

## Chapter 8

### Responses to Slavery: Nat Turner's Rebellion

The previous chapters you have read of efforts of Southerners to break the spirits of their slaves. Despite these efforts there were over 250 slave rebellions in the South. Two of these rebellions, one lead by Denmark Vesey and the other by Nat Turner either lasted for a long time, or were so well organized, that it is important to tell the tales of this heroic resistance to slavery.

Before the Turner rebellion, a free African-American by the name of Denmark Vesey planned a major uprising in Charleston, South Carolina for 1822. Vesey was a brilliant man who learned several languages and hated slavery. He had won money in a lottery that he used to buy freedom. He then worked for 22 years as a carpenter, and became a respected and a wealthy citizen.

Vesey had a lot of free time to plot his slave rebellion. He and others recruited somewhere between 2,000 and 9,000 slaves. The men were divided into 8 companies -- six of who were to attack guard houses, arsenals and powder store houses. Charleston and the surrounding area would be set on fire -- thousands of whites would be killed. Some say Vesey planned to escape by ship to Haiti

The Vesey rebellion was betrayed by a faithful house slave. When the full extent of the plot became known -- white Charleston shuttered. But the leaders of the rebellion went to their death without revealing important details of this major slave conspiracy.

Nat Turner, was a slave preacher so convincing he once converted a white overseer. In contrast to Vesey, Turner only involved six in his scheme and it was simple enough. Go from one house to another, starting with Turner's mild master, Travis -- and kill all whites. Only a non-slave owning family was spared.

The following account of the Turner rebellion comes from Turner's "confession". The confession was taken by Turner's lawyer, Thomas Gray. Gray read it in court and entered a plea of innocence for his client. He said that Turner did not "feel guilty." With such a half-hearted defense accompanied by widespread abhorrence to his actions, Turner was condemned to death and hung six days later -- on November 12, 1831.

#### Turner's Confession

*Since the beginning of 1830, I have been living with Mr. Joseph Travis. He was a kind master, and placed the greatest confidence in me. In fact, I had no cause to complain of his treatment of me.*

*On the 20th of August, it was agreed between the slaves Henry, Hark, and myself to prepare a dinner for the men we expected the next day. There we were to prepare the plan for our uprising, for we had not yet settled on one. Hark on the following morning brought a pig and Henry brought brandy. They and three others prepared a dinner in the woods, where I joined them about three o'clock.*

*I greeted them on coming up and noticed Will who had not been one of us before. I ask him how came he here. He answered his life was worth no more than the others', and his freedom was as dear to him. I asked him if he thought to obtain it? He said he would or lose his life. This was good enough to put him in full confidence. It was quickly agreed we should start at home (Mr. Travis's)*

*on that night. We would spare neither age nor sex until we gathered sufficient force and had armed and equipped ourselves. \*\**

## At the Travis's

*We stayed at the feast, until about two hours in the night. Then we went to the house. Realizing the alarm might wake the neighborhood, we decided to enter the house secretly and murder the family while they lay asleep. Hark got a ladder and set it against the chimney. I climbed up and lifted a window, entered and came down stairs. I unbarred the door and removed the guns from their places. It was then decided that I must be the first to spill blood. Armed with a hatchet and accompanied by Will, I entered my master's chamber. It being dark, I could not give a death blow. The hatchet glanced from his head, he sprang from the bed and called his wife. It was his last word. Will laid him dead with one blow of his axe. Mrs. Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed. The murder of this family, five in number, was the work of a moment for not one of them awoke. There was a little infant sleeping in a cradle that was forgotten. After we left the house and gone some distance, Henry and Will returned and killed it. Then I marched the slaves*

*over to the Francis' house about 600 yards away. Sam and Will went to the door and knocked. Mr. Francis asked who was there. Sam replied it was him and that he had a letter. When he came to the door my men seized him and killed him with repeated blows to the head.*

## The Rebellion Ends

*After several scenes like the above, Turner was joined by other slaves. Soon his forces numbered between fifty or sixty men. They marched to the town of Jerusalem, hoping to get guns at the armory. Afterwards, they planned to hide in a huge swamp not far away, and conduct raids to free other slaves. These plans, however, could not be carried out. Turner explained what happened:*

*We were on the road leading to Jerusalem about three miles away. When reaching the gate of the Parker place, it was suggested to me to call there. I remained at the gate on the road with seven or eight. The others went across the field to the house, about a half mile off. After waiting for some time, we were met by a party of white men who had pursued our blood-stained track. They had fired on the crew at the gate. Immediately, on discovering the whites, I ordered my men to halt and form ranks. The white men, eighteen in number, approached us and fired. I then ordered my men to fire and rush on them. When we approached to within fifty yards, they fired and then retreated. We chased and overtook some of them who we left for dead. After two-hundred yards, we discovered that they had met another party.*

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\* *according to another account, Turner told his followers, "ours is not a war for robbery not to satisfy our passions, it is a struggle for freedom." (George William's, History of the Negro Race in America from 1619-1880, New York, 1883, Vol. II, pp. 87-88.*

*As I saw them reloading and others coming up, with several of my bravest men wounded, the others became scared and ran. The white men heard us and fired several times. Hark had his horse shot out from under him. I caught him another as it was running by me. Five or six of my men were wounded, but none left on the field. Finding myself defeated, I decided to attack Jerusalem from the rear. After proceeding for a short distance, I learned that the rest of my force were scattered in every direction. I was unable to collect a sufficient force to proceed to Jerusalem. <sup>29</sup>*



**Nat Turner captured**

This event ended the armed attack. Now the planters were reinforced with Federal troops. They took over 48 black prisoners. Turner managed to escape capture for six weeks. He was finally discovered in his hiding place by a faithful slave.

## Reactions to the Turner Rebellion

### **A black woman reported:**

*At the time of the old prophet Nat, the colored folks was afraid to pray loud; for the whites threatened to punish them dreadfully, if the least noise was heard. The patrols was low drunken whites. In Nat's time, if they heard any of the colored folks praying, or singing a hymn, they would fall upon 'em and abuse 'em and sometimes kill 'em., afro master or missies could get to 'em. The brightest and the best was killed in Nat's time. The whites always suspect such ones.*

*In Nat's time, the patrols would tie up the free colored people, flog 'em, and try to make 'em lie against one another, and often killed them before anybody could interfere. One day the sheriff heard a patroller boasting how many Niger's he had killed <sup>30</sup>*

### **A white Southerner Writes to a Friend in the North:**

*This rebellion has alarmed my wife as to really endanger her health, and I have not slept without worrying for three months. Our nights are sometimes spent listening to noises. A corn song, a hog*

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Nat Turner, "The Confessions of Nat Turner," told to Thomas R. Gray, reprinted in Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*, Grove Press, Inc., New York 1966, pp. 150-51

<sup>30</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *op. cit.*

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*call, has often caused nervous terror, and a cat in the dining room will banish sleep for the night. There has been and still is panic in all this country.*<sup>31</sup>

## ***John Brown is inspired***

*Nat Turner, with fifty men, held Virginia five weeks. The same number, well organized and armed, can shake the system (slavery) out of the state.*<sup>32</sup>

## **Suggested Student Exercises:**

1. Using what you know about both, contrast the Turner and the Vesey rebellions.
- 2.. Comment on the following quote, attributed to Nat Turner: "ours is not a war for robbery not to satisfy our passions, it is a struggle for freedom." [In responding, cover at least two of the following: a. the purpose of the revolt, b. whether there was a less violent way of accomplishing the same ends, c what happened as a result of the rebellion.]

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<sup>31</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *op. cit*

<sup>32</sup> Herbert Aptheker, *op. cit*.