

UNTRUE CONFESSIONS

Is most of what we know about the rebel slave Nat Turner wrong?

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DECAY has its own aesthetic in the rural South, where poverty, rough-hewn building stock, and rampant flora make houses that have been vacant for a generation seem as anciently deserted as Welsh ruins. In Southampton County, Virginia, a low, marshy enclave just west of the Great Dismal Swamp, there are scores of such eerie wrecks. They teeter amid dead-level cotton fields, and are worn to an almost identical finish: warped gray timber, rust-colored roof, green vines entangling naked sills.

In several weatherboard shells, floors are stained with dark patches that locals believe is blood. At night, they say, ghosts tote lanterns through the crumbled rooms, making heavy rustling sounds, as if peanut sacks were being dragged across the attic floor. Beside one collapsed house, a weed-choked garden overlays a mass grave containing seven maimed bodies. These homesteads were among twenty attacked by Nat Turner in August of 1831, when he and some sixty other black rebels rampaged across the county for two days, killing every white person they found. Armed with farm tools and a few swords and muskets, they slaughtered fifty-seven people, mostly women and children, before militiamen quelled the revolt, just a few miles from the county seat.

Nat Turner's insurrection was one of very few slave revolts in American history, and was by far the bloodiest. It traumatized the young nation and hardened the resolve of both slaveholders and abolitionists in ways that contributed to the outbreak of the Civil War, three decades later. Yet the true story of what happened during those two hot days and nights in 1831 remains largely untold. In Southampton, the insurrection has been effaced from public memory. Nationally, historians have been slow to challenge a facile explanation of the revolt which casts Nat Turner as a lone, God-crazed madman. And when William Styron portrayed Nat Turner in fiction, in 1967, as a flawed idealist, tormented by lust, he was fiercely attacked by those who felt that a white author had no right to tell the story of a black hero. Protests eventually helped thwart plans to make Styron's novel into a film.

But Nat Turner's uprising has a way of lingering, like the farmhouses still rotting in the Southampton cotton fields. And controversy over the revolt keeps resurfacing, as it is doing now, after a twenty-five-year lull. Local mavericks in Southampton are calling for Nat Turner to be remembered, even honored. There has been renewed talk of a movie based on Styron's novel, directed by Spike Lee. And scholars are taking a fresh look at the historical record, and questioning whether the revolt has been misunderstood as the work of one deranged man rather than as a symptom of broader unrest.

Interpretation of history always reveals as much about the present as it does about the past. But with Nat Turner the contemporary echo is especially loud, raising raw and unresolved questions about race, religious zealotry, and revolutionary violence. Even at a distance of more than a century and a half, the story of a black man who massacred whites in the name of God and freedom remains incendiary. "This war, the Nat Turner war, is still going on," James Magee, a black man in Southampton County who is trying to rehabilitate Turner's memory, says. "He set off a powder keg that's still exploding."

IN 1831, Southampton County was a backwater that bore little kinship to either the genteel Old South of Confederate lore or the grinding plantation economy that most Americans think of when they imagine the brutishness of slavery. Southampton's loamy soil had been exhausted by tobacco, and few farmers owned more than a handful of slaves. Many whites occupied low-slung, wood-frame dwellings known as "a story and a jump." Slaves lived and worked close by their owners, not only in the fields but in workshops and apple-brandy stills. The county also was home to an unusually large number of free blacks, a legacy of the many local Baptists, Methodists, and Quakers who opposed slavery.

Nat Turner was born here in 1800, the same year as John Brown, on a small farm owned by Benjamin Turner. He learned to read and write, and gained renown as a healer and preacher—even baptizing a white man. There is no hard evidence that Benjamin Turner or later owners treated Nat Turner with unusual barbarity, though in his twenties he did run away. He returned voluntarily, and it was soon afterward that he allegedly began plotting the revolt, which he launched, with six co-conspirators, following a feast of roasted pig and hard apple cider.

Around midnight on August 21st, the band headed for the homestead of Turner's master, Joseph Travis, a wheelwright, and axed him and his family in their beds. From there they embarked on a house-to-house death march that covered about twenty miles. Almost no one was spared; at a rural school, the insurgents killed ten children. Along the way, they picked up guns, horses, and sixty or more followers, including free blacks. The rebels were single-minded in their slaughter; there is no evidence of rape, house-burning, or concerted plunder.

Panicked families fled into the woods and swamps, and officials called out the militia. The rebels were quickly killed or captured, some wearing the clothes of their murdered masters. Enraged whites immediately exacted revenge, on both rebels and innocent slaves. One militiaman reported to a newspaper that he witnessed "the slaughter of many blacks, without trial, and under circumstances of great barbarity." One white witness wrote to his parents about the fate of a slave captured by the militia: "They burnt him with red hot irons—cut off his ears and nose—stabbed him, cut his hamstrings, stuck him like a hog, and at last cut off his head." At another site, a slave's severed head was stuck on a stake as a warning. The spot became known as Blackhead Signpost, and a road of that name still runs through the county. Estimates of the number of blacks killed during and just after the revolt run into the hundreds.

Nat Turner was the only one of the rebel leaders to avoid capture. Officials offered a reward for his arrest, describing the thirty-year-old slave as a stocky, knock-kneed man of average height. After two months, a local farmer finally found the fugitive hiding in a foxhole just a mile from the Travis homestead. The terse transcript of Turner's trial, six days later, which survives on yellowed paper at the Southampton courthouse, bears dispassionate witness to the routine degradation of slavery. It introduces the rebel leader as "Nat alias Nat Turner a negro man slave late the property of Putnam Moore an infant." (Slave surnames, like slave marriages, were not legally recognized by whites, and Turner's owner at the time of the revolt was technically Joseph Travis's young stepson.) Turner's sentence of death, like that of other slaves who were hanged, bore a price tag: "And the Court value the said slave to the sum of three hundred and seventy five dollars."

Owners of human chattel were entitled to recompense when this property was “destroyed” by the state, as contemporary documents often put it.

Virginia blacks, both slave and free, lost some of their few liberties in the aftermath of the revolt. The state legislature quickly banned preaching by blacks, unsupervised religious instruction, and assembly. Patrols for runaway slaves were stepped up across the South, and some locales banned the importation of Virginia slaves because they might be “infected.” Many free blacks from Southampton accepted transportation to Liberia rather than endure the new restrictions and suspicions.

But the insurrection also stirred the antislavery movement and shattered the prevailing notion that slaves were docile, or incapable of fighting for their freedom. Two weeks after the revolt, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison described the violence as “the first step of the earthquake, which is ultimately to shake down the fabric of oppression.” In later decades, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, and Abraham Lincoln would invoke Turner’s legacy, and John Brown may have taken Turner as his model when he launched his own doomed plot to arm and free blacks at Harpers Ferry, in 1859.

The few other nineteenth-century plots by blacks to rise up against whites— most notably by Denmark Vesey, in Charleston, and Gabriel Prosser, in Richmond—were quickly betrayed, and their leaders expeditiously hanged. In the century after the Civil War, it became a truism among scholars that the institution of Southern slavery made rebellions nearly impossible. Most historians believed that this was due to the harsh controls and the dispersal of slaves in rural areas. Slavery apologists credited the benign paternalism of the masters. In this context, Nat Turner’s revolt came to represent an anomalous explosion sparked by one man’s fanaticism.

To support this thesis, historians could point to an extraordinary document that seemed reveal all one needed to know about the revolt. Just after Turner’s capture, a white lawyer named Thomas Gray visited him in his jail cell and recorded what he claimed was Turner’s confession that he had single-handedly plotted and led the uprising. The pamphlet Gray published three weeks later, entitled “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” purported to tell the story in Turner’s words, though the formal language appears to have been largely the lawyers own. Gray also interjected his own analysis and observations, including a remark that contradicted racial stereotypes of the day: “For natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, [Turner] is surpassed by few men I have ever seen.”

However, the essential image that emerged from the confession was of a man driven to mass murder by religious derangement. Turner told Gray of childhood visions and of marks on his body, which were taken as signs that he was a prophet. As he grew older, he made a display of asceticism, preferring fasting and prayer to the company of others. “I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty,” he told Gray. Visitations from “the Spirit” and portentous signs—drops of blood on corn, hieroglyphics found on leaves, visions of white and black spirits dueling in the skies—gradually revealed to Turner his God-given mission. “The time was fast approaching when the first should be the last and last should be first,” he said. “I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons.”

Turner’s narrative of the two-day massacre was icy and unrepentant. Joseph Travis “was to me a kind master,” Turner told Gray; then he described how he and his

followers killed not only the wheelwright but “a little infant sleeping in a cradle.” At another home, Turner reported, “I saw Will pulling Mrs. Whitehead out of the house, and at the step he nearly severed her head from her body, with his broad axe.” Turner then chased Mrs. Whitehead’s daughter Margaret. “After repeated blows with a sword,” Turner said, “I killed her with a blow on the head, with a fence rail.” Another woman was forced to look upon the mangled body of her husband, then was ordered to lie beside him and was shot. As Turner recited these horrors, Gray wrote, he had a “fiend-like” composure. “I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins.”

This image of Turner as a homicidal madman, motivated by religious hallucinations rather than by the hardships of slavery, was amplified by the first detailed history of the revolt, published in 1900 by a Southampton historian named William Drewry. Drewry interviewed survivors who recalled the revolt, but he also infused his account with the pro-slavery, white-supremacist views popular in his day. Slavery, he wrote, “was an institution which nourished the strongest affection and piety in slave and owner.” Turner had been well treated, Drewry reported, so his rebellion was unjustified, and also counterproductive, because it provoked harsh reprisals and undermined abolitionist sentiment in Virginia. Blacks evidently felt differently, and Turner became a folk hero in their stories and songs—a legendary trickster and liberator known as “ole Nat” or “Prophet Nat.” In the nineteen-thirties, when researchers from the Works Progress Administration interviewed ex-slaves, the old people made frequent reference to this wily, though by then historically murky, figure. “White folks was sharp,” an elderly woman said, “but not sharp enough to get by ole Nat. Nat? I don’t know who he was. Ole folks used to say it all de time. De meanin I git is dat de niggers could always outsmart de white folks.”

WILLIAM STYRON was born in 1925 in Newport News, Virginia, just an hour’s drive from Southampton. As a boy, he learned almost nothing of Nat Turner until he took a car trip to Southampton with his high-school football team. By the road, he noticed a lone historical marker telling of the revolt. “It was like a thunderbolt,” Styron told me, upsetting everything he’d been told by his slave-owning grandmother about docile slaves and good masters, and all he’d experienced as a child in the tightly controlled apartheid of the Jim Crow South.

Styron met with me at the Connecticut farmhouse where he has lived since 1955, amid rolling New England hills that feel very far from the steamy flatness of southeastern Virginia. Now seventy-four, and with only slight traces of a Tidewater accent, Styron said that he began taking notes on Nat Turner during the forties and started writing in the early sixties, against the backdrop of civil-rights ferment.

Styron believes that historical fiction works best when the writer is fed “short rations” by the historical record, rather than gorged with facts that fetter his imagination. In his view, Turner’s confession to Thomas Gray and William Drewry’s 1900 history were the only authentic sources on the revolt, so he relied mostly on his own insights to flesh out Turner’s character. In particular, Styron was struck by Turner’s seeming reluctance to kill. According to the confession, Turner’s first hatchet blow to Travis glanced off his master’s skull, and he later struck and failed to kill a woman, claiming that his sword was dull. In the end, he murdered only Margaret Whitehead. Styron therefore made Nat’s unrequited desire for the young woman a central plot element, and her murder the climax of the book. Turner, who narrates the novel, emerges as a tortured

figure: desperate for freedom but disdainful of fellow-slaves, lustful but monklike, masturbating frequently as he dreams of white women yet, apart from a homosexual encounter with another slave, sexually inexperienced. Styron also muted the apocalyptic tone of Turner's confession. "I quite consciously changed him from what the evidence seemed to have been—namely, that he was a psychopathic mass murderer—to a man who had human dimensions," Styron said.

The psychologically complex image Styron created of antebellum society reflected the influence of Stanley Elkins's controversial 1959 book, "Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life," which drew parallels between plantation life and the Holocaust. In both circumstances, Elkins argued, the victims were so brutalized and infantilized that they submitted docilely to their oppressors. Elkins's work was attacked by blacks who felt that he perpetuated the stereotype that slaves were childlike Sambos, and it fell out of favor as other historians began to document acts of resistance among both slaves and Jews.

Nonetheless, Styron felt that "The Confessions of Nat Turner," published in the summer of 1967, would be seen as a searing indictment of slavery and a courageous attempt by a white Southerner to enter black consciousness. Many whites and some blacks did read it that way. The book received critical raves, quickly became a No. 1 best-seller, and won the Pulitzer Prize. But it also became a flash point for racial antagonism, coinciding, as it did, with one of the most explosive moments in the history of race relations in America. Just weeks before the book was published, rioting had erupted in twenty-three cities. In Detroit alone, forty-three people were killed, prompting the governor of Michigan to declare a state of "insurrection." In April, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, and black neighborhoods exploded again. National Guardsmen patrolled city streets, Black Panthers battled police, and militants such as H. Rap Brown called for guerrilla warfare against the white establishment.

Perhaps unwisely, Styron publicly drew parallels between the black rage of the sixties and that of Nat Turner in 1831. He appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*, which quoted provocative passages from the novel and noted that both Turner and H. Rap Brown were "coolly hell-bent after Whitey." One difference between the two types, Styron told the *Washington Post*, was that Turner "had no articulated social consciousness. He was a religious fanatic."

A group of black intellectuals quickly published "William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond." The book accused Styron of injecting "Whitey-Serum" into the historical record; of putting his own "unreconstructed southern racist" thoughts inside the head of a slave; of depicting blacks as "bootlicking Sambos"; and, worst of all, in the words of Lerone Bennett, Jr., the editor of *Ebony*, of "de-balling" blacks by turning a "virile, commanding, courageous figure" into "a neurasthenic, Hamlet-like white intellectual in blackface."

Another contributor, John Henrik Clarke, wondered if whites "failed to see Nat Turner as a hero and revolutionary out of fear that they might have to see H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael in the same way." Others detected a coded, counter-revolutionary message in Styron's portrayal of Turner: black revolutionaries, then and now, were doomed. The opposite was true, one contributor, John Oliver Killens, warned. "Nothing short of total liberation will quench their thirst for freedom," he wrote. "There are thousands of Nat Turners in the city streets today."

When, in early 1968, Twentieth Century Fox announced plans to film Styron's novel, starring James Earl Jones as Nat Turner, opponents formed the Black Anti-Defamation Association and recruited LeRoi Jones, Stokely Carmichael, and H. Rap Brown to condemn the project. They declared in one statement that "hunkies such as William Styron do not have the right or authority from black people to speak for us or interpret our heroes." After threats of a boycott by black actors, the producers pledged to "project a positive image of Nat Turner as a black revolutionary" and to give the film a name other than that of Styron's novel.

But the filmmakers ran into trouble again when they began scouting locations in Southampton County. Local whites resented Styron's unflattering depiction of their forebears as "brandy-fragrant sun-scorched snaggle-mouthed anus-scratching farmers." There were also fears that the film might inflame the tense racial atmosphere in Southampton, which was then in the midst of turbulent integration. In 1970, Fox finally cancelled the project, citing cost overruns.

Styron received eight hundred thousand dollars for the movie rights, but he was left embittered by the controversy. A close friend of James Baldwin, who lived for a time in a cottage on his Connecticut property, Styron regarded himself as a liberal on race. But the heckling and the hate mail made him retreat from public debate about his novel. "At the time in which it was written, there was a terrific need on the part of the black intellectual community to have a kind of spotless black hero, almost a caricature of Spartacus," he told me. "Being a novelist, I wouldn't supply that kind of hero. I wanted to give a picture of a man who was tormented by what he was doing, who had doubts about his mission even as he was going to do it."

In retrospect, Styron said he could have consulted historical material that he was unaware of while writing the book, such as evidence that Turner had a wife. (Critics felt that Styron perpetuated an image of black family pathology by making Turner a sexually tormented bachelor.) However, Styron said, none of that would have placated his critics, who, he believes, rejected the entire exercise of a white man's writing from a slave's perspective. In this sense, Styron feels that he "unwittingly created one of the first politically incorrect texts." Those who attacked him "were denying our common humanity by saying I had no right to enter into the skin of a black man," he said.

Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, who was among those writers, feels that Styron still misconstrues both Turner and the black viewpoint. Thelwell is a professor of African-American studies at the University of Massachusetts; he believes that Turner's slaughter of women and children was justified by an institution that bartered human flesh, split up families, and was responsible for the torture and murder of many slaves. "Sow the wind and reap the whirlwind," he said. He continues to regard Styron's book as an "ignorant monstrosity" of a novel which amounts to "an appropriation of other people's culture in the most disrespectful way."

Vincent Harding, a theologian and another of the ten black writers, believes that Styron, by substituting Freudian agony for Turner's millennial wrath, stripped the revolt of its true context: the apocalyptic Christianity that suffused antebellum America and molded men like Turner and John Brown. "The God they knew promised that injustice would cost the perpetrators in very real and very concrete ways," Harding told me. "The twentieth century doesn't deal with that kind of God anymore. It's easy to caricature and trivialize it."

IN Southampton County, the roadside historical marker that first stirred William Styron's imagination was toppled by a car in the nineteen-seventies. When it was finally put back up fifteen years later, it was moved from its original site, in the county seat, and now stands beside a cotton field on a two-lane road far from any town. One other roadside marker, identifying the site of a nineteenth-century homestead, makes passing reference to the insurrection but gives the event an Old South spin. It reads, in part, "In the servile insurrection of August, 1831, the houses were fortified by faithful slaves and made a place of refuge for fugitive whites." This sign was erected in 1930, at the peak of moonlight-and-magnolia nostalgia for antebellum Culture.

The Southampton County Historical Society, which operates two museums, owns the sword Nat Turner carried during the revolt. Neither museum makes mention of Nat Turner in its exhibits, however, and the sword is locked, away, out of public view. This year, Southampton is marking its two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary with monthly lectures and exhibits on county history. The exhaustive program includes talks on obscure local figures, such as President John Tyler's grandson, but omits Nat Turner. "It's a celebration of the accomplishment of being here two hundred and fifty years, not of everything that happened," Collin Pulley, the chairman of the anniversary committee, says. Pulley, a leading official with the Sons of Confederate Veterans, manages a furniture store that is adorned with portraits of Southern generals.

Five years ago, two members of the historical society produced a documentary on Nat Turner. The society sells the video, offering it as a defense against charges that it has willfully ignored the most significant event in local history. (The society also paid to re-erect the road sign about the revolt.) But the documentary, while generally neutral in tone, is based on William Drewry's 1900 account, which depicted the rebellion as an unjustified uprising against a benevolent system—an opinion that is still shared by many local whites. "Nat had his insurrection because he was so well treated that his expectations rose higher than what he could achieve," Gilbert Francis, one of the documentary's producers, told me when I met with him, in 1995, during my first visit to the county. Francis, who died two years ago, was a prominent lawyer and large landholder. For decades, he was also the gatekeeper of Nat Turner's memory in Southampton. Though a self-described liberal—he was one of the few whites in the county who welcomed desegregation—he opposed public recognition of Nat Turner. He was descended from a family that was massacred in the rebellion, and he showed me a family Bible listing the birth, in 1831, of a son to one of the survivors, beside the words, "1 mo 7 days after Insurrection."

"The bastard tried to kill my entire family," Francis said. "I'm not going to glorify him." He also despised William Styron, because the novelist depicted his great-grandfather, Nathaniel Francis, as a drunken and sadistic slave master, "a gross, hairless man with a swinish squint" who was married to "a slab-faced brute of a person with a huge goiter." In the nineteen-sixties, when Fox tried to film Styron's novel, Francis had been the principal liaison between Hollywood and the local community, and had demanded changes in the script.

Since Francis's death, questions about Nat Turner have been referred to the documentary's co-producer, Katherine Futrell, a retired librarian. She walked with me to the site of the tree from which Nat Turner was hanged, and showed me the potter's field

nearby where the executed rebels are believed to be buried. On occasion, she takes school groups to visit the surviving homes attacked by the rebels in 1831. (Only one is inhabited.) But Futrell, like Gilbert Francis, believes it is best to leave the revolt a matter of private interest rather than public display. "As my father used to say, 'Let sleeping dogs lie,'" she said. As a child, Futrell, who grew up in the rural district where the revolt broke out, sensed that older whites had felt nervous long after the event. Whenever tension arose between the races, she told me, "whites would go to homes that could be easily fortified and defended. "The majority of the county's population is black, as it was in 1831, and a vestigial fear persists—not of actual violence but of inflamed racial tension. "We have a good relationship with black people and want to keep it that way," Mildred Drake, a local bank teller, told me. "Let's not stir things up."

Blacks in Southampton have generally acceded to this hush, and most respond to queries about Nat Turner with a shrug of indifference, or a vague gesture in the direction of the roadside marker. Even those who trace their ancestry to Turner have long been reluctant to talk about him. "People were always afraid to say they were related to him," says Asphy Turner, eighty, who was told as a child that he was directly descended from Nat, and whose land encompasses Turner's final hideout. "The question is, was he a great man or a bad man? He fought for freedom, but he murdered women and children. I reckon people would rather not talk about it."

James Magee, however, is determined to revive the memory of Nat Turner. Magee stands a lanky six feet six and bears a strong resemblance to the actor Morgan Freeman. A retired state employee, Magee is a talented painter who devotes many of his canvases to the insurrection. On sunny days, he often sets up an easel along the path the rebels traveled, painting scenes such as "On the Road to Jerusalem," his current work, which shows Turner and his accomplices leaving a house in which they've just slaughtered a white family.

"Those hateful Confederate S.O.B.s at the historical society still want to play the master-slave game, but I ain't the 'old marsey' type," Magee, who is sixty-five, says. "You can make history out of yesterday's ironing, but the only history here that matters is Nat Turner. I'm making damned sure that not everyone forgets that." Magee has conducted his own periodic tours of the route of the rebellion, usually for black groups, beginning at a church where Turner is believed to have preached to fellow-slaves the week before the uprising. "I tell blacks, 'This is hallowed ground, this is where the emancipation of your people began,'" he said. "It's a direct path from Nat Turner to John Brown to the Civil War. He struck the first blow toward ending slavery."

Magee also draws on oral history, much of it from stories he heard as a child sitting on the porches of sharecroppers' shacks. "I listen to things unwritten, words whispered around the hearth," he said. "How do you expect there to be a written record from blacks when slaves could be whipped or worse for having a paper or a book?" Among the tales he heard was that captured rebels were put in barrels with nails driven through the staves, and rolled down the road. During the county's bicentennial celebration, in 1949, Magee says he saw grisly relics of the revolt on display: a wallet and book bound with a rebel's tanned flesh, a broadaxe, a club, and Margaret Whitehead's bloodstained dress.

Magee hopes to one day erect a proper memorial or a museum devoted to Nat Turner and his followers. There is not much local interest in this, but Magee has one

unlikely ally, a seventy-eight-year-old white man named Stanley Holcomb, who lives in a crumbling antebellum mansion with a mezuzah on the door. Holcomb, an entrepreneur and a onetime movie extra, is a convert to Judaism who has a Colonel Sanders-style coiffure and wears a white Stetson and cowboy boots. A sharecropper's son who grew up on a peanut farm in Southampton, Holcomb says he realized the "dishonesty of the hush-hush attitude toward Nat Turner" when he moved away from Virginia as a young man. "I think it was guilt about slavery," he told me.

Three years ago, Holcomb produced his own movie on the uprising, a low-budget splatterfest that used locals as actors, including himself as one of Turner's masters and a young rapper with dreadlocks as one of the rebels. When I asked him why he had made the film, Holcomb replied, "Greed. That and annoying the old farts in Southampton who didn't want me to make it." But the black audience Holcomb hoped to find hasn't materialized, either, and he has sold only a few thousand videotapes.

Holcomb's next scheme is a Nat Turner museum, restaurant, and gift shop on the main highway through the county. Already, he has gathered two five-gallon buckets of dirt from a farm where Turner may have worked and plans to bottle and sell it as Soil Nat Turner Walked On. Holcomb has also collected slave artifacts, such as leg shackles and wrist irons. Like his film, though, the museum is an unpopular project among many whites, and Holcomb is still trying to raise the money for it. For now, the only commemoration of Nat Turner is a small, private gesture made most years by James Magee. On August 21st, he places a wreath by the roadside marker that tells of the revolt.

A Nat Turner surfaces once again in Southampton County, he is also being rediscovered by black intellectuals, some of whom are questioning the anti-Styron orthodoxy of the late sixties. Styron says he first sensed a thaw two years ago on Martha's Vineyard, where he has a summer home, when he attended a colloquy on race. Cornell West, a prominent black intellectual, told the audience that Styron had struggled to understand the common history of whites and blacks. "You could have knocked me over with a feather," Styron recalled. "I was tickled to death."

Styron also began a dialogue with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the head of the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard, who felt that Styron's novel was overdue for a reevaluation. "Censorship is to art as lynching is to justice, and it's just as disgusting when blacks do it as whites," Gates told me. The assault on Styron came at "the height of Black Power, of the super-macho, super-stud Black Panthers, with their guns, leather, and berets," he said. "Styron's version of Nat Turner was simply unreadable to these people, and they didn't want a white to write about it, particularly in that way."

Since then, Gates said, the blossoming of black-studies programs and the rapid expansion of the black middle class have made intellectuals more secure, and open to diverse points of view. "Back then, there was a tiny representation of blacks in academia and the media—the whole thing was a blanket of whiteness—and all black people could do was raise hell and throw stones," he remarked. "Now we have much more input and control of the images of black people."

Last year, Gates arranged for Spike Lee to meet Styron on Martha's Vineyard. At Styron's home, they talked about the novel and how it might be adapted for film. Styron says that Lee was attracted to and challenged by the book's most controversial element, Turner's lust for Margaret Whitehead. "He was saying, 'This is volatile stuff,'" Styron told me. " 'The black man and the white woman, the violence and the sex.' "

Spike Lee offered few details when he met with me, in New York. He told me that the Nat Turner project was “in limbo” because the person who had been championing it had left Fox. He also sensed that Hollywood was reluctant to finance a movie about a slave revolt. (Two recent films about slavery, “Amistad” and “Beloved,” were box-office disappointments.) But Lee said that he still hoped a movie about Nat Turner, whom he regards as a great African-American freedom fighter, would eventually be made. “I don’t think that one should just junk the novel,” he said.

When I suggested to Lee that the savagery of Turner’s story might be difficult to film, he bristled. “How does Spielberg handle violence in ‘Saving Private Ryan’? That’s the same way you have to handle it,” he said. “People were fighting for what they believed in. Slavery was an evil institution. Why was the United States fighting World War II?” He acknowledged, though, that “there might be some things people still might not be able to stomach today,” and that a movie on the revolt would be unlikely to have mass appeal. “We’re not going to have Nat Turner Happy Meals at McDonald’s. It’s not going to happen.”

IN a 1967 interview in the *Times Book Review*, William Styron glibly declared, “What there is to know about Nat Turner can be learned in a single day’s reading,” thereby adding American historians to the list of people who were offended by his work. A flurry of books and articles disputed the claim. The historian Henry Irving Tragle, for instance, published hundreds of pages of neglected documents on the revolt, including trial transcripts, news reports, letters—even the certificate of execution for Turner, which his owner’s estate needed in order to claim reimbursement from the state. But most scholars seemed more intent on rebutting Styron than on reexamining the traditional understanding of the revolt. “The Styron controversy made the subject of Nat Turner seem scorching hot,” said Kenneth Greenberg, the chairman of the history department at Suffolk University, in Boston, and the author of several works on Turner and slavery. “Academics, who tend to be a frightened group, didn’t want to throw themselves on the flames.” Also, in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, research on slavery began to focus on subtler and less documented forms of black rebellion, such as disobedience and sabotage. “Black culture itself—its music, language, and folk traditions—came to be seen as a form of resistance,” Greenberg said.

As a result, Nat Turner entered a period of scholarly neglect. And the conventional wisdom about the revolt—which Styron underscored by using Turner’s confession as the basis for his novel—remained virtually unchallenged. “Nat Turner has remained trapped in the narrative of ‘great man’ history,” Scot French told me, citing Thomas Carlyle’s famous maxim that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men.” French is the assistant director of the University of Virginia’s Carter G. Woodson Institute for Afro-American and African Studies, and part of the burgeoning new field of “social memory,” which draws on anthropology, literary theory, and other disciplines to analyze how and why the historical record is crafted. He has spent five years researching both Nat Turner’s revolt and the way it has been remembered, and hopes to publish his work next year. When French began to delve into the source material, he found evidence to support many alternative readings of the revolt—including the possibility that blacks other than Nat Turner were crucial to the uprising, and that it was part of a broader conspiracy. In particular, French and other revisionists have

analyzed the role played by Thomas Gray, the white amanuensis who took down Turner's confession. Gray, who was born into a prominent planter family, was in financial straits in 1831; he had recently sold most of his land and almost all his slaves, and had just been excluded from his father's will. He may therefore have had a strong economic incentive to publish the confession, which he appears to have embellished for dramatic effect. The confession, for instance, isn't mentioned in the transcript of Turner's trial, though Gray wrote that it was read in court and corroborated there by Turner. Gray's description of the trial includes vivid language not found in the transcript, such as the judge's pronouncement that Turner be hanged until he was "dead! dead! dead."

Also revealing is a long letter from a "g'entleman" in Southampton that was published a month before Turner's capture. (Such anonymous dispatches were a common form of antebellum journalism.) It strongly resembles the confession, both in its writing style and in its analysis of the revolt. This suggests that Gray may have already settled on a version of events, which he then used Turner to substantiate. "Public curiosity has been on the stretch to understand the origin and progress of this dreadful conspiracy," Gray wrote in a preface to the confession, clearly regarding it as his mission to quiet rumor and panic over slave unrest. The confession he recorded duly reassured Southern whites that the violence didn't reflect the cruelties of slavery, or mass disaffection among blacks. Rather, it was "entirely local" and sprang from one man's "gloomy fanaticism," and from his charismatic sway over impressionable slaves.

What gives Gray's account enduring power is that all Americans can find within it a message they want to hear. "Everybody has a stake in the confession," French said. For abolitionists, Nat Turner's tale became a bracing account of slaves' desire for freedom. Similarly, for blacks, who have had few other slave rebels to lionize, "the confession has become an iconic text," French noted. "Nat Turner is the great man of black history." Scholars, too, have been mesmerized by the document, because, French explains, it allows them to say, "Here you have it from the man himself! A slave, no less! We never hear from them." As a result, historians have tended to downplay evidence that casts doubt on the confession's accuracy. In this respect, French compares the traditional interpretation of Turner's revolt with the "lone gunman" approach to political violence, which ignores the broader context of the act. "As soon as you call it the Nat Turner insurrection, you rule out everything else," French told me.

At the time of the uprising, the South was rife with antislavery agitation. In 1829, a free black named David Walker published a fiery "Appeal," which, calling on blacks to violently overthrow their masters, caused keen anxiety in the South. William Lloyd Garrison had just begun publishing his abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, which was thought to be so incendiary that Georgia posted a five-thousand-dollar reward for Garrison's capture. Antislavery sentiment was also cresting in Great Britain, which abolished slavery in its empire, including in its West Indian colonies, in 1833. There was even debate in the Virginia legislature about freeing slaves. All this made Southern slave owners feel isolated and defensive; one sign of their growing anxiety was the strengthening, a few months before the revolt, of laws against educating slaves.

Historians have also neglected eyewitness accounts from both whites and blacks, which appear to contradict the confession. Many reports prior to Turner's capture suggested that other blacks may have led the uprising. Letters and press accounts noted the prominent role played by both "Genl. Nelson" and a free black named Billy Artis. But

Nelson was quickly executed, and Artis shot himself before he was captured. Only Turner remained at large as panicked whites struggled to make sense of the uprising. “He was the one person who could take the fall,” French said. “If he’d been killed during the revolt, we could have been reading ‘Nelson’s Confessions.’”

Another puzzle is the testimony of a slave girl named Beck, who, before Turner’s capture, told a court that she had heard slaves outside Southampton discussing an uprising a full year before it happened—contrary to Turner’s later claim that he had disclosed his plans to only a few confidants, and just before the revolt. The court sentenced a number of slaves to death on Beck’s testimony, though some whites repudiated her account once Turner’s story was told.

Mary Kemp Davis, a professor at Florida A. & M., has recently published a book on Nat Turner that identifies other oddities. In the trials of rebel slaves that were held before Turner’s capture, neither black nor white witnesses noted Turner’s religious fervor. And though slaves such as Beck testified in these earlier trials, none were called in Turner’s case. Rather, the court relied on a white witness, who stated that Turner “seemed to command the party,” and on a court official who had interrogated Turner. “Could it be that the slaves could not be depended upon to give the kind of testimony the court desired?” Davis writes.

It is also possible that Turner protected other blacks by taking the blame for the revolt. Or, under prompting from Gray, and perhaps even coercion (he was “covered with chains” during the confession), he chose to tell the lawyer what he wanted to hear—and what Turner himself possibly wanted to believe. “He’d been alone in the woods for two months, and he may have become as crazy as a loon, willing to play along with this version,” French said. “The confession might be true to Nat Turner’s way of seeing, but not to the events as a whole.”

Just after the uprising, a rash of suspected slave conspiracies were uncovered across Virginia and in nearby states, resulting in executions, militia call-ups, and panic as far away as Delaware. All this suggested to many whites a broad scheme, perhaps even an abolitionist plot stretching along the Eastern seaboard. The governor of Virginia, John Floyd, wrote that the conspiracy was “greater than will ever appear” and that “every black preacher” east of the Blue Ridge was privy to the plan. Virginia’s swift crackdown on black churches and black education is also hard to square with the notion that the massacre was caused by a lone fanatic, now deceased.

French doesn’t go so far as to posit a broad conspiracy, but he does argue that it is significant that so many people believed one existed. Prominent scholars familiar with French’s work feel that it will re-ignite debate not only about the insurrection but about slavery itself. “This will bring Nat Turner back,” Nell Painter, a historian and the director of African-American studies at Princeton, says. “And it opens up a whole range of possibilities—that there was widespread organized resistance to slavery, which runs against the myth of a solid South.” Painter also believes that French and others will draw more attention to traditionally neglected sources, such as the journal of a plantation mistress who wrote of slavery in 1858, “We are living under a volcano.” This is evidence, Painter says, “that the fear was real and so was the anger and violence.” A new book, co-authored by the historians John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweniger and entitled “Runaway Slaves,” documents the fact that thousands of slaves ran away each year, thus demolishing any lingering notion that slaves were docile and undefiant.

Scholars of slavery are also giving new weight to the oral histories and slave narratives that have traditionally been regarded as tainted by the abolitionist views of those who recorded them. “Historians have come to realize that if you don’t use this material, the history of slavery comes only from the owners,” Painter told me. Moreover, some of the more disputed oral traditions, such as the one regarding Thomas Jefferson’s slave offspring, have recently been given support by DNA testing.

Like almost everyone else who is drawn to the Nat Turner saga, Scot French suspects that the full story of what happened in 1831 will remain impossible to reconstruct. “But I think we have to confront and embrace the uncertainty rather than imposing a false order on it,” he said. “The Rashomon version may be the best narrative we have. About all we know for sure is that fifty-seven whites died. We have the bodies.”

One body, though, remains unaccounted for—that of Nat Turner. According to several reports, the slave’s corpse was given to doctors for dissection and his body parts were distributed among white families. “There are many citizens still living who have seen Nat’s skull,” William Drewry wrote in 1900. “It was very peculiarly shaped, resembling the head of a sheep, and at least three-quarters of an inch thick. Mr. R. S. Barham’s father owned a money purse made of his hide.” Other rumors claimed that Turner’s body oil was used to make a cure-all called Nat’s Grease.

French succeeded in tracing Turner’s skull to Wooster College, in Ohio, where it was sent in 1866 with a letter of authentication from Southampton County. The museum in which the skull was kept burned down in 1901. According to a local news report, the skull was saved from the flames by being hurled from the burning building to the ground, “where it bounced and rolled like a foot ball.” It has since vanished.

To French, the ghoulish diaspora of Nat Turner’s remains is an apt metaphor for the lingering mystery of his life and of the slave rebellion. “We’ll never lay this story to rest,” he predicted. “Every generation will have to build its own cenotaph to Turner.” When I asked him what such a crypt might look like, French said, “An empty tomb inscribed with poetry, history, and—inevitably—a lot of graffiti.”