

Nat Turner
Student Materials – Focus on Historical Interpretation

The Lesson - Was Nat Turner's Revolt a Success?

1. Read the following passage(s) taken from your textbook and explain why Nat Turner rebelled and if his revolt was a success.

The most violent slave revolt in the United States occurred in 1831 and is known as **Nat Turner's Rebellion**. Nat Turner, a slave from Southampton County, Virginia, believed that God told him to end slavery. On an August night in 1831, Turner led a group of slaves in a plan to kill all the slaveholders and their families in the county. First, they attacked the family that held Turner as a slave. Soon they had killed about 60 white people in the community.

More than 100 innocent slaves who were not part of Turner's group were killed in an attempt to stop the rebellion. Turner himself led authorities on a chase around the county for six weeks. He hid in caves and in the woods before he was caught and brought to trial. Before his trial, Turner made a confession. He expressed his belief the revolt was justified and worth his death: "I am willing to suffer the fate that awaits me." He was executed on November 11, 1831. After the rebellion, many states strengthened their slave codes. The new codes places stricter control on the slave population. Despite the resistance of enslaved people, slavery continued to spread.

- From United States History: Independence to 1914, p. 390-391 (Holt).

Nat Turner Narrative

Nat Turner was born on Benjamin Turner's plantation in Southampton County five days before the execution of the African American revolutionary **Gabriel Prosser** in Richmond, Virginia. Turner's father, whose name is unknown, but who was also a Benjamin Turner slave, successfully escaped and is believed to have spent his life in the Great Dismal Swamp, which lies in southern Virginia and in North Carolina, with other escaped African Americans, as **maroons**.

Turner's mother, a slave named Nancy who was kidnapped from Africa in 1793, believed that he was destined for great things in his life, and she instilled this sense in him. That he acquired literacy in his boyhood added weight to his mother's convictions. Turner also accepted Christianity in his youth, became a preacher, and identified religion with freedom. He claimed to receive religious visions throughout his life.

Turner sought his own freedom, running away in 1821 after he had become the property of Benjamin Turner's son, Samuel. When Samuel Turner hired a harsh overseer, Nat Turner escaped, remaining free for approximately a month. During that time he experienced a vision indicating that he would lead a slave rebellion, and he returned to the plantation to await his signal to begin.

Between 1825 and 1830, Turner became a popular preacher to African American congregations throughout Southampton County. His sermons focused on conflict and liberation, and gained him many followers, some of whom believed he was a prophet. Traveling from church to church allowed Turner to gather the knowledge he needed to organize his revolt, such as road locations and hiding places.

In February 1831, Turner, who was now at the home of Joseph Travis, believed that an eclipse of the sun signaled that the time had come for him to launch his rebellion. He recruited four other slaves, and they developed several plans before accepting one and deciding to begin on the symbolic date of July 4. However, Turner fell ill and the revolt was delayed. On August 13, Turner interpreted a bluish-green sky as a positive signal. The group agreed to strike after midnight on August 22. The uprising began at the Travis home, where the rebels killed everyone in the household. Turner initially intended to move from house to house killing whites regardless of age and sex. He hoped that the show of force would intimidate neighboring whites and encourage other slaves to join the rebellion. After they had obtained a foothold, they agreed that the wholesale slaughter would cease.

Turner's destination was Jerusalem, Virginia, the Southampton County seat and home of an arsenal that would allow the insurgents to arm themselves adequately. As the band moved from house to house, more slaves joined the rebellion until it eventually totaled 60 or 70. With this growth, the rebels were weakened because they became less organized and they lost the element of surprise that had worked so effectively. The militia that met the insurrectionists on Monday afternoon retreated soon after, but it intended to reorganize and return.

When the slave army stopped at James Parker's farm for fresh recruits and supplies, the militia, which had regrouped, struck again. Turner's army was dispersed and, though Turner attempted to rally his troops, white reinforcements arrived and began a brutal counterattack in which they killed over 100 blacks. Turner survived and fled, eluding his captors until October 30. He was quickly tried, sentenced to death, and hanged in Jerusalem, Virginia, on November 11, 1831. While awaiting execution, he told his story to his court-appointed attorney, Thomas Gray. The result was an extraordinary account of his life and of the rebellion, which Gray published as *Nat Turner's Confessions*.

Turner's rebellion lasted almost three days, killed 57 people, and resulted in the executions of over 100 African American rebels. Some call this rebellion the "First War," the **Civil War** being the second. Turner's rebellion was significant in that it was more violent than any other slave uprising and reshaped the debate over **slavery** in ways that led to the Civil War a generation later. The uprising intensified both the antislavery movement, and the corresponding proslavery forces. It reinforced the notion held by some **abolitionists** that slaves would be willing to fight if outside forces organized and armed them. Proslavery forces began to endorse reducing the number of **free blacks** through **colonization**. Turner's rebellion also disproved the myth of the contented slave, and proved that African Americans would die to end slavery.

- from *Encarta Africana* Contributed By: Robert Fay

2. Below are a number of sources that provide more information about Nat Turner's Rebellion. What information does the author provide about the rebellion? Which argument does this information support? Does it support the argument the rebellion was a success or does it support the argument the rebellion was not a success?

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*

("Africans in America," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h500t.html>)

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 had 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 - Image Credit: From the collections of the Library of Congress



Discovery of Nat Turner

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.

Insurrection, on the 21st and 22d of August, 1831.

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

Source 3 -
List or
Persons
Murdered
A list of
persons
murdered
in the

- 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.

Source 4 - 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 5 - 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 6 - 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 will 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.

PART 3 – Below are four historians writing about what happened after Nat Turner's revolt. Provide a one-sentence summary of each historian's argument. For each historian complete the following sentence.

"This historian argues the rebellion was a [choose 'success' or 'failure'] _____ because it caused _____."

I. ...When asked whether he regretted what he had done, Turner replied, "Was not Christ crucified?"

If slave rebellions were not nearly so common as individual day-to-day acts of resistance to slavery, they did keep alive the hope of freedom and expressed in the most dramatic form the discontent that lay just beneath the apparently placid surface of southern slavery.

- from The Reader's Companion to American History, Eric Foner, p. 996-997.

II. Whites were not slow to see the connection between Turner's relative freedom of motion as an educated preacher and his leadership in the uprising. In the wake of Turner's Rebellion, southern courts and legislatures clapped stricter controls on the freedoms granted to slaves and to free blacks. In most areas, free blacks were denied the right to own guns, buy liquor, hold public assemblies, testify in court, and vote. Slaves were forbidden to own any private property, to attend unsupervised worship services, and to learn reading and writing...

- from Making America, Carol Berkin et al., 1999, p 341-342.

III. ...These hard-nosed planter tactics [the harsh response to Nat Turner's Revolt] had unexpected consequences in the North, where they allowed abolitionists to gain a more sympathetic audience for their cause...In the year of Turner's uprising, important new voices arose in the slaves' defense. William Lloyd Garrison, a journalist and reformer living in Boston, called on evangelical and republican principles to demand the immediate abolition of slavery and full equality for blacks. Such calls however, only hardened resistance to the antislavery message among the planter class.

- from Who Built America, Volume 1, Christopher Clark and Nancy A. Hewitt, 2000, 345-346.

IV. ... Turner's rebellion lasted almost three days, killed 57 people, and resulted in the executions of over 100 African American rebels. Some call this rebellion the "First War," the **Civil War** being the second. Turner's rebellion was significant in that it was more violent than any other slave uprising and reshaped the debate over **slavery** in ways that led to the Civil War a generation later. The uprising intensified both the antislavery movement, and the corresponding proslavery forces. It reinforced the notion held by some **abolitionists** that slaves would be willing to fight if outside forces organized and armed them. Proslavery forces began to endorse reducing the number of **free blacks** through **colonization**. Turner's rebellion also disproved the myth of the contented slave, and proved that African Americans would die to end slavery.

- from *Encarta Africana* - **Robert Fay**

1. Explain, using the passage taken from your textbook, why Nat Turner rebelled and whether you judge his revolt a success. Explain what you think success would mean for this event.

Read "The Nat Turner Narrative" and underline words or phrases you do not understand. After discussing the narrative and making sure you understand the main ideas write information about the Nat Turner and his revolt that you did not learn from the textbook account. What does that narrative tell us about whether the revolt was a success or not?

2. For each source document summarize the information the writer provides about the rebellion and then judge whether the writer might consider the rebellion a success.

source	Author (if known)	Information about the rebellion	A Success? Explain
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			

3. Provide a one-sentence summary of each historian's argument. For each historian complete the following sentence.

"This historian argues the rebellion was a [choose 'success' or 'failure'] _____ because it caused _____."

Historian I (Eric Foner):

Historian II (Carol Berkin):

Historian III (Christopher Clark and Nancy Hewitt):

Historian IV (Robert Fay):

4. Using information gathered from the source documents and the historians return to your response to the textbook passage (#1).

Your assignment - Revise your textbook's account of Nat Turner's Rebellion. Add additional details and information to the account and discuss whether you judge the rebellion a success.
