

Document A: The Confessions of Nat Turner (Original)

The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrections in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray

TO THE PUBLIC

[Thomas R. Gray:]

Public curiosity has been on the stretch to understand the origin and progress of this dreadful conspiracy, and the motives which influenced its diabolical actors. The insurgent slaves had all been destroyed, or apprehended, tried and executed, (with the exception of the leader,) without revealing any thing at all satisfactory, as to the motives which governed them, or the means by which they expected to accomplish their object. Every thing connected with this sad affair was wrapt in mystery, until Nat Turner, the leader of this ferocious band, whose name has resounded throughout our widely extended empire, was captured. This "great Bandit" was taken by a single individual, in a cave near the residence of his late owner, on Sunday, the thirtieth of October, without attempting to make the slightest resistance, and on the following day safely lodged in the jail of the County. His captor was Benjamin Phipps, armed with a shot gun well charged. Nat's only weapon was a small light sword which he immediately surrendered, and begged that his life might be spared. Since his confinement, by permission of the Jailor, I have had ready access to him, and finding that he was willing to make a full and free confession of the origin, progress and consummation of the insurrectory movements of the slaves of which he was the contriver and head; I determined for the gratification of public curiosity to commit his statements to writing, and publish them, with little or no variation, from his own words. . . .

CONFESSION.

[Nathaniel Turner:]

Agreeable to his own appointment, on the evening he was committed to prison, with permission of the jailer, I visited NAT on Tuesday the 1st November, when, without being questioned at all, commenced his narrative in the following words:--

SIR,--You have asked me to give a history of the motives which induced me to undertake the late insurrection, as you call it--To do so I must go back to the days of my infancy, and even before I was born. I was thirty-one years of age the 2d of October last, and born the property of Benj. Turner, of this county. In my childhood a circumstance occurred which made an indelible impression on my mind, and laid the ground work of that enthusiasm, which has terminated so fatally to many, both white and black, and for which I am about to atone at the gallows. It is here necessary to relate this circumstance--trifling as it may seem, it was the commencement of that belief which has grown with time, and even now, sir, in this dungeon, helpless and forsaken as I am, I cannot divest myself of. Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it had happened before I was I born--I stuck to my story, however, and related somethings which went, in her opinion, to confirm it--others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I

surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast--[a parcel of excrescences which I believe are not at all uncommon, particularly among negroes, as I have seen several with the same. In this case he has either cut them off or they have nearly disappeared]--My grand mother, who was very religious, and to whom I was much attached--my master, who belonged to the church, and other religious persons who visited the house, and whom I often saw at prayers, noticing the singularity of my manners, I suppose, and my uncommon intelligence for a child, remarked I had too much sense to be raised, and if I was, I would never be of any service to any one as a slave--To a mind like mine, restless, inquisitive and observant of every thing that was passing, it is easy to suppose that religion was the subject to which it would be directed, and although this subject principally occupied my thoughts--there was nothing that I saw or heard of to which my attention was not directed. . . .

[Thomas R. Gray:]

It has been said he was ignorant and cowardly, and that his object was to murder and rob for the purpose of obtaining money to make his escape. It is notorious, that he was never known to have a dollar in his life; to swear an oath, or drink a drop of spirits. As to his ignorance, he certainly never had the advantages of education, but he can read and write, (it was taught him by his parents,) and for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, is surpassed by few men I have ever seen. As to his being a coward, his reason as given for not resisting Mr. Phipps, shews the decision of his character. When he saw Mr. Phipps present his gun, he said he knew it was impossible for him to escape as the woods were full of men; he therefore thought it was better to surrender, and trust to fortune for his escape. He is a complete fanatic, or plays his part most admirably. On other subjects he possesses an uncommon share of intelligence, with a mind capable of attaining any thing; but warped and perverted by the influence of early impressions. He is below the ordinary stature, though strong and active, having the true negro face, every feature of which is strongly marked. I shall not attempt to describe the effect of his narrative, as told and commented on by himself, in the condemned hole of the prison. The calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions, the expression of his fiend-like face when excited by enthusiasm, still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him; clothed with rags and covered with chains; yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man; I looked on him and my blood curdled in my veins.

Source: *Thomas Gray*, *The Confessions of Nat Turner: The Leader of the Late Insurrections in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray, in the Prison Where He Was Confined, Nov. 5, 1831, For His Trial.*

Document B: The Richmond Enquirer (Original)

THE SOUTHAMPTON TRAGEDY

The following letters from a friend in Southampton, present several new facts and views of the late Insurrection, and are worthy of all reliance. The writer has had the best opportunities of scanning the scenes themselves, as well as the evidence given on the trials of the Banditti:

Jerusalem, Sept. 21st, 1831

Your letter of the 13th was received a few days ago, on my return from Greensville Superior Court.—There has been very little variation in the evidence submitted to the Court, in the course of the trials for the late insurrection, and with the exception of one witness, a woman belonging to Mr. Solomon Parker, there has been nothing elicited that goes to prove a concert, beyond the day before the insurrection broke out. She states, however, that she has heard the subject discoursed about among her master's slaves, and some of the neighboring ones, for the last eighteen months: and that at a meeting held at the Racoon meeting-house, in May and August last, some eight or ten expressed their determination to unite in the scheme. Several were tried six or eight days ago in this county, upon her unsupported testimony, and were all acquitted: whilst in Sussex, five or six were acquitted upon the same testimony. She is again to be introduced here, on the trial of three or four others, and may, perhaps, obtain more credit with the Court. She is about 16 or 17 years of age and said to be of very good character. It has been considered that, under our act of Assembly, the testimony of a slave or free negro, unless supported by pregnant circumstances, is insufficient to convict in any case.—You will thus perceive that we have, as yet, had no sufficient reason to believe that there was a “concert or general plan” among the Blacks. I have no doubt, however, that the subject has been pretty generally discussed among them, and the minds of many prepared to cooperate in the design.

How far the exemplary chastisement inflicted upon them, may tend to disconcert and suppress their insurrectionary prospects, it is for time to resolve.

There is one idea gone abroad, in relation to the occurrences here, which I think deserves correction, since it is calculated to produce an impression, that the people of this county, unaided, would not have been able to put down the insurrection. No one is more sensible to the obligations due to our fellow-citizens of other counties, for their decided, prompt, and ready assistance, than myself; yet it is due to truth as well as the just confidence which the people of every county ought to feel in themselves, to state that the insurrection was effectually and completely suppressed by the citizens of the county:—That, as early as Tuesday morning, at day-break, and after the repulse from Dr. Blunt's house, they were utterly scattered and dispersed and that no attempt was afterwards made to reunite, or to pursue their design. That, in fact, so far from a military force being required for the protection of the county, the citizens, in greater or less numbers, sometimes two or three together only, were riding all through the county on Tuesday; and that all those slaves who were either slain or captured, met with their fate from the local militia, or citizens of the county.

To return to the subject of your inquiries, I am led to believe, from all that I can learn, that Nat Turner has been revolving this plan of mischief and disruption, "in a mind capacious of such things," for years—Pretending to be divinely inspired, more than four years ago, he announced to the Blacks, that he should baptize himself on a particular day, and that whilst in the water, a dove would be seen to descend from Heaven and perch on his head, thus endeavoring to collect a great crowd, perhaps with a similar design to that afterwards effected. This assemblage was prevented; but he, in company with a white man, did actually baptize himself. From that day until the awful tragedy of the 22d, he has used every means in his power, to acquire an ascendancy over the minds of the slaves. A dreamer of dreams and a would-be Prophet, he used all the arts familiar to such pretenders, to deceive, delude, and overawe their minds.—Whether these arts were practiced only in his own immediate neighborhood, or, as some say, were extended to a distance, I have not been able to ascertain, with any certainty. Some allege that he had never left the vicinity of his master's dwelling, whilst others think that he had even visited the Metropolis of the State in his character of Preacher and Prophet.

Twenty-three of the insurgents have been condemned, thirteen executed, eight commuted, and two, a woman and a man, to be executed on Monday next. Eight or ten yet remain for trial, and three free negroes have been remanded to the Superior Court, for trial. Many of the accused have been discharged—how many I cannot say.

As to the best plan of defence against a similar attempt in the future, this is a subject of great interest, and, as it strikes me, of great difficulty. I observe a writer in your paper has proposed a regular standing force in each county of the State where this population exists, to be well paid, etc. It appears to me that this is not to be thought of. A force of three thousand (and a less number would not answer the purpose) would cost the State more than six hundred thousand dollars per annum. . . . It would be difficult to officer such a corps in a proper manner, or to fill the ranks with other than worthless characters . . . they would soon relax in discipline and in activity, and in the process of time become a nuisance to the State. . . .

Placing this project out of view, I am of opinion that security is to be found only in the rigid enforcement of the laws, regulating this class of our population, united with humane and just treatment in the owners, and a determination to keep their slaves at home:--in the observance of regular patrols, composed of men of character and discretion, in the formation of volunteer corps who might frequently traverse every party, and produce an impression by the exhibition of a military force always prepared for prompt action. . . .

P.S. A Volunteer company has been raised here, composed of the most intelligent and respectable gentlemen. . . .

Source: *Friend of the editor. "The Southampton Tragedy."* The Richmond Enquirer, 27 September 1831. Written in Southampton, Virginia.

Document C: An Address to the Slaves of the United States (Original)

Brethren, the time has come when you must act for yourselves. It is an old and true saying that, "if hereditary bondmen would be free, they must themselves strike the blow." You can plead your own cause, and do the work of emancipation better than any others. . . . The combined powers of Europe have placed their broad seal of disapprobation upon the African slave trade. But in the slaveholding parts of the United States, the trade is as brisk as ever. They buy and sell you as though you were brute beasts. . . . Look around you, and behold the bosoms of your loving wives heaving with untold agonies! Hear the cries of your poor children! Remember the stripes your fathers bore. Think of the torture and disgrace of your noble mothers. Think of your wretched sisters, loving virtue and purity, as they are driven into concubinage and are exposed to the unbridled lusts of incarnate devils. Think of the undying glory that hangs around the ancient name of Africa—and forget not that you are native born American citizens, and as such, you are justly entitled to all the rights that are granted to the freest. Think how many tears you have poured out upon the soil which you have cultivated with unrequited toil and enriched with your blood; and then go to your lordly enslavers and tell them plainly, that you are determined to be free. Appeal to their sense of justice, and tell them that they have no more right to oppress you, than you have to enslave them. Entreat them to remove the grievous burdens which they have imposed upon you, and to remunerate you for your labor. Promise them renewed diligence in the cultivation of the soil, if they will render to you an equivalent for your services. Point them to the increase of happiness and prosperity in the British West Indies since the Act of Emancipation. Tell them in language which they cannot misunderstand, of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery, and of a future judgment, and of the righteous retributions of an indignant God. Inform them that all you desire is FREEDOM, and that nothing else will suffice. Do this, and forever after cease to toil for the heartless tyrants, who give you no other reward but stripes and abuse. If they then commence the work of death, they, and not you, will be responsible for the consequences. You had better all die—die immediately, than live slaves and entail your wretchedness upon your posterity. If you would be free in this generation, here is your only hope. However much you and all of us may desire it, there is not much hope of redemption without the shedding of blood. If you must bleed, let it all come at once—rather die freemen, than live to be slaves. It is impossible like the children of Israel, to make a grand exodus from the land of bondage. The Pharaohs are on both sides of the blood red waters! You cannot move en masse, to the dominions of the British Queen—nor can you pass through Florida and overrun Texas, and at last find peace in Mexico. The propagators of American slavery are spending their blood and treasure, that they may plant the black flag in the heart of Mexico and riot in the halls of the Montezumas. In the language of the Rev. Robert Hall, when addressing the volunteers of Bristol, who were rushing forth to repel the invasion of Napoleon, who threatened to lay waste the fair homes of England, "Religion is too much interested in your behalf, not to shed over you her most gracious influences." . . .

In 1822, Denmark Vesey [Vesey], of South Carolina, formed a plan for the liberation of his fellow men. In the whole history of human efforts to overthrow slavery, a more

complicated and tremendous plan was never formed. He was betrayed by the treachery of his own people, and died a martyr to freedom. Many a brave hero fell, but history, faithful to her high trust, will transcribe his name on the same monument with Moses, Hampden, Tell, Bruce and Wallace, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Lafayette and Washington. That tremendous movement shook the whole empire of slavery. The guilty soul thieves were overwhelmed with fear. It is a matter of fact, that at that time, and in consequence of the threatened revolution, the slave States talked strongly of emancipation. But they blew but one blast of the trumpet of freedom and then laid it aside. As these men became quiet, the slaveholders ceased to talk about emancipation; and now behold your condition today! Angels sigh over it, and humanity has long since exhausted her tears in weeping on your account!

The patriotic Nathaniel Turner followed Denmark Veazie [Vesey]. He was goaded to desperation by wrong and injustice. By despotism, his name has been recorded on the list of infamy, and future generations will remember him among the noble and brave.

Next arose the immortal Joseph Cinque, the hero of the Amistad. He was a native African, and by the help of God he emancipated a whole ship load of his fellow men on the high seas. And he now sings of liberty on the sunny hills of Africa and beneath his native palm trees, where he hears the lion roar and feels himself as free as that king of the forest. . . .

Noble men! Those who have fallen in freedom's conflict, their memories will be cherished by the true hearted and the God fearing in all future generations; those who are living, their names are surrounded by a halo of glory.

Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been—you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. Rather die freemen than live to be slaves. Remember that you are FOUR MILLIONS!

It is in your power so to torment the God cursed slaveholders that they will be glad to let you go free. If the scale was turned, and black men were the masters and white men the slaves, every destructive agent and element would be employed to lay the oppressor low. Danger and death would hang over their heads day and night. . . .

Let your motto be resistance! resistance! RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance. What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of expediency. Brethren, adieu! Trust in the living God. Labor for the peace of the human race, and remember that you are FOUR MILLIONS.

Source: Henry Highland Garnet, *"An Address to the Slaves of the United States,"* 1843.