

Inquiry Question(s) – A Focus on Using Evidence

Was Nat Turner a Hero? Was Nat Turner's Revolt a Success?

Context

Still, whether in cities or on farms, slaves never lost sight of their goal of freedom. For some, it was a time to take action. **Nat Turner**, a slave in Virginia, organized a rebellion.

While in the woods, he experienced a vision that he interpreted as a call to "lead and organize his fellow slaves in a struggle for freedom." In August 1831, a partial eclipse of the sun convinced Turner that the time was ripe. Gathering more than 50 followers as he moved from plantation to plantation. Turner's band attacked four plantations and killed about 70 whites. By the fifth attack, an alarm alerted whites who captured and executed 16 members of Turner's band. Though Turner himself hid out for several weeks, eventually was captured, tried, and hanged.

- from The Americans, p. 155.

Source Documents

Source 1 - After his capture and arrest on October 30, 1831, Nat Turner was imprisoned in the Southampton [Virginia] County Jail, where he was interviewed by Thomas R. Gray, a Southern physician. Out of that interview came his "Confession." Below are excerpts from the interview.

-from *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the leader of the late insurrection, in Southampton (county), by Thomas R. Gray, VA...Baltimore, 1831*

And my mother and grandmother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying, in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast...

and Christ had laid down the yoke he bad home for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first.

Ques. "Do you not find yourself mistaken now?
[Gray]

Ans. "Was not Christ crucified?"

Source 2- This image portrays the discovery of Nat Turner. After state and federal troops dispersed Turner's forces, he escaped and hid in several different places near the farm where he had been a slave. His hiding place was discovered by a dog, and on October 30 he was captured.



Image Credit: From the collections of the Library of Congress

Source 3- Harriet Ann Jacobs, born into slavery in North Carolina in 1813, eventually escaped to the North, where she wrote a narrative about her ordeal of slavery. In Chapter Twelve of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, Jacobs describes the harassment of blacks in Edenton, North Carolina, following Nat Turner's rebellion.

"Fear of Insurrection"

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...

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...Orders were given, and the wild scouts rushed in every direction, wherever a colored face was to be found.

... 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. Everywhere men, women, and children were 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...
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Source 4 - The Richmond *Enquirer* on Nat Turner's Rebellion.

Reprinted from Henry Irving Tragle's The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material, by Henry I. Tragle, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971.

- Virginia, 30 August 1831

So much curiosity has been excited in the state, and so much exaggeration will go abroad, that we have determined to devote a great portion of this day's paper to the strange events in the county of Southampton.... What strikes us as the most remarkable thing in this matter is the horrible ferocity of these monsters. They remind one of a parcel of blood-thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps; or rather like a former incursion of the Indians upon the white settlements! Nothings is spared; neither age nor sex is respected-the helplessness of women and children pleads in vain for mercy. The danger is thought to be over-but prudence still demands precaution. The lower country should be on the alert.- The case of Nat Turner warns us. No black man ought to be permitted to turn a Preacher through the country. The law must be enforced or the tragedy of Southampton appeals to us in vain.

Source 5 - Cleveland Gazette Volume: 02,
Issue Number: 14, Page Number: 02
Date: 11/22/1884

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 wall 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.

Source 6 - List of Persons Murdered
A list of persons murdered in the
Insurrection, on the 21st and 22d of
August, 1831.

-source: The WWW-project *From
Revolution to Reconstruction*, [Arts
Faculty of the University of
Groningen](#) in the Netherlands

- Joseph Travers and wife and three children,
- Mrs. Elizabeth Turner,
- Hartwell Prebles,
- Sarah Newsome,
- Mrs. P. Reese and son William,
- Trajan Doyle,
- Henry Bryant and wife and child, and wife's mother,
- Mrs. Catherine Whitehead, son Richard and four daughters and grandchild,
- Salathiel Francis,
- Nathaniel Francis' overseer and two children,
- John T. Barrow,
- George Vaughan,
- Mrs. Levi Waller and ten children,
- William Williams, wife and two boys,
- Mrs. Caswell Worrell and child,
- Mrs. Rebecca Vaughan,
- Ann Eliza Vaughan, and son Arthur,
- Mrs. John K. Williams and child,
- Mrs. Jacob Williams and three children,
- and Edwin Drury

-amounting to fifty-five.

Exercises with Source Documents

Exercise 1- Primary Sources: How Trustworthy of Reliable?

Primary sources are records from the past. But this does not mean they can always tell you exactly how life “really was” in the past. You need to evaluate such sources carefully to be able to learn things from them. For example, one important question you need to ask of every primary sources is this:

- How trustworthy or reliable is this source? In other words, can you depend on it to give you information that you can use to answer a specific essay question you have been given?

Keep in mind that a reliable source need not be accurate or truthful. An inaccurate report, for example, may still be reliable as evidence of what people believed at the time.

This exercise will help you think about the source reliability. Next to each document or source are three statements about the document's trustworthiness or reliability. For each document, choose the one statement you agree with most. Mark your choice in the space provided. Discuss your choices in class.

Doc. 1

- A. This confession is reliable evidence of what Nat Turner believed about why he led this revolt.
- B. This confession is reliable evidence of what Nat Turner told Thomas Gray about his revolt.
- C. This confession is reliable evidence of what Nat Turner wanted the public to know about why he revolted.

Your choice_____

Doc. 2

- A. This illustration is reliable evidence of how Nat Turner was captured.
- B. This illustration is reliable evidence of how the artist portrayed the capture of Turner.
- C. This illustration is reliable evidence that Nat Turner was captured after his revolt.

Your choice_____

Doc. 3

- A. This document is reliable evidence that whites attacked “colored people and slaves” that did not participate in the revolt.
- B. This document is reliable evidence that other “colored people and slaves” in Virginia did not support the revolt.
- C. This document is reliable evidence that slaves who didn't revolt were “contented and happy.”

Your choice_____

- Doc. 4**
- A.** This document is reliable evidence that Nat Turner's revolt scared the white population in Virginia.
 - B.** This document is reliable evidence of why Nat Turner revolted.
 - C.** This document is reliable evidence that there was a connection between slaves learning to preach and their leading of revolts.
- Your choice** _____

- Doc. 5**
- A.** This document is reliable evidence of Nat Turner's personal qualities.
 - B.** This document is reliable evidence that some people came to view Nat Turner as a hero, a freedom fighter.
 - C.** This document is reliable evidence that Nat Turner's revolt was a success.
- Your choice** _____

Exercise 2 – Interpreting Primary Sources: Making Inferences

I. Below are 3 statements about Document 6. Some of the statements are reasonable inferences, others are not – that is, they are not supported by Document 6. In the space provided, write “yes” or “no” for each statement that is or is not a reasonable inference about Document 6.

1. Nat Turner's revolt targeted all white people living in that area.
A reasonable inference _____

2. Nat Turner's revolt was able to strike a blow against the state police and militia that enforced Virginia's slave laws.
A reasonable inference _____

3. All the people killed by Nat Turner and his followers were slave owners or members of a slave owning family.
A reasonable inference _____

