

Think About It: What Were Some Responses to Slavery?

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Perhaps no event related to southern slavery elicited more combustible or volatile responses among Americans than uprisings, such as Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia in 1831. Before the rebellion was suppressed, Turner's uprising led to the death of over 50 White men, women, and children. Numerous Black Americans were killed in retribution once the rebellion was suppressed.

The violence displayed during Turner's rebellion contributed to heated discussions of slavery in Virginia and elsewhere in the United States.

Our examination of the responses to slavery, using Nat Turner's rebellion as a case study, breaks down as follows:

1. *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

Nat Turner was inspired by the evangelical Protestant fervor that swept through much of the American republic during the Second Great Awakening. His parents had taught him to read the Bible, and at night he preached to his fellow enslaved people and experienced visions, which gained him the reputation of a prophet.

After **Nat Turner's rebellion** was suppressed and Turner himself was captured by White Virginians in late October 1831, a lawyer named Thomas R. Gray visited and interviewed Turner in jail. After Turner's execution, Gray published *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the leader of the late insurrection in Southampton, Va., as fully and voluntarily made to Thomas R. Gray* in November 1831. Historians still disagree over the validity of this source, as it is difficult to discern exactly how much of the publication can be attributed to Turner and how much can be attributed to Gray. Still, the publication's accounts of Turner's visions and religious motivations are compelling.

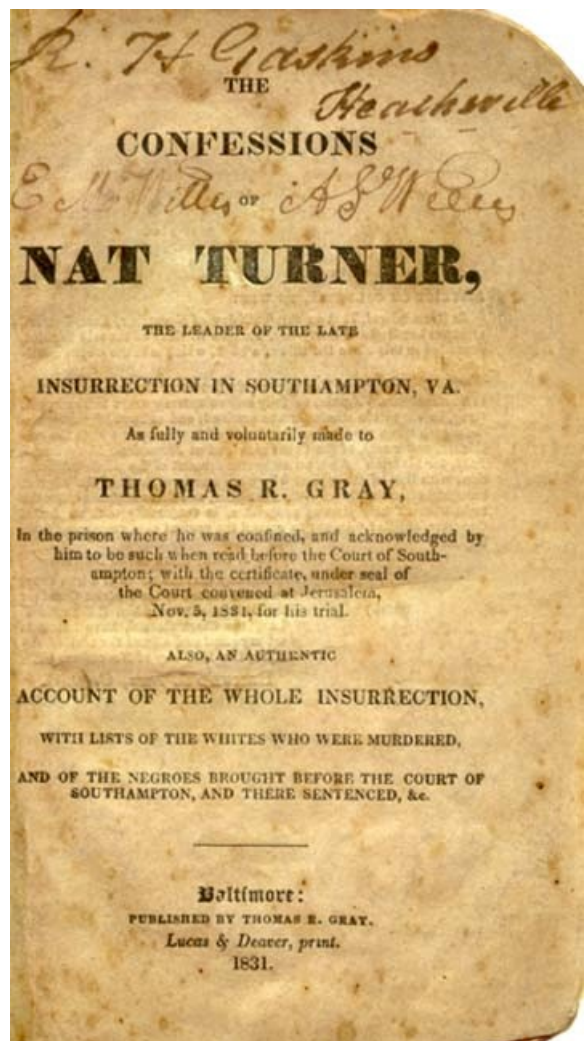


TERM TO KNOW

Nat Turner's Rebellion

A rebellion of enslaved people led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831.

According to Gray's account, Turner was convinced that he was on a divine mission, one first revealed to him after an escape attempt. After fleeing from an overseer and spending several days in the woods, Turner returned to the plantation to the astonishment of others:



The Confessions of Nat Turner

"...the reason of my return was, that the Spirit appeared to me and said I had my wishes directed to the things of this world, and not to the kingdom of Heaven, and that I should return to the service of my earthly master....And about this time I had a vision — and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened — the thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams — and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it."



THINK ABOUT IT

What is the significance of Turner's vision and his hearing of the Spirit?

Subsequent visions and events, including a solar eclipse in February 1831, convinced Turner that the Day of Judgement was at hand:

"....And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, 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. *Ques.* Do you not find yourself mistaken now? *Ans.* Was not Christ crucified?

And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work...[a]nd on the appearance of the sign, (the eclipse of the sun last February) I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. What does Turner mean by the “Serpent” and why must he fight against it?
2. Why does Turner answer, in response to Gray’s question, “Was not Christ crucified?”



BRAINSTORM

Given the passages above, how would you describe Nat Turner’s response to slavery?



DID YOU KNOW

Turner originally set July 4, 1831 as the date for his uprising to occur. After Turner fell ill, however, he postponed it until August 21, 1831, which marked the 40th anniversary of the Haitian Revolution.

2. Northern Abolitionists and Violence

Abolitionists were divided over whether to use violence in an attempt to overturn slavery. Eight months before Nat Turner’s uprising, the prominent northern abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison began publishing *The Liberator* in Boston, Massachusetts. The first issue of *The Liberator*, in which Garrison indicated that he would not speak with moderation on the subject of slavery and declared “I WILL BE HEARD,” indicated a clear proclamation of militant abolitionism.

However, in contrast to enslaved people like Turner, Garrison and a number of other northern abolitionists sought to appeal to the consciences of their audiences, otherwise known as moral suasion, to achieve the elimination of slavery rather than violence.

Divisions among abolitionists over the use of violence to overturn slavery can be seen in an editorial on David Walker’s pamphlet, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* that Garrison wrote in January 1831. Walker’s *Appeal* called for African Americans across the United States to mobilize against slavery. Most importantly, Walker was not opposed to the use of force on behalf of the cause of abolition.

Garrison refused to go as far as Walker, and opined on Walker’s *Appeal* and the issue of violence by writing:

William Lloyd Garrison, Excerpt from *The Liberator*

“Believing, as we do, that men should never do evil that good may come; that a good end does not justify wicked means in the accomplishment of it; and that we ought to suffer, as did our Lord and his apostles, unresistingly — knowing that vengeance belongs to God, and he will certainly repay it

where it is due; — believing all this, and that the Almighty will deliver the oppressed in a way which we know not, we deprecate the spirit and tendency of this *Appeal*....We do not preach rebellion — no, but submission and peace. Our enemies may accuse us of striving to stir up the slaves to revenge but their accusations are false, and made only to excite the prejudices of the whites, and to destroy our influence. We say, that the possibility of a bloody insurrection at the [S]outh fills us with dismay; and we avow, too, as plainly, that if any people were ever justified in throwing off the yoke of their tyrants, the slaves are that people. It is not we, but our guilty countrymen, who put arguments into the mouths, and swords into the hands of the slaves.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Who is Garrison referring to when he writes, “We”?
2. Who does Garrison blame for creating an environment in which enslaved insurrections could occur?



BRAINSTORM

Compare Turner and Garrison’s use of religion on behalf of their respective causes. In what way are they similar? In what ways are they different?

Northern abolitionists recognized that racial slavery was embedded in the United States and that its immediate eradication would require significant changes in American politics and society. Garrison’s comments about the use of violence in his editorial on David Walker’s *Appeal*, however, suggest that some northern abolitionists were reluctant to advocate violence on behalf of militant abolitionism.

3. The Southern Reaction

During and after Nat Turner’s rebellion, White southerners refused to make any distinction between Garrison’s calls for nonviolence in the pursuit of abolition and the potential for future insurrections.



DID YOU KNOW

Some Virginians blamed William Lloyd Garrison for instigating Nat Turner’s uprising.

From the perspective of White southern leaders, abolitionism (violent or nonviolent) and the threat of uprisings could work in tandem to bring about the end of racial slavery. The remarks that many southern politicians made in the wake of Nat Turner’s rebellion suggested that their region was under siege by outside abolitionists, who collaborated with enslaved people in the South.

Virginia governor John Floyd expressed such sentiments in an address to the Virginia state legislature on December 6, 1831, one month after Nat Turner’s execution:

John Floyd, Address to the Virginia State Legislature

“All of those who participated in the bloody tragedy, have expiated their crimes by undergoing public execution, whilst some, who had been condemned, have been reprieved for reasons which were deemed satisfactory. There is much reason to believe, that the spirit of insurrection was not confined to Southampton; many convictions have taken place elsewhere, and some few in distant counties. From the documents, which I herewith lay before you, there is too much reason to believe

those plans of treason, insurrection and murder, have been designed, planned and matured by unrestrained fanatics in some of the neighbouring States, who find facilities in distributing their views and plans amongst our population, either through the post office, or by agents sent for that purpose throughout our territory.”



THINK ABOUT IT

Who is Floyd referring to when he mentions “fanatics in some of the neighboring States?” Why does Floyd choose to blame these “fanatics” for planning enslaved insurrections instead of enslaved people themselves, like Nat Turner?

Although it was not unreasonable for Floyd to suspect that Turner, a literate man, could have encountered abolitionist literature at some point, Floyd assumed that northern abolitionists and Nat Turner worked together to start the rebellion even though he found no hard evidence of such collaboration. He said:

“The most active among ourselves, in stirring up the spirit of revolt, have been the negro preachers. They had acquired great ascendancy over the minds of their fellows, and infused all their opinions, which had prepared them for the development of the final design: there is also some reason to believe, those preachers...have been the channels through which the inflammatory papers and pamphlets, brought here by the agents and emissaries from other States, have been circulated amongst our slaves....Through the indulgence of the magistracy and the laws, large collections of slaves have been permitted to take place, at any time through the week for the ostensible purpose of indulging in religious worship, but in many instances the real purpose with the preacher was of a different character. The sentiments and sometimes the words of these inflammatory pamphlets, which the meek and charitable of other States have seen cause to distribute as fire-brands in the bosom of our society, have been read.”



BRAINSTORM

Compare Floyd’s perception of “negro preachers” with the religious motivations of Nat Turner explained in Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Why do you think Floyd was compelled to establish a connection between Black religious leaders in the South and northern abolitionists, even if such relationships did not exist?

Prior to Nat Turner’s rebellion, the Virginia legislature was considering a gradual emancipation proposal. The proposal would compensate those Virginia slaveholders who chose to free their enslaved people through manumission. Furthermore, the legislature would provide for the relocation of emancipated people to Africa.

Floyd’s speech following Nat Turner’s rebellion, however, encouraged a radical about-face, by stating, “As the means of guarding against the possible repetition of these sanguinary scenes, I cannot fail to recommend to your early attention, the revision of all the laws intended to preserve, in due subordination, the slave population of our State.”

By January 1832, the Virginia legislature tabled the gradual emancipation proposal and, in its place, implemented a series of harsh regulations to ensure that an uprising to the scale of Nat Turner’s rebellion never happened again. These laws prohibited African Americans (free or slave) from preaching, made it illegal for enslaved people to learn how to read, and strengthened the state militia and slave patrols. Other southern states passed similar initiatives, all of which represented an attempt to prevent enslaved people from

interacting with each other and, in turn, from receiving assistance from outsiders who sought to end racial slavery in the United States.

4. The Growing Divide Over Slavery

Racial slavery, especially notable events such as Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831, elicited a variety of reactions from Americans. Such reactions depended upon a number of factors, including one's economic situation and experiences, racial background, religious motivations, and place of residence.



BRAINSTORM

Consider the evidence presented in this tutorial. Which factors most contributed to Nat Turner's response to slavery? To William Lloyd Garrison's? To Governor John Floyd?

Those who advocated for an immediate end to slavery in the South remained a minority within American society. For instance, although a number of northerners criticized slavery on the grounds of free labor, they did not express sympathy toward slave uprisings and they rejected abolition entirely. Many White northerners feared that their region would be flooded with newly emancipated people who would take their jobs if slavery was abolished. They also held the same racist assumptions toward African Americans as White southerners did, and they worried that the abolition of slavery would disrupt the racial order within the United States.



DID YOU KNOW

In 1835, William Lloyd Garrison almost lost his life when an anti-abolitionist mob dragged him through the city of Boston.

Anti-abolitionists from the North and the South endorsed laws that made the distribution of abolitionist literature a criminal offense, for fear that such literature could spark more rebellions. By 1836, the House of Representatives endorsed these sentiments further by implementing a “**gag rule**” that forbade congressmen from considering the hundreds of petitions that abolitionists sent to Washington, D.C.



TERM TO KNOW

“Gag Rule”

A rule implemented by the House of Representatives that forbade the consideration of abolitionist petitions.

Continued resistance from enslaved people and persistent agitation by abolitionists undermined slavery in the United States. At the same time, fears of uprisings and opposition to abolitionism contributed to a continued commitment to slavery in the United States. In all, the United States was becoming more divided over the issue of slavery, which made future attempts at compromise more difficult.



SUMMARY

This tutorial exposed you to three different responses to slavery, particularly to slave rebellions, in the United States. *The Confessions of Nat Turner* provides a glimpse of Turner's religious motivations behind the most significant enslaved rebellion in United States history. Abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison, meanwhile, remained conflicted over whether to use violence in an attempt to end slavery. Finally, in response to Turner's rebellion, White southerners in Virginia and elsewhere turned inward, convinced that their way of life was under siege by outside agitators. The divisions over slavery in the United States were growing ever wider.

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The Confessions of Nat Turner, property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. May be used freely by individuals for research, teaching and personal use. unc.live/2dTaoGq

Floyd's Message to General Assembly, Dec 6, 1831, Nat Turner Project. Ret from bit.ly/2Is6BG5



TERMS TO KNOW

Gag Rule

A rule implemented by the House of Representatives that forbade the consideration of abolitionist petitions.

Nat Turner's Rebellion

A rebellion of enslaved people led by Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831.



DATES TO KNOW

1829

David Walker publishes *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*.

1831

Nat Turner leads a violent enslaved rebellion; Thomas Gray publishes *The Confessions of Nat Turner*; William Lloyd Garrison founds *The Liberator*.

1832

The Virginia legislature rejects a proposal for gradual emancipation and further restricts the rights of people of color in the state.

1836

The "gag rule" in the House of Representatives forbids congressmen from considering any petitions that abolitionists send to Washington, D.C.