

Nat Turner's Revolt in Virginia Raises Concerns in Neighboring North Carolina

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One of the major events that shaped opinions, feelings, and fears in antebellum North Carolina was the 1831 slave revolt led by Nat Turner. In early August 1831, Turner was known as a slave preacher on a small plantation in Southampton County, Virginia, a county on the North Carolina border. He had been born in 1800 as a slave to Benjamin Turner. Upon Benjamin's death, when Nat Turner was about ten, Nat became the property of Benjamin's son, Samuel. He was later sold to a neighbor named Moore and, when Moore died, was inherited by Moore's nine-year-old son.

Many enslaved people resented being passed around and treated as a piece of property. Nat Turner felt that God had entrusted him to lead a bloody revolt against slavery. After midnight on the morning of Monday, August 22, 1831, he led a group into his slaveholder's home. All in the family were killed. Members of the group continued traveling to neighboring plantations, where they killed whites, stole weapons, recruited additional slaves, and moved on. By dawn on Tuesday, August 23, the revolt was over. About sixty whites had been slain.

But as many as two hundred blacks were soon killed, too. Some of them were free, some enslaved, yet most had had nothing to do with Nat Turner or his revolt. They were killed by local whites who were now fearful of any blacks in sight. They were also killed by family survivors searching for revenge and by angry militiamen. Others were captured, imprisoned, and later placed on trial, where most were found guilty and hanged or sold to owners in the Deep South. Turner managed to hide until October 30 when he was captured.

The effects of Turner's revolt are difficult to determine. But slave codes throughout the South were quickly revised and tightened. In North Carolina, new laws tried to prevent slaves from learning to read and write and from preaching to large groups. In 1835 free blacks lost the right to vote—could that, too, have been related to Nat Turner's revolt?