

### Abstract

Nat Turner led a revolt in Southampton County, Virginia in 1831. The revolt itself lasted little more than a day before whites from the area suppressed it. Many people died during the revolt, including the largest number of white casualties in any single slave revolt in the history of the United States. Nat Turner was the last person caught and arrested for his involvement. During his jail time, he was interviewed by local lawyer Thomas R. Gray. This interview eventually was published and became publicly known as *Nat Turner's Confessions*. *Nat Turner's Confessions* made the public aware of Nat Turner's faith and belief that God had chosen him to lead black slaves to freedom. Nat Turner was unlike any other black slave during time. Given the rare opportunity to be educated, Nat Turner learned to read the bible. He devoted his time to fasting and prayer leading to a strong relationship with God. Turner received visions from God in which he believed God spoke to him and prepared him for a rebellion. Then, in February 1831, there was an eclipse of the sun which Turner took as the sign from God rebel on that day. Thirty-year-old Turner was hung, and his body mutilated, but his powerful legacy continues to inspire people of today.

### Nathaniel Turner's Exposure to Education and Religion

African Americans outnumbered whites in many areas of the South, and rebellions were rare in the 1800's. Therefore, it came as a surprise to the white folks of Southampton County that a slave named Nat Turner led an insurrection against his master's family and their neighbors. This caused a backlash against African Americans, both free and enslaved. The white Virginians began to rethink the institution of slavery and the regulations associated with it. Thus, Nat Turner's Rebellion became one of the most famous slave rebellions in U.S. history. **Nat Turner's exposure to education and religion led to his belief that God had called him to avenge the sins of slavery; therefore, causing Nat to lead a rebellion.** Although early in his lifetime, Nat Turner's life was forever changed because of this rare opportunity to learn and develop faith. He uses the Bible both to stake his spiritual authority to lead such a rebellion and to claim temporal leadership over the revolt.<sup>1</sup>

Nathaniel "Nat" Turner was a black American slave who was born on the Virginia plantation of Benjamin Turner. Turner allowed Nat to be instructed in reading, writing, and religion. Nat became a fiery preacher and was leader of African-American slaves on Benjamin Turner's plantation and around his neighborhood. He believed that he was chosen by God to lead them from bondage and avenge the sins of slavery. He quietly enlisted other slaves that

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Sataro, *The Prophet in His Own Words: Nat Turner's Biblical Construction* (The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 2008).

supported him and his belief. For months, the men met secretly. They conspired about the plans of their uprising<sup>2</sup>.

In the early morning hours of August 21, 1831, Turner and his men launched one of the largest slave rebellions in American history. The rebels moved from home to home killing every white person they met. As they advanced to nearby towns, more recruits joined them. The local patrols failed to uncover Turner's plan. For thirty-six hours, the rebellion raged on. The bloody revolt in Southampton, Virginia killed nearly sixty white men, women, and children. Over three-thousand members of the state militia were sent to deal with Turner's rebels and they were soon defeated. In retaliation, more than a hundred innocent slaves were killed. Turner hid but was captured six weeks later. Nat Turner died on November 11, 1831.<sup>3</sup>

The leader of the deadly slave revolt had a deep Christian faith that propelled his rebellious actions. Nat Turner was an intelligent slave who could read and write. A literate slave was considered the exception among the other slaves. It was so rare that it became one of the greatest fears of European slave owners and missionaries during this time.<sup>4</sup> Nat Turner was recognized from birth as having exceptional gifts and abilities from his family and those in his community. In "The Confessions of Nat Turner," by Thomas Gray, Gray states, "A series of incidents, beginning in childhood, confirmed Turner in the belief that he was "intended for some great purpose" and that he would "surely be a prophet." He was born into a family that was

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Sataro, *The Prophet in His Own Words: Nat Turner's Biblical Construction* (The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Editors, History.com. "Nat Turner." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2 Dec. 2009, [www.history.com/topics/black-history/nat-turner](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/nat-turner).

<sup>4</sup> Makungu Akinyela. "Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos." *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 3 (2003): 264

religious and both his mother and father believed that Nat was destined for grander purposes.

Growing up, Nat devoted his spare time to fasting, reading the bible and praying for he believed the Almighty was guiding him and preparing him to lead a revolt.

Turner found the bible as a source from which to speak his outrage, pain, despair and hope to a God that listened and was on his side. “A bible belonging to the enslaved Turner spoke of possibility,” says curator Rex Ellis of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. In the bible, Nat Turner found an alternative mindset suggesting that where he had begun was not where he needed to end.<sup>5</sup> Nat studied the Old Testament and committed long passages to memory. Working in the fields one day, he heard a voice call to him. Nat Turner believed God spoke to him through signs, visions, and scriptures. He became convinced that God wanted him to carry out the divine mission to revolt against slavery. Turner’s religious fervor, his visions and revelations, came from the ability to read the bible and understand it, which in turn inspired and compelled Nat Turner’s act of rebellion.

Turner always understood his calling to leading a revolt in religious terms.<sup>6</sup> While Turner was locked in prison, Southampton’s executioner Thomas Gray asks, “Do you not find yourself mistaken now?” Turner responded, “Was not Christ crucified?”<sup>7</sup> Without the bible, Turner would not have seen the revolt in Biblical terms. When the slaves heard Turner quote the slaveholders’ favorite passage from Luke in the bible, the slaves themselves rejected Turner’s claims to

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph, Drexler-Dreis. “Nat Turner’s Rebellion as a Process of Conversion.” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 12 (3): 231

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/understanding-gospel-nat-turner-180960714/#PiwiXTMU2T0SVCEi.99>

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Gray. *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia*. (University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 13-16

prophecy. In “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” by Thomas Gray, Turner states, “The negroes found fault, and murmured against me, saying that if they had my sense they would not serve any master in the world.” However, it was because he had real sense that the others did not understand Nat. The brief education he had received and his ability to read the bible allowed Nat Turner to make parallel connections between what he was suffering through and relate them directly with how Jesus suffered. Jesus was Nat Turner’s role model. Turner understood that Jesus had to constantly make moves that people did not like; he ended up crucified on the cross to fulfill God’s will and be eternally free. Nat Turner knew that the moment he decided to rebel, he would be no longer bounded to the chains of the world; he would be Jesus, eternally free<sup>8</sup>.

Nat Turner’s rebellion made white folk fears of African American slaves rebelling against their treatment a reality, and they responded brutally because of it. Virginians introduced new slave codes that were enacted to prevent future rebellions. Amongst those new slave codes was the strict control of slaves’ movements. Educating slaves was also outlawed. All of this was done to tighten the grip on the African-American population to maintain order. Above all else, however, these various southerners began to consider the dangers associated with maintaining slaves and the threat it posed to their future safety and well-being.<sup>9</sup>This newly found heightened sense of alert existed in the minds of white folks for years to come. Essentially, Turner’s rebellion served as a spark that eventually culminated into the Civil War. The Civil War may not have developed as quickly as it did if it was not for the rebellion. A vast number of African-Americans regards Nat Turner as a hero worldwide. His wise use of intellect and religion

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<sup>8</sup> Patrick Breen. “Understanding the Gospel of Nat Turner.” (The Smithsonian Magazine, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Joseph, Drexler-Dreis. “Nat Turner’s Rebellion as a Process of Conversion.” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 12 (3): 233

changed the misconception that slaves were too ignorant to know or want freedom. Nat Turner's rebellion resulted in a course of events that lead to an uproar against the disintegration of slavery.

## Annotated Bibliography

Akinyela, Makungu M. "Battling the Serpent: Nat Turner, Africanized Christianity, and a Black Ethos." *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 3 (2003): 255-80.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3180833>.

This article talks about the spread of Christianity among the first generation of enslaved Africans that were on American shores. The article is also focused on Black religion as a primary source for Blacks to develop a spirit of resilience. The author also talks about the confessions of Nat Turner as an example of an enslaved African who was exposed to the Christian religion.

Breen, Patrick. "Understanding the Gospel of Nat Turner." Smithsonian.com. October 07, 2016. Accessed September 27, 2018. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/understanding-gospel-nat-turner-180960714/>.

This article is about the movie composed of the life of Nat Turner called, "The Birth of a Nation". The article provides background information about Nat Turner's family and how he was raised as well as the average life of an African-American slave during the 1800's. It concludes with analyzing Turner's religious views and how his religious position as a preacher or prophet helped him shape the decisions he made which led to rebelling.

Drexler-Dreis, Joseph. 2014. "Nat Turner's Rebellion as a Process of Conversion." *Black Theology: An International Journal* 12 (3): 230–50. doi:10.1179/1476994814Z.00000000037.

This article is about Nat Turner's rebellion as the culmination of a process of conversion. The article argues that Nat Turner's rebellion was a participation in God's grace even if it consisted of killing others. The article also uses Nat Turner's Christian faith as to display the context of the Christianity lived out by slaves.

Santoro, Anthony. "The Prophet in His Own Words: Nat Turner's Biblical Construction." *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 116, no. 2 (2008): 114-r149.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27740429>.

This is an article about Nat Turner's religious views and its connections to the largest known slave rebellion in U.S. history. It explains why Turner was adamant that his rebellious action was a biblical prophecy and not a political rhetoric. The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography serves the journal of record for Virginia history.

Turner, Nat. *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia*. Edited by Gray Thomas R. University of North Carolina Press, 2011: 11-35. [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807869468\\_turner](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807869468_turner).

This article presents excerpts from Nat Turner's autobiography. This article is about Nat Turner's life story and the negative experiences he lived that led him to the late insurrection in Southampton, Virginia. The final pages include a list of the men, women and children killed during the insurrection.

"Nat Turner." Edited by History.com Editors, *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 2 Dec. 2009, [www.history.com/topics/black-history/nat-turner](http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/nat-turner).

This article is about the history of Nat Turner. It begins with describing the setting of where Nat Turner was raised as well as it talks about the change of ownership Nat Turner had. The article captures Nat Turner's life leading up to the rebellion.