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Unrequited Toil

A History of United States Slavery

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As American soldiers pursued rebels in Florida, Denmark Vesey used his church network in Charleston, South Carolina, as a hub of the black insurgency, organizing one of the largest uprisings in American history in 1822. Vesey was born on St. Thomas, then a Danish possession, in 1767, and spent his boyhood on St. Thomas in a polyglot Creole community. At age fourteen he was sold to slave traders sailing to St. Domingue, the hellish French sugar island that became Haiti. On board a merchant ship, he attracted sailors' attention. Called Telemaque, Vesey was described as physically striking, and the ship's master, Joseph Vesey, bought him and resold him to a sugar planter, who sent him back for a refund. Captain Vesey took him back in 1781 and employed him aboard his slave ship for another two years before settling him in Charleston, South Carolina.[25]

Religious networks and evangelical fervor explain how Vesey's planned uprising and the black insurgency of which it was a part changed in the generation after Gabriel's Rebellion. Evangelical Christianity washed over the landscape. In backwoods revivals and in urban meeting houses, the new evangelicals became fishers of converts. When African-descended Americans heard the Word and read Scripture, they took unintended lessons: that all people were spiritual equals in the sight of God, that all were equally loved by Jesus Christ, and that the Holy Spirit was working for all. Christianity leveled republican hierarchies and elided democratic divisions.[26] Denmark Vesey was among a cadre of evangelical

[25] Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*, rev. edn. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

[26] James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1969); Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Eddie Glaude, *Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

African Americans who preached a theology of liberation that became a strategy of emancipation.

That liberation network formed with black congregations. In Charleston, Vesey acted as his owner's agent and servant, forming a wide network of associations in the bustling city. There he married an enslaved woman named Beck, learned trades and literacy, and met numerous potential recruits. In 1799, the thirty-three year-old Vesey's fortunes turned when he bought a winning lottery ticket. With $1,500, he bought his freedom from Joseph Vesey, now a plantation owner. Denmark Vesey worked as a carpenter, but rather than distancing himself from his enslaved friends and acquaintances, as many free African-descended Charlestonians did, he remained close, answering a vocation. He became a minister, preaching equality among men and rebelliousness to whites who refused to acknowledge Christian equality. It was a time when evangelicals were planting churches and broadening their work.

Vesey became a class leader in the Methodist Church, cultivating a black following at a time when evangelicals were dividing along racial lines. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church was the first independent black Protestant denomination in America, and in 1818, under the leadership of Morris Brown, Charleston's AME church seceded from the white Methodists. African-descended people were like the children of Israel, Vesey argued. And the New Testament liberation theology of the biblical Apostle Paul of Tarsus was also operating in the potent evangelical upwelling in Vesey's Charleston. One witness said "he would speak of the creation of the world in which he would say all men had equal rights, black as well as whites, &c. all his religious remarks were mingled with [s]lavery."[27]

And as Paul defied Roman authority, African-descended Christians defied whites' authority. In retaliation for exercising religious autonomy, authorities arrested 140 AME church members in June 1818, and several black ministers were given the choice of fines or jail time or leaving the state. Morris remained, serving a month in jail. And as the conflict deepened, Vesey formed ties with enslaved men such as Rolla Bennett, Monday Gell, and Peter Poyas, their conversations turning on the injustices swirling around them.

[27] Ex-slave, quoted in Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977), 76.

A plot formed to throw off slavery's chains. As AME leaders were persecuted and driven underground, they linked Christian liberation theology with historical processes like the Haitian Revolution and some traditional African practices. At some point before the summer of 1822, Vesey's ministry turned from Christian salvation to earthly revolution. The 1820 Missouri Crisis convinced him that the tide was turning against slavery in the United States. He and Monday Gell looked to Haiti as an ally. They authored a letter to Jean-Pierre Boyer, who had become Haiti's president in 1818 and was working to unify the country. A black sailor promised to deliver it. Angola native Gullah Jack allied with Vesey's insurgents, which helped broaden the revolution's appeal to Africans shipped to Charleston as slaves before the 1808 ban. Jack organized an Angolan band of insurgents. Monday Gell organized fellow Igbos from West Africa into a regiment. Mingo Harth was another West African who organized Mandinka recruits. Some of these ethnic companies maintained cultural discipline: dissenters or those who refused to join the planned rebellion would suffer the scorn of fellow Africans from the old country. This pan-African coalition joined a wider vision Vesey offered, "that if we did not put our hand to the work, & deliver ourselves, we would never come out of [s]lavery." And with a growing insurgent network reaching into the church, out to various ethnic groups, and beyond Charleston to Haiti, Vesey's planned revolution quickly took shape in 1822.[28]

Vesey's would-be revolution had the potential to succeed, even more than Gabriel's 1800 uprising. Lowcountry South Carolina was majority black and majority enslaved, unlike Richmond and Henrico County, Virginia. Vesey's insurgent network was broad, and perhaps 9,000 enslaved people knew some part of the uprising planned for July 14, 1822, Bastille Day, commemorating the start of the French Revolution in 1789. But such a wide-ranging conspiracy was also a weakness. A bondsman named Peter betrayed the plot in May. Governor Thomas Bennett was disinclined to believe that his bondsman Rolla was involved in any planned uprising so sweeping and ambitious, even after Rolla – Vesey's friend – was implicated. But evidence coming from informants – including two enslaved men who traded betrayal for freedom – blew up the plan.

South Carolina and Charleston authorities began rounding up accused conspirators and torturing confessions out of them. Vesey fled but was caught, along with 130 other African-descended people. Panic spread

[28] Bernard E. Powers, *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822–1885* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 32 (quotation); Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, chap. 6.

among whites as the magnitude of the planned rebellion came to light. Two courts were convened in Charleston, and as a result of the proceedings, thirty were released, thirty-seven were exiled from the state, and twenty-three were acquitted. Two died in custody, and courts convicted and sentenced thirty-five to death by hanging. Vesey, Rolla Bennett, Peter Poyas, and several others were hanged on July 2 outside the city limits, their bodies taken by surgeons. Even in death black bodies had "ghost values" or a postmortem slave commodity price.[29]

The decision to hang Vesey and some of his coleaders in an out-of-the way place was meant to deprive them of martyrdom. Yet South Carolina officials created a ghastly spectacle of executing others. On July 12, two more insurgents were hanged at a portion of Charleston called the Lines, a stone wall at the city's northern limits. Twenty-two were led to the Lines on July 26, where a group of benches was set up and nooses thrown over the walls in a gallows spectacle staged as a theatrical display of vengeance. But authorities botched the executions, miscalculating the drop. And instead of seeing the necks of the condemned breaking, the large crowd – including children – watched as twenty-two men were slowly strangling. The captain of the city guard then opted to shoot each one by one. When five more conspirators were hanged at the Lines in late July and August, the nooses were dangled from a deadly height.[30]

In the aftermath of the abortive Vesey rebellion, South Carolina imposed harsh new security measures meant to control the contagion of liberty among would-be black insurgents. Black preachers were banned, the AME church was destroyed, and independent congregations were disbanded. The state passed new black codes in December, including the mandatory arrest of any black mariner who arrived in port (though he could be released to leave). South Carolina's Negro Seaman's Act of 1823 enacted harsh penalties for violators. Charleston beefed up its police force, built a new arsenal, and created a surveillance association to watch and control black people. City bondspersons had long worn badges, and that regime was more strictly enforced along with slave patrols and increased penalties for bondspersons hiring their own time.

Eight years after Vesey's execution, a fresh wave of religious antislavery activism stoked enslavers' fears. North Carolina native David Walker

[29] Daina Ramey Berry, *The Price for Their Pound of Flesh: Black Bodies for Sale in the Building of America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2017), chap. 6.

[30] Jack Shuler, *The Thirteenth Turn: A History of the Noose* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2014), 102–05.

extended Vesey's liberation theology into a call for massive uprisings in his 1829 *Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*. Born free in North Carolina in 1785, Walker became an antislavery lecturer, traveling widely before settling in the 1820s in Boston, where he ran a used clothing business. He rejected the gradualism of the American Colonization Society, which sponsored schemes to manumit American bondspersons and exile them to Liberia. Instead he urged an immediate uprising.

Walker's *Appeal* was in important ways an expression of a rising tide of democracy and evangelical religion. Words and political speech were becoming powerful democratic forces as more people could read and buy copies of newspapers, books, tracts, pamphlets, and magazines. Democratic appeals were beginning to infuse politics as they had religious debates. And seizing that democratic entitlement, Walker picked up a pen mightier than many swords. It provoked an antidemocratic response.

When copies of the *Appeal* were found circulating among African Americans in Wilmington, North Carolina, in 1830, whites' frenzied response sent a murderous wave across the eastern part of the state. Governor John Owen led a frantic effort to suppress the *Appeal*, sending notices to thirty-two state senators and urging law enforcement to be on high alert. Suspicion soon centered on the large free African American networks in Pasquotank and Craven Counties. New Bern was thought to be at the center of an insurrection planned for Christmas Day, 1830, and enslavers arrested and detained hundreds of African-descended people suspected of conspiring against them. In Chowan County, a mob destroyed a black church, rifled the dwellings of Edenton residents, and forbade gatherings. No conspiracy was uncovered, but fears simmered as the state legislature passed a raft of repressive legislation.

North Carolina tightened security, forbidding bondspersons' gaming and whites' gaming with them. Sheriffs were empowered to sell fugitives caught as runaways and to prevent free blacks from selling wares outside the county in which they resided. It forbade "the circulation of seditious publications" or those advocating rebellion, established new county slave patrols, punished harboring runaways, and threw up barriers to black people entering the state and to manumitted bondspersons remaining. Once freed or manumitted, black North Carolinians had ninety days to leave the state for good. It forbade intermarriage among blacks and whites and, perhaps most ominously, the legislature passed a law "to Prevent All Persons from Teaching Slaves to Read or Write, the Use of Figures Excepted." Numeracy could serve enslavers' ends, but literacy was dangerous. State-enforced ignorance was the price North Carolina was willing to pay to prevent an organized black insurgency.[31] Across the South, enslavers undercut public education in a furious attempt to foreclose the possibility that black protests could find their way into print and through it the circulation of ideas. And then enslavers' worst fears came to pass.

On the moonlit early morning of August 22, 1831, Nat Turner climbed up a ladder into his owner Joseph Travis's house in Southampton County, Virginia, slipped in through an attic window, crept downstairs, and unbolted the door, letting in two fellow insurgents, Will Francis and Hark Travis, also called Hark Moore. "I entered my master's chamber, it being dark," Turner testified. He raised a hatchet with deadly intent, then faltered. "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 a blow of his axe, and Mrs. Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed." Downstairs two white boys, Putnam Moore and Joel Westbrook, were also sliced to death with axes. The most deadly slave uprising in American history had begun.[32]

The Nat Turner Rebellion brought home the ever-present possibility that enslaved people would rise up and murder their owners in bed. And the Turner rebels did not spare non-enslavers. Every white person in their path was targeted for being connected to an enslaver in some way. The uprising was calculated to spread terror. It was planned, not spontaneous. And it came from within the black neighborhood local whites claimed to have mastered. The terror of that August rocked the state and nation and rattled the foundations of slavery in Virginia.

Nat Turner was about thirty, born the year Gabriel was executed in Virginia and Denmark Vesey bought his freedom in South Carolina. He was recognized as particularly intelligent and gifted. "I was intended for some great purpose," he testified. He professed Christianity, and as Turner grew, he began a ministry to fellow bondspersons. Unlike Vesey, he did not become part of an institutional church. Rather, he claimed that the Holy Spirit spoke to him as a prophet. Turner witnessed several prophesies such as when he "discovered drops of blood on the corn as

[31] Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005), 35 (quotations); Claude A. Clegg III, *The Price of Liberty: African Americans and the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), chap. 3.

[32] Nat Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.* (Baltimore, MD: T. R. Gray, 1831), 12.

though it were dew from heaven," and also found "on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters, and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood." This was evidence of a divine commission of which he was the fulfillment: "I should arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons."

After the murders of Mr. and Mrs. Travis, one of the rebels returned to the Travis house to kill an infant left behind, beheading it and throwing the body in a fireplace. The band then moved south a quarter mile to the cabin of Salathiel Francis, killing him, taking his guns and horses, and moving in the early morning darkness southward to the Reese farm, killing Piety Reese and her eighteen-year-old son, William. Both the Francis and Reese properties were home to free and enslaved African Americans, and the Turner rebels spared their lives while recruiting others.[33]

As dawn approached, Turner's men then headed for the Elizabeth Turner plantation, where Nat Turner had once abided. There an insurgent shot and killed a white overseer, but "as we approached, the family discovered us, and shut the door," Turner recalled. "Will, with one stroke of his axe, opened it, and we entered and found Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Newsome in the middle of a room, almost frightened to death." Will Francis killed Elizabeth Turner, and Nat Turner killed Sarah Newsom. The rebels ransacked the estate and recruited insurgents from the slave dwellings. Having killed nearly eleven whites connected to Turner's rebels by legal ownership, the group split up.[34]

Turner directed a detachment to attack neighboring estates while he led men south. Hark Moore and Jack Reese killed four non-slave owners, including an infant. Alarmed whites in the neighborhood had begun fleeing the insurgents. Turner led nine more rebels who mounted horses and rode to the Whitehead cotton plantation, killing seven, including a two-year-old toddler. A terrified Harriet Whitehead hid in a bedroom and was left alive. Enslaved people belonging to the Whiteheads fled, but on leaving the plantation Turner's men recruited two enslaved men returning from an early morning hunt. Now numbering seventeen, the band split again, fanning out into the county.

As the sun rose higher on that summer morning, Turner's rebels raced against warnings sent out by whites in the neighborhood about the

[33] David F. Allmendinger Jr. *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), chaps. 5–6.

[34] Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 13.

uprising, splitting up. As the killings continued, Turner recruited more rebels. Some joined willingly while others were coerced. By then whites were counterattacking. Tom Barrow had received word the rebels were heading to his farm and loaded two guns, lying in wait for the insurgents led by Nat Turner II (another Nat Turner involved in the raid). While his sister-in-law Mary T. Vaughn escaped through a garden, aided by an enslaved woman, Barrow fired at the rebels but was overrun and killed along with his brother-in-law George Vaughn.[35]

At ten in the morning, white volunteers chased about Southampton County on the bloody trail of the insurgents. Evading them, Nat Turner and the two other rebel detachments regrouped at the Newt Harris farm, then attacked the Levi Waller farm, killing ten, including six children, before advancing on the farms of William and Jacob Williams, killing a dozen more whites. A little after noon, the insurgents shot three more at the Rebecca Vaughn farm. To avoid the betrayals that undermined Gabriel and Denmark Vesey's uprisings, Turner had kept his plans to himself, acting as a military commander. He even took the name "General Jackson" (Andrew Jackson was president at the time) or "General Cargill" while his captains also referred to themselves as generals.[36]

The moonlight raid had become a daylight skirmish. About thirty of Turner's insurgents encountered an eighteen-member white posse at Parker's Field, about three miles from the town of Jerusalem (today Courtland). Whites formed as if to fight. Turner's men advanced after he ordered them "to fire and rush on them." And the militiamen fled, Turner's insurgents pursuing until they met another posse of white volunteers reinforcing the first, counterattacking and pushing back Turner's men. "The insurgents," Captain William C. Parker contended, "after receiving a few raggling fires, retreated."[37] Turner recalled that "several of my bravest men being wounded, the others became panick [*sic*] struck and squandered over the field; the white men pursued and fired on us several times."[38]

White militiamen fell back while the insurgents tried an alternate route to Jerusalem, halted by whites guarding a bridge. By nightfall, about

[35] Allmendinger, *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County*, 181–82.

[36] Thomas C. Parramore, "Covenant in Jerusalem," in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 58 (quotation); Allmendinger, *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County*, 184–90.

[37] Parker, quoted in Allmendinger, *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County*, 193.

[38] Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 16.

twenty surviving members of Turner's force gathered at Buckhorn Quarter four miles west of Jerusalem, including both Nat Turners, Hark Moore, and Sam Francis. They spent the night there, moving at about five in the morning to the house of Dr. Samuel Blunt. There Blunt and some neighbors fired on the rebels. As the Turner rebels moved to the Newt Harris farm again to regroup, they encountered mounted militiamen from nearby Greensville County. Most of the insurgents disbanded. Turner went into hiding near Cabin Pond. The Turner Rebellion had ended.

But whites in Virginia and North Carolina panicked, it not being clear whether Turner's insurgency was isolated or one part of a vast and coordinated uprising. Locals in Southampton County and its vicinity summarily executed African-descended people with near impunity, perhaps twenty-five to forty in the days after the uprising. Alfred, owned by Levi Waller, was captured by Southampton volunteers shortly before the skirmish at Parker's Field. To restrain him, they cut his Achilles tendons. When the Greensville militia came upon Alfred, they shot him dead, cut off his head, and placed it on a post by the roadside. And Jordan, a black man who had joined Dr. Blunt in shooting at insurgents on August 23, was killed anyway. One black man was shot dead by a jittery militia company just for being in Southampton County. Militiamen from Norfolk took home the severed heads of several enslaved people, placing them atop poles to warn any would-be insurrectionaries.

Misinformation led to hysteria. Reports indicated that the Southampton insurgent leaders had fled to the Great Dismal Swamp straddling the Virginia–North Carolina border. "Excessive agitation prevailed in [Wilmington, North Carolina]," a Maryland newspaper reported, "the men were under arms, and the women and children half-distracted by their fears; and thus it was in several parts of North Carolina, and the people hastily prepared themselves to encounter reported armies of slaves!" About 1,000 militia and federal troops responded, rounding up suspects and hunting for conspirators. And by September, perhaps 100 African-descended people in southern Virginia and northern North Carolina had been killed by militia and other white mobs.[39]

[39] *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, August 25, 1831, 2; *Niles' Weekly Register* [Baltimore] September 24, 1831, 67 (quotation); Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 338–53; Alfred L. Brophy, "The Nat Turner Trials," *North Carolina Law Review* 91 (May 2013): 1817–80.

The meanings of the uprising and the identity of Nat Turner remain controversial matters. To some, he was a holy warrior. To others, he was a thief and a murderer. To yet others, he was a general. But unlike Gabriel, Turner's insurgency targeted whites regardless of class or whether they were enslavers. Even babies were not spared, a tactic suggesting vengeance for so many black infants and children snatched away. And unlike Vesey's uprising centered on a church, the 1831 rebellion in Southampton focused on a determined leader, one whose ministry attracted some followers and repelled others.[40] Turner hid for nine weeks in Southampton County before being captured, and legend spread of "Captain Nat Turner" and "Gen. Nat Turner." He was compared to Gabriel in the press.[41] In jail pending trial, he gave an interview to a local lawyer, Thomas Ruffin Gray, detailing the uprising and his putative motives. Gray published it as *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Authorities treated it as an admission of guilt.

It was a shrewd one indeed. Turner drew all the responsibility for the rebellion to himself while announcing its overarching theme, "it 'twas my object to carry terror and devastation wherever we went." The "terror" was deliberate. Turner gave no indication that he had been persuaded by abolitionist appeals or that he was head of an expansive revolutionary movement. Rather, his uprising was a response to a divine call. "The Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened," Turner argued, "and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne 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."[42]

Virginia declared war on that kind of terror. Authorities tried suspected insurgents, executing fifty-five, equal to the number of whites killed. Some suspects were acquitted while others were sentenced to transportation out of state. After Turner's execution, spectators dismembered his body. Some took souvenirs. His head probably made it to Wooster, Ohio, though the corpses of many of those hanged were taken off to the medical school at the University of Virginia, where cadavers were in short supply. In North

[40] James Sidbury, "Reading, Revelation, and Rebellion: The Textual Communities of Gabriel, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner," and Douglas R. Egerton, "Nat Turner in a Hemispheric Context," in *Nat Turner*, 119–47.

[41] *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, August 29, 1831, 2 (first quotation); *Vermont Republican*, September 10, 1831, 3 (second quotation); *Salem* [Mass.] *Gazette*, September 9, 1831, 2.

[42] Turner, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, 14 (first quotation); 11 (second quotation).

Carolina, by year's end, fifteen African Americans were lynched and another fourteen convicted of insurrection. Twelve of them were hanged.[43]

Although Nat Turner insisted his rebellion was divinely ordained, it came amid a chain of uprisings that were part of a wider revolutionary movement sweeping Europe and the Americas in the early 1830s. In Europe came the July 1830 Revolution in France and uprisings in Poland, Italy, and the German states. Belgium split from the Netherlands in 1831, and Greece won its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1832. West Indian bondspersons were mobilizing too. In February 1831, a slave rebellion in Martinique involved some 300 bondspersons and a pair of white revolutionaries. In the aftermath, twenty-two African-descended people were executed in Saint-Pierre, and French authorities imposed a strict color line. In 1831, enslaved insurgents on British Tortola planned to kill all the white males on that sugar island and seek refuge in Haiti. In December 1831, Samuel Sharpe led nearly 20,000 African-descended people in the Christmas Rebellion in Jamaica, burning sugar plantations, stores, and sugar houses, and taking large swaths of the island under rebel control. British forces put it down early in 1832, executing 138, including Sharpe, and maiming many more.

But British legislators were forced to confront the issue of why so many were following insurgent leaders like Sharpe. Abolitionist and Member of Parliament Thomas Fowell Buxton warned the House of Commons that "if the question respecting the West Indies were not speedily settled, it would settle itself in an alarming way." Buxton and his abolitionist colleagues were able to persuade Parliament to pass a gradual abolition scheme that would rid Britain of West Indies slavery starting in 1834 while compensating owners financially.[44] It was the last nail in the coffin of the old West Indies sugar lobby, and Parliament calculated it was far better for Americans to pay the security costs of enslaved people to produce cotton bound for England than for Britain to risk uprisings for diminishing returns in sugar. Virginia too debated whether African American slavery was worth the costs the Turner Rebellion tallied.

After Turner was executed, the Virginia General Assembly weighed the expenses of a slave security state against the financial interests of

[43] David Grimsted, *American Mobbing, 1828–1861: Toward Civil War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), chap. 5.

[44] Buxton quoted in Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Abolitionist Movement* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 168.

enslavers. Some antislavery delegates recommended colonization – sending manumitted bondspersons out of the country – and thereby ending slavery gradually. Colonization was the persistent outcome of racial thinking that stumbled on the logic of inclusive societies.[45] But the Assembly sided with enslavers, narrowly defeating a gradual abolition petition early in 1832. That was no accident.

Slavery promised greater returns than in the 1820s. In 1830, slave prices in the United States had begun their steepest ascent in fifteen years. Cotton prices were leading the rise. British demand for American slave-grown cotton rippled back to Virginia, the state with the largest enslaved population. With each slave sale, Virginia enslavers collected some of the wealth flowing into the state from lower south sugar and cotton planters demanding more workers. Would-be revolutionaries could be sold off with greater ease and efficiency as bondspersons became liquid assets.[46] The slave market therefore seemed to diffuse the dangers of future uprisings. But states did not let the market alone solve their security problems.

In the wake of the Nat Turner Rebellion, Virginia and bordering states passed sweeping new restrictions on people of African descent. Since religion and abolitionist agitation seemed to be at the root of the rebellion, Virginia took steps to limit black preaching and everything associated with it. The legislature outlawed teaching people of African descent, free or enslaved, to read or write. Many teachers disobeyed the law and instructed black students anyway. The legislature forbade religious worship without a licensed white minister. Some African American congregations went underground, meeting in secret. Other black Christians joined white worshippers, under their surveillance, rather than go unchurched. Virginia's measures were part of a wave of restrictive legislation enforcing a color line in worship, mobility, and education, which also enlisted whites of all social classes as monitors of African-descended people.[47]

Deep South states countered Virginia's efforts to dispose of rebels in the interstate slave trade. A month after Turner was executed in Virginia, Louisiana forbade entry of enslaved people brought to the state for sale based on rumors that traders bought up other Southampton rebels for

[45] Nicholas Guyatt, *Bind Us Apart: How Enlightened Americans Invented Racial Segregation* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2016).

[46] Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, chap. 7.

[47] Rebecca Hartkopf Schloss, "The February 1831 Slave Uprising in Martinique and the Policing of White Identity," *French Historical Studies* 30.2 (Spring 2007): 203–36.

export. To prevent the volatile conditions leading to the German Coast uprising twenty years earlier, Louisiana already required certificates of good character for any bondsperson arriving in the state for sale. Alabama also passed emergency legislation that was a mix of Virginia restrictions on literacy and Louisiana restrictions on bondspersons entering the state. The Alabama legislature refused to allow enslaved people entering with any but a resident owner or migrant owner and outlawed teaching African Americans to read or write and gathering in groups of five or more, and forbade anyone addressing groups of black people – a prohibition on public worship. Mississippi wrote a slave-trading ban into its 1832 constitution. Yet some enslavers scoffed at such restrictions. "London and Paris have much more to dread from their rabble than Louisiana will ever have from her blacks," banker Edmond Jean Forstall wrote a New York correspondent in 1832. Demographics favored white surveillance and control over black workers, he argued, since Louisiana's population was roughly equal free and enslaved.[48] Forstall's explanation is the kernel of why there were not more Nat Turner-like uprisings.

But in preventing another rebellion, Virginia and other states permitting slavery doubled down on war capitalism while foreclosing what would later be called Schumpeterian capitalism, which was capitalism characterized by an intellectual class of creative entrepreneurs. Theorized by economist Joseph Schumpeter, entrepreneurial, change-oriented capitalism flourished in places with schools, free exchanges of ideas, and encouragement of innovation. It led to experimentation and invention rather than merely growth. Instead, Virginia and other states that remained committed to slavery knocked down opportunities for education and with it the creativity that led to economic diversity in states and regions in which slavery was outlawed.[49]

The process had been unfolding for decades, but the draconian restrictions on literacy and dissemination of literature put in place after 1831 meant that creativity foundered on the overriding imperatives of the slave security state. In restricting schooling and literacy to enslaved people, it denigrated the same for poor whites. In enlisting whites to police

[48] Robert H. Gudmestad, *A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), chap. 4; Edmond Forstall to Thomas Wren Ward, November 19, 1832, Baring Papers, Ottawa, Canada, quoted in Reginald C. McGrane, *Foreign Bondholders and American State Debts* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1935), 171 (quotation).

[49] John Majewski, "Slavery and Schumpeterian Capitalism," paper presented at the Business History Conference, April 1, 2016, Portland, Oregon.

nonwhites, the state became consumed with suspicion and security, focusing on terror rather than on hope. Free speech sank in importance, so great was the fear that another *Appeal* would circulate. In choosing the interests of enslavers Virginia chose the expansion of commodity capitalism over economic diversification and a more creative and dynamic variety of capitalism. And so the 1830s became a great fulcrum of American history, thanks in no small measure to the Turner Rebellion erupting in the context of a growing financial interest in chattel slavery.

Enslaved rebels brought home to enslavers the towering social costs of slavery, and by the 1830s, the slave security state developed in reaction to the black insurgency. Southern whites traded liberty for security, forbidding educational opportunities for African-descended residents, closing churches, curtailing meetings, and restricting unsupervised movement. In the process they sacrificed economic diversity and democracy to the imperatives of slave labor production. Rebels were captured, tortured, sold off, or executed. Their tactical objectives failed. Gabriel, Sancho, Deslondes, Vesey, and Turner met gruesome fates, and they did not spark a Haitian revolution in the United States. But collectively they forced enslavers to choose a repressive regime that squashed economic vibrancy in the service of war capitalism. It was that move to a society of suspicion and the overriding imperative of protecting enslaved property that divided the Slave South from states in which slavery was prohibited. And slave security set the groundwork for the meteoric expansion of slavery in the 1830s.