and Testimony Regarding the Vesey Rebellion,” June 1822-August 1822, 1-2. General Assembly. Governors’ messages. S 165009. South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina.

TRANSCRIPTION

EXAMINATION OF POMPEY—A NEGRO MAN BELONGING TO MR BRYANTS

Denmark Vesey has often spoken to me about the insurrection and endeavoured [sic] to persuade me to join them, he enquired of me if my master had not arms in his house and tried to persuade me to get them from him—the blacks stood in great fear of him and [illegible] so much so, that I always endeavoured [sic] to avoid him.

EXAMINATION OF EDWIN—A NEGRO MAN BELONGING TO MR PAUL

Charles belongs to Judge Drayton—he told me that Monday Gell and Denmark Vesey knew about the insurrection of the blacks—he said that William Paul in consequence of his having given testimony would run a great risk of his life if he went out. I heard every body, even the women say when several were apprehended that they wondered that Monday Gell and Denmark Vesey were not taken.

EXAMINATION OF FRANK—A NEGRO MAN BELONGING TO MR FERGUSON

The first time I spoke with Monday Gell ‘twas one night a Vesey’s house, where I heard Vesey tell Monday, he must send some one round into the country to [illegible] the people down. Monday replied he had directed Jack to go up, and told him to tell the people to come down and join in the fight against the Whites, and to ascertain and inform him how many people he could get to agree—A few days after I met Vesey, Monday, and Jack in the street under Mr Duncans trees at night, where Jack stated, that he had been in the country round by Goose Creek and Dorchester and that he had spoken to 6,600 persons who had agreed to join. At Vesey’s the first time I spoke to Monday, he was going away early and Vesey asked him to stay: when Monday said he expected that night a meeting at this house to fix upon and mature the plan &c. and he could not stay. I afterwards conversed with Monday in his shop where he asked me if I had heard that Bennetts and Poyas’ people were taken up, that ‘twas a great pity—he said he had joined in the business—I told him to take care that he was not taken up. Whenever I talked with Vesey, he always spoke of Monday being his principal and active man in this business—I

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

COURT PROCEEDINGS AND TESTIMONY REGARDING THE DENMARK VESEY REBELLION

— CONTINUED —

heard Jack say, he would pay no more wages, he was too busy in seeing about this insurrection, besides what would the Whites want with wages—they would soon be no more. Monday Gell said to Vesey, that if Jack had so many men, they had better wait no longer, but begin the business at once and others would join.

Mr James Ferguson who was present at Franks examination stated to the Court that the testimony of Frank was in substance what he had before told him.

EXAMINATION OF PHARO—*BELONGING TO MR THOMPSON*

One evening I over heard two men in the street say that [illegible] Berry and Denmark Vesey were two principal men—Perault belong to Mr Strohecker said to me last Tuesday that the black people were not worth any thing, but that there was a French Band, which if they could get only 100 men to join with them would attack the work house and take their friends out. I once went to Monday Gells, who had told me he wanted to see me—this was before Mr Pauls' William was taken up, I then met Charles Drayton and Mr Fergusons Frank frequents Mondays house—Monday said he wanted to say something particular to me, and Charles winked at him, when Monday stopped [illegible]—Charles asked me on friday the 14th June in the streets to lend him a horse next Sunday evening—I said I could not.

EXAMINATION OF PATRICK—*BELONGING TO MISS DATTY*

I know Charles Drayton—about 5 months ago he met me in the street, when he stopped me, and asked me to join with him—I asked him in what—he said he want to make up a Company—I said what for, he said for some respectable known man coming here from abroad—I said I did not want death to take me yet and quit him.

EXAMINATION OF Y*—*BELONGING TO COLONEL GEORGE W. CROSS*

Peter Poyas first spoke to me and asked me to join. I asked him to join what, the Church—he said no, have you not heard that the blacks are going to try to take the Country from the Whites—I asked him if he thought he had force enough to do it—he said yes aplenty. ♦



Court Proceedings and Testimony Regarding the Denmark Vesey Rebellion document and depiction of a whip used on slaves.

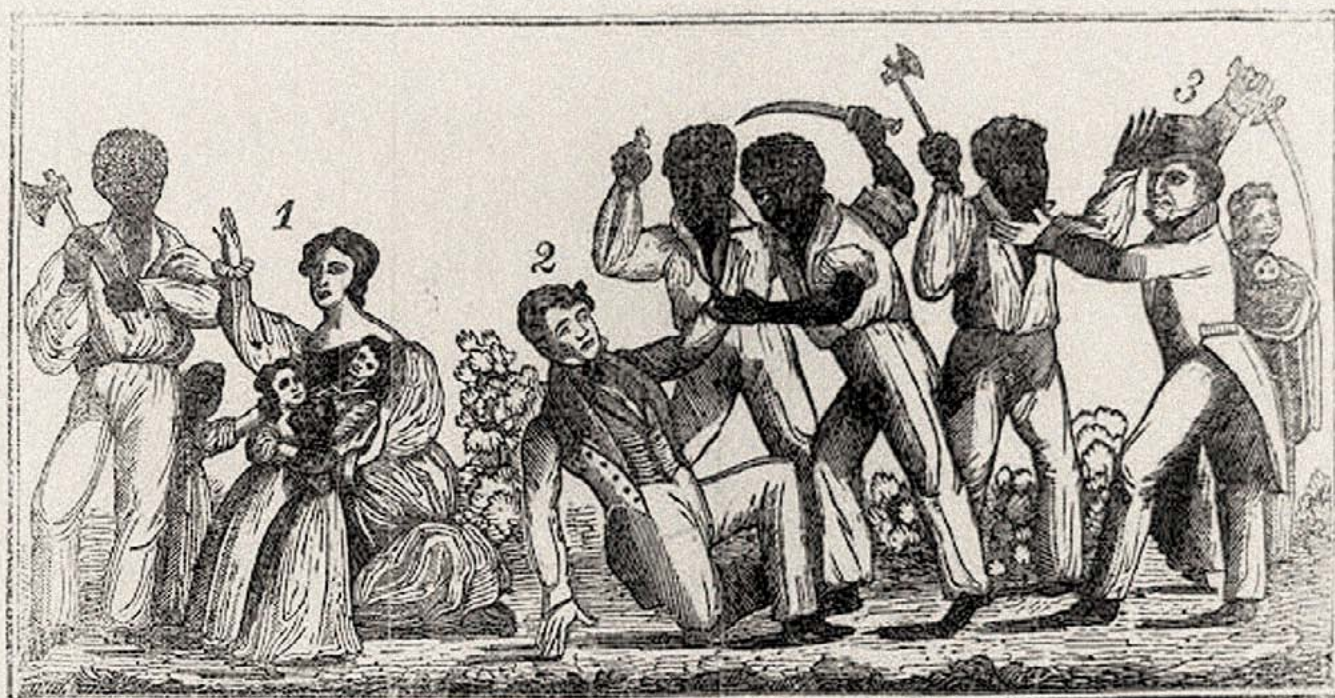
CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA

COMPOSITE OF SCENES OF NAT TURNER'S REBELLION

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/98510363/>

HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA.



The Scenes which the above Plate is designed to represent, are—Fig. 1. a Mother intreating for the lives of her children,—2. Mr. Travis, cruelly murdered by his own Slaves.—3. Mr. Barrow, who bravely defended himself until his wife escaped.—4. A Comp. of mounted Dragoons in pursuit of the Blacks.

TRANSCRIPT

THE SCENES WHICH THE ABOVE PLATE ARE DESIGNED TO REPRESENT ARE:

- Fig. 1. a Mother intreating for the lives of her children.
2. Mr. Travis, cruelly murdered by his own Slaves.
3. Mr. Barrow who bravely defended himself while his wife escaped.
4. A Comp. of mounted Dragoons in pursuit of the Blacks.

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

THE LIBERATOR COMMENTS ON NAT TURNER'S INSURRECTION

WELD | 1831

http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=358

ANNOTATION

On January 1, 1831, William Lloyd Garrison founded *The Liberator*, a militant abolitionist newspaper that was one of the country's first publications to demand an immediate end to slavery. On the front page of the first issue, he defiantly declared: "I will not equivocate--I will not excuse--I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD." Incensed by Garrison's proclamation, the state of Georgia offered a \$5000 reward to anyone who brought him to that state for trial.

THE INSURRECTION

What we have long predicted,—at the peril of being stigmatized as an alarmist and declaimer,—has commenced its fulfillment. The first step of the earthquake, which is ultimately to shake down the fabric of oppression, leaving not one stone upon the other, has been made. The first drops of blood, which are but the prelude to a deluge from the gathering clouds, have fallen....

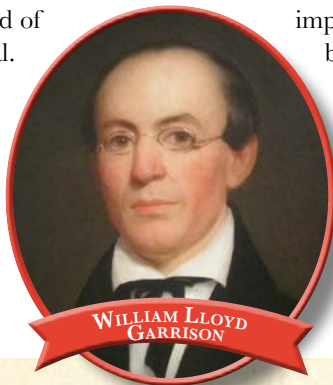
Read the account of the insurrection in Virginia, and say whether our prophecy be not fulfilled....

True, the rebellion is quelled. Those of the slaves who were not killed in combat have been secured, and the prison is crowded with victims destined for the gallows!... You have seen, it is to be feared, but the beginning of sorrows. All the blood which has been shed will be acquired at your hands. At your hands alone? No—but at the hands of the people of New-England and of all the free states. The crime of oppression is national. The South is only the agent in this guilty traffic. But, remember! the same causes are at work which must inevitably produce the same effects; and when the contest shall have again begun, it must be a war of extermination....

Ye accuse the pacific friends of emancipation of instigating the slaves to revolt.... The slaves need no incentive at our hands. They will find in

their stripes--in their emaciated bodies--in their ceaseless toil--in their ignorant minds...in your speeches and conversations, your celebrations, your pamphlets, your newspapers--voices in the air, sounds from across the ocean, invitations to resistance above, below, around them! What more do they need....

For ourselves, we are horror-struck at the late tidings. We have exerted our utmost efforts to avert the calamity. We have warned our countrymen of the danger of persisting in their unrighteous conduct. We have preached to the slaves the pacific precepts of Jesus Christ. We have appealed to christians, philanthropists and patriots, for their assistance to accomplish the great work of national redemption through the agency of moral power--of public opinion—of individual duty. How have we been received? We have been threatened, proscribed, vilified and imprisoned.... If we have been hitherto urgent, and bold, and denunciatory in our efforts--hereafter we shall grow vehement and active with the increase of danger. We shall cry, in trumpet tones, night and day,—Wo to this guilty land, unless she speedily repents of her evil doings! The blood of millions of her sons cries aloud for redress! IMMEDIATE EMANCIPATION can alone save her from the vengeance of Heaven, and cancel the debt of ages! ♦



CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

FEAR OF INSURRECTION

HARRIET ANN JACOBS

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newnation/5250>

“NOT FAR from this time Nat Turner’s insurrection broke out; and the news threw our town into great commotion. Strange that they should be alarmed when their slaves were so “contented and happy”! But so it was.

It was always the custom to have a muster every year. On that occasion every white man shouldered his musket. The citizens and the so-called country gentlemen wore military uniforms. The poor whites took their places in the ranks in every-day dress, some without shoes, some without hats. This grand occasion had already passed; and when the slaves were told there was to be another muster, they were surprised and rejoiced. Poor creatures! They thought it was going to be a holiday. I was informed of the true state of affairs, and imparted it to the few I could trust. Most gladly would I have proclaimed it to every slave; but I dared not. All could not be relied on. Mighty is the power of the torturing lash.

By sunrise, people were pouring in from every quarter within twenty miles of the town. I knew the houses were to be searched; and I expected it would be done by country bullies and the poor whites. I knew nothing annoyed them so much as to see colored people living in comfort and respectability; so I made arrangements for them with especial care. I arranged every thing in my grandmother’s house as neatly as possible. I put white quilts on the beds, and decorated some of the rooms with flowers. When all was arranged, I sat down at the window to watch. Far as my eye could reach, it rested on a motley crowd of soldiers. Drums and fifes were discoursing martial music. The men were divided into companies of sixteen, each headed by a captain. Orders were given, and the wild scouts rushed in every direction, wherever a colored face was to be found.

It was a grand opportunity for the low whites, who had no negroes of their own to scourge. They exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority, and show their subserviency to the slaveholders; not reflecting that the power which trampled on the colored people also kept themselves in poverty, ignorance, and moral degradation. Those who never witnessed such scenes can hardly believe what I know was inflicted at this time on innocent men, women, and children, against whom there was not the slightest ground for suspicion. Colored people and slaves who lived in remote parts of the town suffered in an especial manner. In some cases the searchers scattered powder and shot among their clothes, and then sent other parties to find them, and bring them forward as proof that they were plotting insurrection. Every where men, women, and children were



HARRIET ANN JACOBS

INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE OF A SLAVE GIRL.

WRITTEN BY HERSELF.

“Northerners know nothing at all about slavery. They think it is perpetual bondage only. They have no conception of the depth of degradation involved in that word, SLAVERY; if they had, they would never cease their efforts until so horrible a system was overthrown.”

A WOMAN OF NORTH CAROLINA.

“Rise up, ye women that are at ease! Hear my voice, ye careless daughters! Give ear unto my speech.”

ISAIAH XXXIII, 9.

EDITED BY L. MARIA CHILD.

BOSTON:
PUBLISHED FOR THE AUTHOR.
1861.

whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet. Some received five hundred lashes; others were tied hands and feet, and tortured with a bucking paddle, which blisters the skin terribly. The dwellings of the colored people, unless they happened to be protected by some influential white person, who was nigh at hand, were robbed of clothing and every thing else the marauders thought worth carrying away. All day long these unfeeling wretches went round, like a troop of demons, terrifying

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is a slave narrative that was published in 1861 by Harriet Ann Jacobs, using the pen name “Linda Brent”. Above is the front page of the first edition.

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

FEAR OF INSURRECTION

— CONTINUED —

and tormenting the helpless. At night, they formed themselves into patrol bands, and went wherever they chose among the colored people, acting out their brutal will. Many women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of their way. If any of the husbands or fathers told of these outrages, they were tied up to the public whipping post, and cruelly scourged for telling lies about white men. The consternation was universal. No two people that had the slightest tinge of color in their faces dared to be seen talking together.

I entertained no positive fears about our household, because we were in the midst of white families who would protect us. We were ready to receive the soldiers whenever they came. It was not long before we heard the tramp of feet and the sound of voices. The door was rudely pushed open; and in they tumbled, like a pack of hungry wolves. They snatched at every thing within their reach. Every box, trunk, closet, and corner underwent a thorough examination. A box in one of the drawers containing some silver change was eagerly pounced upon. When I stepped forward to take it from them, one of the soldiers turned and said angrily, "What d'ye foller us fur? D'ye s'pose white folks is come to steal?"

I replied, "You have come to search; but you have searched that box, and I will take it, if you please."

At that moment I saw a white gentleman who was friendly to us; and I called to him, and asked him to have the goodness to come in and stay till the search was over. He readily complied. His entrance into the house brought in the captain of the company, whose business it was to guard the outside of the house, and see that none of

the inmates left it. This officer was Mr. Litch, the wealthy slaveholder whom I mentioned, in the account of neighboring planters, as being notorious for his cruelty. He felt above soiling his hands with the search. He merely gave orders; and, if a bit of writing was discovered, it was carried to him by his ignorant followers, who were unable to read.

My grandmother had a large trunk of bedding and table cloths. When that was opened, there was a great shout of surprise; and one exclaimed, "Where'd the damned niggers git all dis sheet an' table clarf?"

My grandmother, emboldened by the presence of our white protector, said, "You may be sure we didn't pilfer 'em from your houses."

I ENTERTAINED NO POSITIVE FEARS ABOUT OUR HOUSEHOLD, BECAUSE WE WERE IN THE MIDST OF WHITE FAMILIES WHO WOULD PROTECT US.

"Look here, mammy," said a grim-looking fellow without any coat, "you seem to feel mighty gran' 'cause you got all them 'ere fixens. White folks oughter have 'em all."

His remarks were interrupted by a chorus of voices shouting, "We's got 'em! We's got 'em! Dis 'ere yaller gal's got letters!"

There was a general rush for the supposed letter, which, upon examination, proved to be some verses written to me by a friend. In packing away my things, I had overlooked them. When their captain informed them of their contents, they seemed much disappointed. He inquired of me who wrote them. I told him it was

one of my friends. "Can you read them?" he asked. When I told him I could, he swore, and raved, and tore the paper into bits. "Bring me all your letters!" said he, in a commanding tone. I told him I had none. "Don't be afraid," he continued, in an insinuating way. "Bring them all to me. Nobody shall do you any harm." Seeing I did not move to obey him, his pleasant tone changed to oaths and threats. "Who writes to you? half free niggers?" inquired he. I replied, "O, no; most of my letters are from white people. Some request me to burn them after they are read, and some I destroy without reading."

An exclamation of surprise from some of the company put a stop to our conversation. Some silver spoons which ornamented an old-fashioned buffet had just been discovered. My grandmother was in the habit of preserving fruit for many ladies in the town, and of preparing suppers for parties; consequently she had many jars of preserves. The closet that contained these was

next invaded, and the contents tasted. One of them, who was helping himself freely, tapped his neighbor on the shoulder, and said, "Wal done! Don't wonder de niggers want to kill all de white folks, when dey live on 'sarves" [meaning preserves]. I stretched out my hand to take the jar, saying, "You were not sent here to search for sweetmeats."

"And what were we sent for?" said the captain, bristling up to me. I evaded the question.

The search of the house was completed, and nothing found to condemn us. They next proceeded to the garden, and knocked about every bush and vine with no better success. The captain called his men together, and, after a short consultation, the order



CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

FEAR OF INSURRECTION

— CONTINUED —

to march was given. As they passed out of the gate, the captain turned back, and pronounced a malediction on the house. He said it ought to be burned to the ground, and each of its inmates receive thirty-nine lashes. We came out of this affair very fortunately; not losing any thing except some wearing apparel.

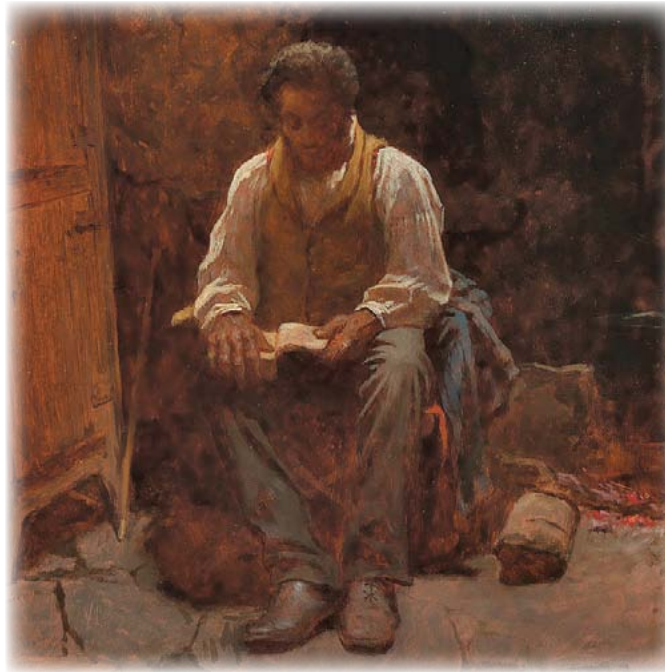
Towards evening the turbulence increased. The soldiers, stimulated by drink, committed still greater cruelties. Shrieks and shouts continually rent the air. Not daring to go to the door, I peeped under the window curtain. I saw a mob dragging along a number of colored people, each white man, with his musket upraised, threatening instant death if they did not stop their shrieks. Among the prisoners was a respectable old colored minister. They had found a few parcels of shot in his house, which his wife had for years used to balance her scales. For this they were going to shoot him on Court House Green. What a spectacle was that for a civilized country!

A rabble, staggering under intoxication, assuming to be the administrators of justice!

The better class of the community exerted their influence to save the innocent, persecuted people; and in several instances they succeeded, by keeping them shut up in jail till the excitement abated. At last the white citizens found that their own property was not safe from the lawless rabble they had summoned to protect them. They rallied the drunken swarm,

drove them back into the country, and set a guard over the town.

The next day, the town patrols were commissioned to search colored people that lived out of the city; and the most shocking outrages were committed with



perfect impunity. Every day for a fortnight, if I looked out, I saw horsemen with some poor panting negro tied to their saddles, and compelled by the lash to keep up with their speed, till they arrived at the jail yard. Those who had been whipped too unmercifully to walk were washed with brine, tossed into a cart, and carried to jail. One black man, who had not fortitude to endure scourging, promised to give information about the conspiracy. But it

turned out that he knew nothing at all. He had not even heard the name of Nat Turner. The poor fellow had, however, made up a story, which augmented his own sufferings and those of the colored people.

The day patrol continued for some weeks, and at sundown a night guard was substituted. Nothing at all was proved against the colored people, bond or free. The wrath of the slaveholders was somewhat appeased by the capture of Nat Turner. The imprisoned were released. The slaves were sent to their masters, and the free were permitted to return to their ravaged homes. Visiting was strictly forbidden on the plantations. The slaves begged the privilege of again meeting at their little church in the woods, with their burying ground around it. It was built by the colored people, and they had no higher happiness than to meet there and sing hymns together, and pour out their hearts in spontaneous prayer. Their request was denied, and the church was

demolished. They were permitted to attend the white churches, a certain portion of the galleries being appropriated to their use. There, when every body else had partaken of the communion, and the benediction had been pronounced, the minister said, "Come down, now, my colored friends." They obeyed the summons, and partook of the bread and wine, in commemoration of the meek and lowly Jesus, who said, "God is your Father, and all ye are brethren." ✠

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

BLACK CODE

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/slavesfree/slavesfree.html>

EXCERPTS

Following Nat Turner's rebellion, and fearing the rise of the abolition movement in the North, slaveholders throughout the South strengthened laws governing slaves and free people of color, known as "black codes." The black codes governed enslaved people as well as four categories of free people:

- ◆ "Free negroes," or free-born African Americans.
- ◆ "Former slaves," enslaved people who had been liberated.
- ◆ "Mulattoes," people of mixed (both black and white) ancestry.
- ◆ "Free persons of color," which included all the other categories but could also be extended to Native Americans.

By lumping together free and enslaved people of color into one legal category, whites divided the population along racial lines, not along the legal categories of free and unfree.

In reading the legal code, you can clearly see the anxiety of southern whites over the possibility of slave insurrection and abolition. These codes sought to limit the ability of enslaved people to read, write, mingle together in groups, preach, assemble, own weapons, earn money, and hold property, and they also limited slave owners' ability to free their slaves. While the black codes brought free and unfree African Americans into one legal category, they also tried to divide the African American community. For example, several laws forbade free people of color from socializing with or marrying slaves.

Punishment by whipping was the most common type of punishment levied against black people, free or enslaved, in North Carolina. For slaves, this was the only practical option, because a slave had no property and could not pay fines. The only other option would have been hard labor, but that was the essence of slavery. At the same time state legislatures passed laws extending the number of offenses by which blacks could be whipped, courts became less likely to punish whites by the whip. The humiliation and bodily scars that came from whipping reinforced the differences between the races.

RESTRICTIONS ON SLAVES

| | |
|---|---|
| Slaves not to go armed. | No slave shall go armed with gun, sword, club or other weapon, or shall keep any such weapon, or shall hunt or range with a gun in the woods, upon any pretence whatsoever; and if any slave shall be found offending herein, it shall and may be lawful for any person or persons to seize, and take to his own use, such gun, sword or other weapon, and to apprehend and deliver such slave to the next constable, who is enjoined and required, without further order or warrant, to give such slave twenty lashes on his or her bare back, and to send him or her home: and the master or owner of such slave shall pay the taker-up of such armed slave the same reward as by this act is allowed for taking up runaways. (1741 c 35 s 35, 36, 37. 1831 c 44) |
| No slave to go off his masters plantation without leave in writing. | No slave shall go from off the plantation or seat of land where such slave shall be appointed to live without a certificate of leave, in writing, for so doing from his or her master or overseer. (1741 c 35 s 38) |
| Slaves not to raise stock. | No slave shall be permitted on any pretence whatever, to raise any horses, cattle, hogs or sheep, but all such belonging to any slave, or in any slave's mark, shall be seized and sold by the county wardens as directed in the act entitled an act concerning the Poor. (1741 c 35 s 39 1779 c 152 s 1) |

Continued on next page.

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

BLACK CODE

– CONTINUED –

RESTRICTIONS ON SLAVES

| | |
|---|--|
| No slave to teach another to read. | If any slave shall teach or attempt to teach, any other slave to read or write, the use of figures excepted, he or she may be carried before any justice of the peace, and on conviction thereof, shall be sentenced to receive thirty-nine lashes on his or her bare back. (1830 c 6 s 2) |
| Negroes not to meet for the purpose of dancing &c. without written permission | No person shall grant permission for any meeting or meetings of the negroes of others, or people of colour, at his, her or their houses, or on his, her or their plantation for the purpose of drinking or dancing, under the penalty of forfeiting twenty dollars on conviction of such offence, in any court having jurisdiction thereof, unless such slave shall have a special permit in writing or otherwise from his or her owner for that purpose. Page 5 (1794 c 406 s 2) |
| Slaves and free negroes not to preach in public. | It shall not be lawful under any pretence for any slave, or free person of colour to preach or exhort in public or in any manner to officiate as a preacher or teacher in any prayer meeting, or other association for worship where slaves of different families are collected together; and if any free person of colour shall be thereof duly convicted on indictment before any court having jurisdiction thereof, he shall, for each offence, receive, not exceeding thirty-nine lashes on his bare back; and where any slave shall be guilty of a violation of this act, he shall, on conviction before a single magistrate, receive not exceeding thirty-nine lashes on his bare back. (1831 c 4 s 1) |
| Slaves entitled to trial by jury in the county and superior courts. | In all cases where the county or superior courts shall have jurisdiction of offences committed by slaves, the slave charged shall be entitled to a trial by a jury of good and lawful men, owners of slaves. (1793 c 381 s 1 1831 c 30 s 5) |

RUNAWAYS AND INSURRECTION

| | |
|--|---|
| In cases of insurrection &c. a commission of Oyer and Terminer may issue | In all cases of insurrection or rebellion, or of conspiracy to make insurrection, or to murder or rebel, or any such contemplated conspiracy, insurrection or rebellion, of any slave or slaves, upon the information and at the request of any five justices of the peace of the county in which such conspiracy, insurrection or rebellion shall happen or may be contemplated, the Governor for the time being, shall be authorised and have power to issue a commission of Oyer and Terminer, to any one of the judges of the Superior Courts of Law; and in case the said judges are necessarily engaged on their circuits, the Governor shall be authorised and have power to issue a commission to one of the judges of the Supreme Court, whose duty it shall be to hold said court forthwith, and who shall be clothed with all the powers necessary for the trial of all such slave or slaves, as may be charged with any of the before mentioned offences. (1831 c 30 s 1) |
|--|---|

Note: Oyer and Terminer is an archaic legal term, inherited from the French and English, which means "to hear and determine." By issuing a commission of Oyer and Terminer, the governor empowered people to investigate alleged crimes. If the commission found that there had been illegal activities, then the people responsible were formally charged.

CHILDREN OF DARKNESS

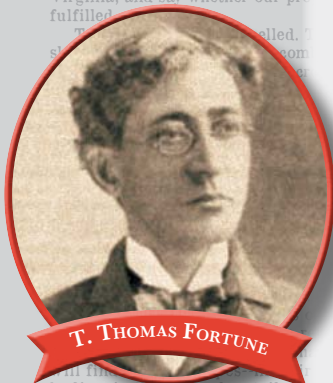
NAT TURNER

BY T. THOMAS FORTUNE

CLEVELAND GAZETTE | 11/22/1884 | VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 14 | PAGE 2

<http://dbs.ohiohistory.org/africanam/page1.cfm?ItemID=14427>

being stigmatized as an alarmist and declaim-
er,—has commenced its fulfillment. The first
step of the earthquake, which is to
shake down the fabric of oppressi-
not one stone upon the other, has
The first drops of blood, which as-
lude to a deluge from the gatheri-
Read the account of the insur-
Virginia, and say whether our pro-
fulfilled.



...bodies—in their ceaseless toil—in
rant minds...in your speeches and
tions, your celebrations, your pan-
newspapers—voices in the air, so
across the ocean, invitations to
above, below, around them! What
they need...

For ourselves, we are horrors
the late tidings. We have exerted
efforts to avert the calamity. We
our countrymen of the danger of
their unrighteous conduct. We ha-
to the slaves the pacific precepts
Christ. We have appealed to chri-
lanthropists and patriots, for the
to accomplish the great work of
demption through the agency of
-of public opinion—of individual
have we been received? We have
ened, proscribed, vilified and im-
If we have been hitherto urgent,
and denunciatory in our efforts—
we shall grow vehement and acti-
increase of danger. We shall cry,
tones, night and day,—Wo to this
unless she speedily repents of he-



The blood of many of her son-
EMAN
er from the veng
feel the hot of a
elled.
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son is cr
gallows!
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speeches
s, your
ions, you
newspapers—voices in the air, so
across the ocean, invitations to resistance
above, below, around them! What more do
they need

the late tidings. We have exerted our utmost
efforts to avert the calamity. We have warned

victims destined for the gallows!... You have
seen, it is to be feared, but the beginning of

NAT. TURNER

BY T. THOMAS FORTUNE

He stood erect, a man as proud
As ever to a tyrant bowed
Unwilling head or bent a knee,
And longed, while bending, to be free;
And o'er his ebon features came
A shadow—'twas of manly shame—
Aye, shame that he should wear a chain
And feel his manhood writhed with pain,
Doomed to a life of plodding toil,
Shamefully rooted to the soil!

He stood erect; his eyes flashed fire;
His robust form convulsed with ire;
"I will be free! I will be free!
Or, fighting, die a man!" cried he.

Virginia's bills were lit at night --
The slave had risen in his might;
And far and near Nat's wail went forth,
To South and East, and West and North,
And strong men trembled in their power,
And weak men felt 'twas now their hour.

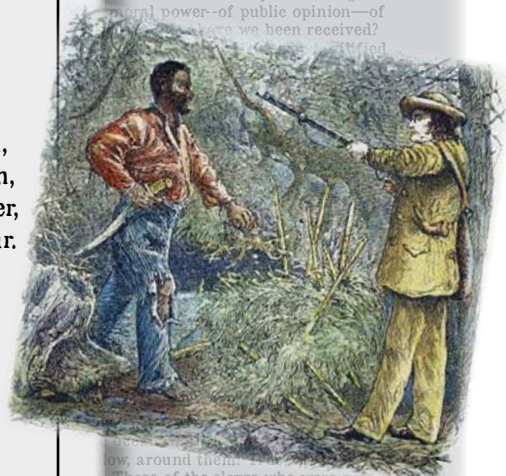
"I will be free! I will be free!
Or, fighting, die a man!" cried he.
The tyrant's arm was all too strong,
Had swayed dominion all too long;
And so the hero met his end
As all who fall as Freedom's friend.

The blow he struck shook slavery's throne;
His cause was just, e'en skeptics own;
And round his lowly grave soon swarmed
Freedom's brave hosts for freedom arm'd.
That host was swollen by Nat's kin
To fight for Freedom, Freedom win,
Upon the soil that spurned his cry;
"I will be free, or I will die!"

Let tyrants quake, e'en in their power,
For sure will come the awful hour
When they must give an answer, why
Heroes in chains should basely die,
Instead of rushing to the field
And counting battle ere they yield.

All the blood which has been shed
quired at your hands. At your hands
—but at the hands of the people of
and of all the free states. The
oppression is national. The South
agent in this guilty traffic. But,
the same causes are at work which
itably produce the same effects; and
contest shall have again begun, it
war of extermination.

use the pacific friends of emancipa-
stigmating the slaves to revolt.... The
id no incentive at our hands. They
in their stripes—in their emaciated
their ceaseless toil—in their igno-
s...in your speeches and conversa-
celebrations, your pamphlets, your
rs—voices in the air, sounds from
ocean, invitations to resistance
ow, around them! For ourselves,
ror-struck at the late tidings. We
ted our utmost efforts to avert the
We have warned our countrymen of
of persisting in their unrighteous
We have preached to the slaves the
cepts of Jesus Christ. We have
to christians, philanthropists and
for their assistance to accomplish the
k of national redemption through the
eral power—of public opinion—of
we have been received?



ow, around them! True, the rebellion
Those of the slaves who were not
combat have been secured, and the
crowded with victims destined for the
gallows!... You have seen, it is to be feared, but
the beginning of sorrows. All the blood which
shed will be acquired at your hands.
ands alone? No—but at the hands of
e of New-England and of all the free
crime of oppression is national.
it is only the agent in this guilty
it, remember! the same causes are at
h must inevitably produce the same
id when the contest shall have again
must be a war of extermination.
use the pacific friends of emancipa-
stigmating the slaves to revolt.... The
id no incentive at our hands. They
in their stripes—in their emaciated
their ceaseless toil—in their igno-
s...in your speeches and conversa-
celebrations, your pamphlets, your
rs—voices in the air, sounds from
ocean, invitations to resistance
ow, around them! True, the rebellion
Those of the slaves who were not
combat have been secured, and the
prison is crowded with victims destined for the
gallows!... You have seen, it is to be feared, but
the beginning of sorrows. All the blood which

heaven, and cancel the debt of ages!
True, the rebellion is quelled. Those of the
slaves who were not killed in combat have

prison is crowded with victims destined for the
gallows!... You have seen, it is to be feared, but
the beginning of sorrows. All the blood which