

NAT TURNER'S REVOLT:
REBELLION AND RESPONSE IN SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA

by

PATRICK H. BREEN

(Under the Direction of Emory M. Thomas)

ABSTRACT

In 1831, Nat Turner led a revolt in Southampton County, Virginia. The revolt itself lasted little more than a day before it was suppressed by whites from the area. Many people died during the revolt, including the largest number of white casualties in any single slave revolt in the history of the United States. After the revolt was suppressed, Nat Turner himself remained at-large for more than two months. When he was captured, Nat Turner was interviewed by whites and this confession was eventually published by a local lawyer, Thomas R. Gray. Because of the number of whites killed and the remarkable nature of the *Confessions*, the revolt has remained the most prominent revolt in American history.

Despite the prominence of the revolt, no full length critical history of the revolt has been written since 1937. This dissertation presents a new history of the revolt, paying careful attention to the dynamic of the revolt itself and what the revolt suggests about authority and power in Southampton County. The revolt was a challenge to the power of the slaveholders, but the crisis that ensued revealed many other deep divisions within Southampton's society. Rebels who challenged white authority did not win universal support from the local slaves, suggesting that disagreements within the black community existed about how they should respond to the

oppression of slavery. At the same time, the crisis following the rebellion revealed divisions within white society. Many whites in Southampton County advocated a brutal and often indiscriminate retribution against slaves; others—including most of the prominent leaders in the county—worked to limit the reprisals against slaves. In the end, the crisis ended as the county's acknowledged leaders reasserted control, both by suppressing the rebels and by quashing the efforts of whites to retaliate against slaves in a way that threatened the property of Southampton's slaveholders.

INDEX WORDS: Nat Turner, Slave Resistance, Slavery, Southampton County, Virginia, Southampton Insurrection, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Thomas R. Gray

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map, which the Virginia Library put on-line as part of its Virginia Historical Inventory, is the basis for the Southampton maps that I have appended to this work.¹

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¹ The original version of the Southampton map is Virginia Writers Project, Virginia Historical Inventory; on-line at http://lvaimage.lib.va.us/cgi-bin/vhip_subjects/vhip.pl?ox=0&oy=0&filename=sou.sid&title=Southampton+County&res=3&size=12&default_x=2061.5&default_y=1956&subject=Dwellings&fullwidth=4123&fullheight=3912 [1 March 2005].

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On Sunday night, 21 August 1831, Nat Turner and four associates began what became the most famous slave revolt in American history. A small conspiracy, the rebels had caught whites in Southampton County completely by surprise. By the middle of the day on Monday, 22 August, the rebels had killed nearly five dozen whites, making the revolt the most deadly, at least in the terms of whites killed, in American history. The initial successes of the rebels, however, quickly ended. By Monday afternoon, the rebels suffered their first defeat. By Tuesday morning, 23 August, the main rebel force was defeated and dispersed. In the days after the rebellion, all the rebels except Nat Turner were captured or killed, as were several slaves who had not joined the rebellion. Despite an intense manhunt encouraged in part by rewards offered for Turner's capture, Nat Turner remained at large for two months. After two months of remaining successfully concealed, Turner was spotted in mid-October, not far from the starting point of the revolt. A renewed manhunt led to his capture on 31 October. It took a day for the men who had captured Turner to bring him to the jail at the county seat in Jerusalem. Thomas R. Gray, a white lawyer who was involved in the defense of other accused rebels, interviewed Nat Turner during this confinement. These interviews led to the publication of *The Confessions*, perhaps the most famous book on slavery ever published in the South. On Saturday, 6 November 1831, Southampton's Court of oyer and terminer met to decide the fate of the slave revolt's leader. Their judgment was never in doubt. The most famous American to spend his entire life in slavery was hanged on 11 November 1831.

Although the revolt had been quickly suppressed, its repercussions were felt far beyond the borders of Southampton County, Virginia. Haunted by the visions of Nat Turner, the Virginia legislature took up the question of emancipation. For the first time since St. George Tucker circulated his emancipation plan in the late eighteenth century, a significant part of the Virginia legislature urged the adoption of a plan of gradual emancipation (and colonization) of Virginia's slaves. In 1831-1832, proslavery conservatives dominated the special committee charged to examine "the subject of slaves, free negroes and the melancholy occurrences growing out of the tragical [sic] massacre in Southampton." The committee recommended that "all petitions, memorials, and resolutions which have for their object the manumission of persons held in servitude under the existing laws of the Commonwealth" be refused. Thomas Jefferson's nephew, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, then led a floor fight to overturn the recommendations of this committee. Randolph saw the end of slavery as an eventuality. "[I]t must come," he declared at the climax of one speech. The only question in Randolph's mind was whether emancipation would be done by legislative action, "or by the bloody scenes of Southampton and St. Domingo." Many in the Virginia legislature interpreted the recent events in Southampton differently: Randolph's appeal fell on deaf ears, and the legislature rejected gradual emancipation, never to be revisited anywhere in the South before the Civil War.¹

The nascent abolitionist movement also absorbed the excitement that Nat Turner had created. Although most abolitionists carefully disavowed any connection to the revolt—"I do not justify the slaves in their rebellion," William Lloyd Garrison wrote in a letter two weeks after

¹ Richmond *Enquirer*, 10 and 19 January 1832. For the description of the debates, see Alison Goodyear Freehling, *Drift Toward Dissolution: The Virginia Slavery Debate of 1831-1832*, and Christopher M Curtis, "Jefferson's Chosen People: Legal and Political Conceptions of the Freehold in the Old Dominion from Revolution to Reform," (Ph. D. Emory University, 2002). Both describe the outlines of the legislative debate, although Curtis argues that this debate was a critical moment in the reconceptualization of southern property in a way made northern and southern legal conceptions ultimately incompatible.

the revolt—some, including Garrison, used the revolt as something that would justify their strategy of turning to immediate emancipation. In an article published shortly after the rebellion, Garrison crowed: “What we have so long predicted,—at the peril of being stigmatized as an alarmist and declaimer,—has commenced its fulfillment.” Garrison had predicted woe in his first issue of *The Liberator*, which had been published on 1 January 1831, and Nat Turner’s Revolt confirmed to Garrison’s mind the prophetic truth of his visions of the end of slavery.² Thus, the revolt stood at a pivotal moment in American history. It contributed to the radicalization of American politics that led southerners and northerners both to reject the type of gradual emancipation plans that had ended slavery in the north. Nat Turner’s Revolt was a critical milestone in sectional relations that set America on a course to Civil War.

Despite the significance of Nat Turner’s Revolt in American history, the revolt itself has inspired relatively little scholarly attention.³ Following the publication of William Styron’s Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, there was a flurry of activity as scholars debated the historical accuracy of Styron’s novel. Most of this debate was limited in its scope, as several scholars pointed to particulars in the historical record that Styron had mistaken. The frustration with Styron’s novel also led to Stephen Oates’ *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner’s Fierce Rebellion*. Ironically, for a historian writing in the wake of the controversy that paid much attention to the liberties taken by a novelist, Oates’ dramatic narrative of the rebellion eschewed the traditional rules of evidence, as he imagined events and even dialogue for which there were no sources. Prior to Oates’ effort, there had only been two other full length

² Eric Foner, ed. *Nat Turner: Great Lives Observed* (New Brunswick, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971), 83; *The Liberator*, 3 September 1831, in Henry Irving Tragle, comp. *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1971), 62.

³ Kenneth S. Greenberg makes a similar point about the relative inattention to the Nat Turner Revolt in his introduction to a reader of documents on the revolt. See Greenberg, “*Confessions of Nat Turner: Text and Context*” in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 31.

monographs on the rebellion: William Sidney Drewry's 1900 dissertation, *The Southampton Insurrection*, and Herbert Aptheker's 1937 masters thesis, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*, both of which became books.

It would be hard to imagine two more radically different accounts of Nat Turner's Revolt. Trained at Johns Hopkins University, Drewry, a white Southampton native whose family had been involved in suppressing the rebellion, celebrated the virtues of Southampton's whites. "Never in the history of slavery, however," Drewry contended, "was there less danger to owners, more contentment among the slaves themselves, fewer runaways, and greater advantages, social, financial, and political, gained from this institution." Drewry also depicted the rebels as maniacal fools duped by "a wild, fanatical preacher" whose "earnestness and intellectual superiority impressed all the negroes who saw him...."⁴

Working at Columbia University, Aptheker, a radical who eventually joined the communist party, attacked Drewry's work. In a foreword to his book on Nat Turner's Revolt, Aptheker asserted "that for the truth of the Turner event it would have been better if Drewry had never published." Aptheker disagreed vehemently with Drewry's account of the slaveholders, and he was particularly upset with Drewry's portrayal of the rebels. Aptheker ended the introduction to his masters thesis by demanding that the men who followed Turner should not be seen "as deluded wretches and monsters... but further examples of the woefully long, and indeed veritably endless, roll of human beings willing to resort to open struggle in order to get something precious to them—peace, prosperity, liberty, or, in a word, a greater amount of happiness."⁵

⁴ William Sidney Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection* (Washington: Neale Company, 1900; reprinted, Murfreesboro, NC: Johnson Publishing, 1968), 18, 26, 30.

⁵ Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion: Together With the Full Text of the So-Called 'Confessions' of Nat Turner Made in Prison in 1831* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), i, 5.

Both accounts—Drewry’s account of beneficent slaveholders and Aptheker’s account of rebellious slaves—provide important insights for this history of Nat Turner’s Revolt, but the binary view that they each present is something that I reject. Instead, I have begun my interpretation of the events in Southampton by focusing on the crisis caused by the rebellion. Nat Turner’s call for Southampton slaves to overthrow the slaveholders’ power triggered a series of struggles for authority within the county. Understanding these power struggles is absolutely essential to understanding how Nat Turner and his supporters tried and ultimately did reshape Southampton County. As a result, this account, which is the first to examine these conflicts, is the most thorough and complete account of Nat Turner’s Revolt in Southampton, Virginia.

Slavery was a powerful system, which forced most slaves to acquiesce to their position. Although a handful of slaves were able to escape slavery—by running away, self-purchase, manumission, or suicide—most slaves accepted their position, if only to survive another day. Those who openly tried to oppose the system faced brutal repression, including being arrested, beaten, tortured, or exiled from one’s home. Unlike ancient Rome, killing one’s slaves in the South was technically illegal, but few successful prosecutions of white murderers—especially of white murderers who had been the owner of the murdered slaves—occurred.

The overwhelming power of the slaveholders typically precluded overt resistance on the part of the slaves. Instead slaves practiced into more subtle forms of day-to-day resistance. Modern historians have accepted that everyday resistance was a critical component to the responses of slaves to slavery, even as historians have disagreed about how subversive such acts actually were.⁶ Nat Turner’s Revolt, however, shattered whatever consensus may have existed in

⁶ A school of slave historians emphasized the continuity between everyday resistance and the more dramatic attempts to achieve freedom. As Kenneth M. Stampp, contend, “The subtle expressions of this spirit [of resistance], no less that the daring thrusts for liberty, compromise one of the richest gifts slaves have left to posterity.” Another group of historians, led by Eugene D. Genovese, have argued for a radical discontinuity between acts of everyday

Southampton's slave community on the question of resistance. Because of the early success of the revolt, whites in Southampton County panicked and fled the countryside. This created a vacuum of power. Although Turner and the other rebels hoped to fill this vacuum and establish their own authority by winning the support of the county's slaves, the revolt left Southampton's slave community deeply divided about how they should respond to Turner's call.

In chapters two through six of this dissertation, I describe the actual unfolding of the revolt, from its initial planning stages in early 1831 until its ultimate defeat on the morning of 23 August 1831. In addition to writing what I believe is the clearest and most accurate account of the revolt in Southampton County, I also focus upon how other slaves responded to Nat Turner's attempt to seize power. Many slaves and free blacks supported the rebels; dozens joined the revolt. Yet even this group of slaves and free blacks who supported the rebellion does not appear monolithic. Some apparently supported the rebellion as a religious war led by a messianic figure, although I am skeptical of early claims that this was the primary motivation of Nat Turner's followers. Although some rebels saw themselves as followers of a prophetic figure, other evidence suggests that many—perhaps most—rebels joined the rebellion not as a religious war, but as a political war. Moreover, a fairly significant amount of indirect evidence suggests that Turner occupied a marginal place in Southampton's black community and that some of the rebels seem to have joined in spite, not because, of Nat Turner.⁷

While the claim of whites in the immediate aftermath of the rebellion—which was also adopted by Drewry—that Nat Turner had acquired power over the minds of the other rebels

resistance and the bold attempts to overthrow the system of slavery itself. He argued “‘day-to-day resistance to slavery’ generally implied accommodation and made no sense except on the assumption of an accepted status quo the norms of which, as perceived or defined by the slaves, had been violated.” See Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-bellum South* (1956; New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 92, and Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 598.

⁷ I first developed this argument in “A Prophet in His Own Land: Support for Nat Turner and His Rebellion within Southampton's Black Community,” in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 103-118.

seems doubtful, so does Aptheker's claim that this rebellion was a natural outgrowth of the type of day-to-day resistance one would expect to see among the slaves in Southampton County. In fact, close attention to the records of the events provides clear evidence that some slaves opposed the rebellion, and at least some slaves took up arms to defend their masters. Most slaves did not do anything as dramatic as fight on behalf of the slaveholders, but several slaves acted in ways to foil the rebels' attempt to overthrow white power. Early in the rebellion, some spread word of the rebellion to whites, allowing whites to escape. Others helped save their owners, including Catherine Whitehead's Hubbard, whose quick thinking saved Harriet Whitehead from the fate that befell the rest of her family. Even among the rebels themselves, there is evidence that the rebels were not actually a unified force and that some rebels had been forced to join the rebellion against their will. Some may doubt the testimony of slaves who claimed afterward to have been forced to join the rebellion—although it is worth noting that Southampton's court seems to have accepted some of these claims—but Nat Turner himself suggested that the rebel leadership perceived different levels of commitment among the rebels. According to *The Confessions*, Turner remembered placing “fifteen or twenty of the best armed and most relied upon, in front.” The implication of Turner's testimony was corroborated by the testimony of Moses, one of the most important witnesses during the trials. During the trials, Moses testified that some of the rebels were “constantly guarded by negroes with guns who were ordered to shoot them if they attempted to escape.”⁸

The prominent examples of the slaves who supported the rebels' attempt to seize power and those who supported the slaveholders' attempt to foil the rebellion, however, made up only a small portion of Southampton's total slave population. The majority of slaves in Southampton

⁸ Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (Baltimore, 1831), 14; The Trials of Nathan, Tom, and Davy, in Tragle, 200-01.

did not get involved. Women, old slaves and children provided little support for the rebels, although their lack of involvement may be attributed to the rebels' apparent lack of interest in recruiting among such groups.⁹ Others did not have the opportunity. But even among older boys and adult men who lived in the neighborhood, the rebels failed to win mass support. This can be best seen in the recruiting rates. Nat Turner and the rebel army's efforts to recruit at several of the largest plantations in the county produced few recruits. The rebels were able to recruit successfully only at a handful of plantations, several of which were home to those most deeply connected to the revolt. The rebels also failed to win much spontaneous support from among the slaves who had heard about the revolt. As a result, a rebel army that traveled throughout St. Luke's Parish in Southampton County, home to nearly twenty five hundred slaves over twelve, almost certainly never included as many as eighty men.

The divisions within the black community can be seen in an incident that occurred as the rebellion came to an end. The free black Exum Artis and William Vick's slave Burwell had a dispute on Tuesday, 23 August, the same day that the main rebel force had been dispersed. Burwell had been sent to deliver messages for the whites, who were still at that point afraid to travel unescorted through the countryside. When Burwell arrived at William Vick's plantation to deliver the whites' message, "Exum Artist [sic] came up and interrupted him." Artis' efforts to interrupt the whites' lines of communication failed when Burwell told Artis to mind his own business. After delivering the message, Burwell then went off, as he had been directed by the whites. Burwell's actions, which probably seemed like treachery from the perspective of Exum Artis, incensed Artis. Artis got a gun and followed Burwell. According to testimony presented in a hearing against Artis, when he caught upon to Burwell, Exum Artis "made considerable

⁹ An effort to open the question of female involvement in the rebellion has been made by Mary Kemp Davis in "What Happened in This Place: In Search of the Female Slave in the Nat Turner Slave Insurrection," in Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 162-176.

noise.” Artis and Burwell’s contrasting responses to the rebellion are fairly clear—as the former supported the rebels and the latter supported the owners—but perhaps the most interesting thing about this episode is the response of the slaves who witnessed this clash: they did not join Exum Artis and criticize Burwell. Nor did they, like Burwell, offer any direct support for whites. Instead, they pleaded for Artis to quiet down, since they were concerned that the “white people would come + shoot them or carry them to jail.”¹⁰ This kind of attempt by many, perhaps most, in the black community to avoid taking sides in the rebellion and find a way to survive the rebellion ultimately doomed the rebels’ cause.

In addition to analyzing the black responses to Nat Turner’s Revolt, I examine the white responses. Not surprisingly, Nat Turner’s Revolt had an enormous impact upon Southampton’s whites, and this is the only study to examine the range of responses within the white community at the time of the rebellion. The desire of whites to reestablish control in Southampton in the aftermath of the rebellion provoked conflicts over authority in Southampton. Although some of these disputes may have appeared to be about relatively trivial events—in one case there was a dispute about the charges levied by a local who hosted troops from Richmond—this debate quickly centered on a political question of great importance: how should slaves and free blacks be treated in the aftermath of the rebellion? One group, which reportedly had widespread support in the county, encouraged brutality. One of the militia commanders, William Henry Broadnax, complained about this widely felt impulse to the “indiscriminate slaughter of the blacks who were suspected.”¹¹ There is little documentary evidence left by this group of whites—most of the accounts that describe the rebellion were written by leaders opposed to this

¹⁰ Examination of Exum Artis, in Tragle, 212. All the details of the examination of Exum Artis come from “Nat Turner Insurrection,” Southampton County Court Judgments, LV. This episode is describe a bit more fully in Chapter 10, below.

¹¹ William Henry Broadnax, quoted in Richmond *Enquirer*, 24 January 1832.

popular impulse to retribution—but one suspects that many wanted revenge for the white families that had been slaughtered. Others who encouraged an energetic response may have believed that such actions would be the best way to prevent future revolts. Potential rebels would certainly think twice if they believed that the result of another insurrection might be a general massacre of slaves and free blacks.

On the other hand, another group of whites, who included most of the prominent people in the county, wanted to limit the scope of the white response. A week after the rebellion, General Richard Eppes ordered “all descriptions of person to abstain in the future from any acts of violence to any personal property whatever,” in other words slaves. Eppes’ order permitted only one exception: someone who killed a rebel who “refuses submission to the competent legally authorized and responsible individuals.” This movement to centralize power in “the competent legally authorized and responsible individuals” was a direct attack on the popular impulse to extensive slaughter. In part, the slaveholders wanted to make sure the innocent were not killed with the guilty, but they also pursued the explicit goal of preserving slave property. When Eppes issued the order to stop the bloodshed, he noted that the widespread carnage “in every instance must be attended with a total loss to their neighbors, and friends, of the value of the property; whereas, if preserved and delivered to the civil authority, a public execution in the presence of thousands will demonstrate the power of the law, and preserve the right of property.”¹² In one sense, Eppes’ proclamation simply restated the law in Virginia: the commonwealth would reimburse slaveholders only for the value of slaves condemned in court. But this proclamation also revealed a unique vulnerability in the slaveholding order in the aftermath of an insurrection. When popular passions raged against the slaves, as they did in Southampton after the revolt, slave property itself was at risk. (It is hard to imagine, for

¹² Lynchburg *Virginian*, 8 September 1831, in Tragle, 74-75.

instance, slaveholders winning lawsuits against other whites who killed suspected rebels.) Given this, the slaveholders had to consolidate power if they hoped to protect and preserve their most valuable property.

The efforts by the slaveholders to control the responses to Nat Turner's Revolt took place in three different phases: during the armed suppression, during the trials, and during debates in the churches about black church members. During the actual efforts to suppress the rebellion, there was a movement by the leaders to assert authority over the armed response. The shocking news that the slaves had revolted had surprised Southampton County's whites. They were completely unprepared for such a rebellion, and white authority in the first few days after the rebellion was disorganized and decentralized. During a period of poor communication, this allowed for a fluid response, which was sufficient to check the threat posed by the small rebel force. The danger of decentralized authority, however, was readily apparent to the leaders of society, and in the week after the rebellion they worked hard to gain control over the response and limit white retribution. I argue that the slaveholders were remarkably successful in this effort. The vindictive popular impulse was contained, and as a result of my research, I confidently estimate a number of slave fatalities remarkably lower than the numbers that historians have traditionally accepted.

Although the initial efforts of the leaders to save their slaves were successful, they were still apparently widely unpopular. Even Eppes' command to stop the massacre of blacks was backed by the threat of "the rigors of the articles of war." For this policy to last, the leaders needed to find a way to legitimate their unpopular power-grab. They did this by moving the remaining questions about the white responses to the courts. The courts that heard the cases of slaves—the court of oyer and terminer—was dominated by the richest men in Southampton. It

also excluded the majority of Southampton's citizens because the court of oyer and terminer met without a jury. Instead a panel of judges—usually five—judged and sentenced the accused rebels. Only a handful of judges served on these panels, and I have found a group of seven judges, all wealthy planters, that formed a core of the court. Every accused rebel faced a bench with at least one of these men, and most cases were decided by a bank of judges that included three or more of the seven most active judges.

The court's power was even more insulated from popular public pressures than was the authority of the county's military leaders. Moreover, the court's decisions—which found many suspects not guilty and also recommended that the governor commute death sentences of many convicts—appear to have generated significant opposition within Southampton. The court was aware of this opposition. When rumor had spread of an order for the troops guarding the prison to leave, the court issued a request for the troops to stay. Maybe members of the court feared a jailbreak, but court officials seemed more concerned that vigilante groups would attack the jail, killing the prisoners and effectively undermining what Eppes had called “the power of the law.”

“The power of law” was an instrument of significant force for the leaders of Southampton. A handful of judges were able to use the courts to punish those most deeply implicated in the revolt, but their refusal to apply the sanctions demanded by the populous effectively made the courts an instrument that helped elite authority withstand popular political pressure. Leaders risked their own prestige and power on the moderate course that they had charted from the early stages of the response, and they understood that should their actions fail to crush the rebellious spirit among the slaves in Southampton County, they would not have the power to restrain popular passion in the future.

As it turned out, the effort of the court to limit the retaliation against the slaves was successful. Southampton had no further slave revolts or scares despite the relatively lenient path pursued by the county's leading slaveholders. Noting this success, it did not take long for many people in Southampton to accept that the limited response had in fact been prudent. The once-popular vigorous response, which encouraged punishing those in the black community who sympathized with the revolt, lost support. Evidence for the growing acceptance of the more moderate response can be seen in the late 1831 and 1832 debates over whether many blacks should be punished for the revolt moved to Southampton's churches. Even Southampton's most democratic churches, its Baptist churches, ultimately adopted plans consistent with the restraint shown by Southampton's leading slaveholders. At Mill Swamp Baptist Church—the scene of Southampton's most contentious and longest running debate—Josiah Holleman's proposal to expel the church's black members failed. The church decided to allow its black members to remain within the church. Interestingly, in a move that foreshadowed southern elite use of racism to create a white consensus after the Civil War, the church agreed to segregate its communion service, ending those moments in the communion service that suggested the possibility of interracial fellowship.

Information about even so significant event as Nat Turner's Revolt is sketchy and sometimes suspect. Much that the historian would like to know about the conspiracy cannot be known. The biases of surviving sources also present a problem. Everyone who described the event had biases, but most of the surviving records from the county came from a small group of men who supported the efforts of the county's leaders to limit the bloodshed. Few accounts of those white voices that demanded a more vigorous response survive. Also, almost no black voices survive that did not pass through a pen held by a white intermediary. My efforts to cull

reliable material from these biased sources has been influenced by an awareness of ongoing debates within the profession, most notable by the debate over the reliability of sources that appeared from the 1822 Vesey plot in Charleston, South Carolina. In 1964, Richard Wade argued that the Vesey slave scare in Charleston, South Carolina had been manufactured by whites. He denied that there had been any evidence of a conspiracy, and he wondered if the convicted rebels had died for crimes they had not committed. Wade's thesis had only limited impact on the profession, but in 2001, Michael P. Johnson resurrected Wade's thesis, noting problems with several historians' use of the Charleston trial records. Johnson's extended review of three books on Vesey ignited a controversy that requires that every historian who uses sources compiled by white sources to consider their merit.¹³

Although no one doubts that Nat Turner's Revolt happened, concerns have grown that many of the sources describing the revolt might not be reliable. Many interesting sources—such as letters written in the midst of the panic—are clearly unreliable. Some reflect rumors, not reality of the revolt. The best sources of information—the synoptic letters and newspaper reports written as whites in the area tried to describe what had happened, the accounts of the trials and *The Confessions of Nat Turner* itself—are also subject to doubt. Did they get the basic events wrong? No doubt all of these accounts were incomplete and imperfect, but they described the basic events in ways that fundamentally agreed with each other. After the initial panic, most accounts estimated the number of rebels to be somewhere between forty and sixty. Most of the names on the lists of whites killed remained constant, and several accounts of the deaths of these

¹³ Richard C. Wade, "The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration," *Journal of Southern History* 30 (1964): 143-61; Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. (Oct. 2001): 915-76; online at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/58.4/johnson.html> [19 April 2005]; and the responses in the forum, "The Making of a Slave Conspiracy," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. (Jan. 2002): 135-202; on-line at <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/59.1/> [19 April 2005]. For the strongest defense of the reliability of the records concerning the Denmark Vesey Case, see Robert L. Paquette, "From Rebellion to Revisionism: The Continuing Debate about the Denmark Vesey Affair," *The Journal of the Historical Society* 4 (Fall 2004): 291-334.

people appeared. The usually small differences between the lists seem to suggest that the sources were independent of each other, further reinforcing one's confidence in these accounts. Most letters from the scenes also described similar reprisals taken against Southampton's slaves and free blacks in the aftermath of the revolt. Although all the letters are limited by the racism of their authors, they included much valuable and reliable information about the events during the revolt.

The court records are also extremely valuable sources. Since I have interpreted the court proceedings as primarily an elaborate public ritual designed to legitimize an attempt by the leaders of society to consolidate their power, the court records can be interpreted on two levels. On one level, internal evidence of serious problems in court procedures can be used to undermine the argument that the court records were compiled by a court serious about respecting due process rights of the accused. The court was much more concerned about its own power, even if its expansion of power typically coincided with the interests of the accused rebels. On another level, these documents accurately recount the testimony that the litigators believed best to describe the events of the rebellion.¹⁴ In fact, my initial argument about the use of legal formalism—such as scrupulous record keeping, allowing the defense attorneys the leeway to make substantive and procedural arguments on behalf of their clients, and requiring testimony for conviction—to distinguish court actions from brutal popular reprisals implies that court records provide a window into the best information that whites had about the revolt.

The most intensely debated source on the revolt has been *The Confessions*, published by Thomas R. Gray. Although Gray's account was initially accepted as a reliable account of Turner's own confession, over the last forty years historians have questioned the reliability of

¹⁴ This claim should be limited by the unhappy heuristic principle accepted by Southern courts that found whites more reliable than blacks, even if blacks had more direct access to the events.

The Confessions. During the controversy about Styron's novel, both Styron's supporters and critics disparaged the reliability of *The Confessions*, although both sides still appealed to its authority when it supported their reading. In 1992, Daniel Fabricant rejected such opportunistic use of *The Confessions*. He argued that *The Confessions*, taken down and published by a white lawyer, could not be considered reliable. In 1999, the journalist Tony Horowitz wrote an article describing his exploration of the source material on the revolt. The title of the piece was "Untrue Confessions: Is Most of What We Know about the Rebel Slave Nat Turner Wrong?"¹⁵

Such questions have forced historians to re-evaluate the reliability of *The Confessions*. Until now, the best of such critical re-evaluations, however, has suggested that *The Confessions* is more reliable than Fabricant and Horowitz suggested. In "The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," David Allmendinger makes two important arguments in support of *The Confessions*: first, *The Confessions* introduces much new information. Although it was possible that the source of this information was Thomas R. Gray, the man who wrote down *The Confessions*, Allmendinger argues that it is most likely that Nat Turner himself provided most of the new details about the revolt. Second, Allmendinger notes that *The Confessions* retained Turner's perspective throughout the narrative. It would have been much easier (and perhaps marketable) to compose a narrative with an omniscient narrator who could have related everything that had happened during the course of the revolt. Instead Nat Turner left so much material out of his account that Gray chose to add his own extended commentaries at the end of *The Confessions*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Daniel S. Fabricant, "Thomas R. Gray and William Styron: Finally, A Critical Look at the 1831 *Confession of Nat Turner*," *American Journal of Legal History* 37 (July 1993): 332-361; Tony Horowitz, "Untrue Confessions: Is Most of What We Know about the Rebel Slave Nat Turner Wrong?" *The New Yorker* 75 (13 December 1999): 80-89.

¹⁶ David F. Allmendinger, "The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 24-42. For my full argument on *The Confessions*, see Chapter 11.

In this work, I have added several original arguments in support of the reliability of *The Confessions*. Among other arguments, for example, I have examined Gray's authorial interruptions of the text to support the reliability of *The Confessions*. The most likely explanation for the irregular presentation of interruptions is that Gray was—as he claimed to be—in a dialogue with Turner. Furthermore, I have made a close textual analysis that demonstrates that Gray preserved Turner's voice, even to the extent that Gray transcribed what he was almost certain were erroneous comments from the revolt's leader.

Accepting that the most important sources were not intentionally corrupted does not imply that historians can use any of the sources blindly. The historian must keep in mind that even honest reporters can be confused, misled and lied to. In this work, I have used the evidence as carefully as possible, keeping in the forefront of my mind the distinction between what the various sources convey about the events and what they convey about their authors. Despite the obvious problems in approaching the sources, the sources do reveal much, although only through the careful process of critical analysis. In a study of hermeneutics, the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur uses the German word "*Aneignen*," or "'to make one's [own] what was initially 'alien.'"¹⁷ This is the dialectic by which a reader appropriates meaning from a text, and it is a helpful way to think about the historian's project of mediating sources. Ultimately, it is this project of "aneignung" that yields the account of Nat Turner's Revolt that follows.

¹⁷ Paul Ricoeur, "Appropriation," *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson, (Paris: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 182-193

CHAPTER 2

SIGNS FROM GOD

On a winter Sunday in February 1831, four men gathered in the woods of Southampton County, Virginia. Each made his way from nearby plantations. Hark came from the house of Joseph Travis, a household that included seven other slaves over the age of twelve. Joseph Travis' neighbor, Nathaniel Francis, owned seven slaves over the age of sixteen and another three over the age of twelve. One of these slaves, Sam, joined Hark in the woods.¹ Nelson and Henry also came to the meeting, although it is unclear where they lived. Nelson may have belonged to Peter Edwards, who lived immediately next to Nathaniel Francis, close to the Travis place. If so, thirty-three year old Nelson was, according to one person, "uncommonly skilled and worth at least \$400, and had he been mine I would not have taken \$500 for him."² Where Henry

¹ See Virginia Auditor of Public Accounts, Personal Property Tax, Southampton County, 1831, Library of Virginia.

² Joseph Joines quoted in Peter Edwards, 12 December 1831, Southampton County Legislative Petitions, LV. Historians disagree on the identity of Nelson. Drewry calls him "Nelson Williams," although he never specified which Williams owned Nelson. Most likely, Drewry meant Jacob Williams, who owned a slave named Nelson who was tried for involvement in the revolt. Henry Irving Tragle agrees, identifying William's Nelson as "one of those who met at Cabin Pond on the 21st." Stephen B. Oates states specifically that Nelson was "the property of Jacob Williams." In support of this identification, Nelson apparently knew about the revolt as early as four days before it occurred. The evidence against Nelson, however, described how the rebels "told Nelson to go with them," when they arrived at his plantation long after the revolt began, suggesting that Nelson had not been a part of the revolt from the start. See William Sidney Drewry, *The Southampton Insurrection* (Washington DC: Neale, 1900; reprint, with a foreword by F. Roy Johnson, Murfreesboro, NC: Johnson, 1968), 33; Trial of Nelson in Henry Irving Tragle, comp., *The Southampton Slave Revolt: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1971), 193-94, quote from fn. 61; Stephen B. Oates, *Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1975, 1990), 53. More likely, Nelson belonged to Peter Edwards, as Thomas Parramore suggests. Peter Edwards' Nelson is a perfect candidate. Nelson actively fought for the cause, see Peter Edwards, Petitions, and unlike Jacob Williams' Nelson no evidence suggests that Edwards' Nelson joined later in the revolt. Moreover, living on Peter Edwards' plantation, Nelson would live on land abutting Nathaniel Francis' and near to Joseph Travis'. Jacob Williams, on the other hand, lived miles away. Finally, Edwards' Nelson was killed as the revolt was suppressed, as was one of the slave leaders named Nelson. One report written from Southampton four days after the revolt admitted that the white had the severed "head of the celebrated Nelson, called, by the blacks, 'Gen. Nelson.' ... The skull of Nelson, taken by us, is in the possession" of a local doctor. This strong evidence that the leader Nelson had already been killed undermines the candidacy of Jacob William's Nelson, who was tried on 3 September 1831 to be General Nelson. The only other plausible candidate to be General Nelson would be an unknown third Nelson who joined the revolt. See *Norfolk American Beacon*, 29 August 1831, quoted in Tragle, 50,

lived is a mystery. Although we do not know much about Henry, we do know that he was a man who had the ability to get some liquor, and it may not have been beyond his ability to provide the others drinks that would help stave off the cold.³

Nat Turner called the four men together. Thirty years later, the abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson wrote an article about Nat Turner for the *Atlantic Monthly* in which he complained that “The biographies of slaves can hardly be individualized; they belong to the class.”⁴ Although the biographies of slaves will always be incomplete, lacking detail and texture, Nat Turner’s life has been much better documented than all but a handful of American slaves. According to the *Confessions* recorded by Thomas Gray, Nat Turner was born on 2 October 1800, just days before Virginia executed the Commonwealth’s second most famous slave rebel, Gabriel, also known as Gabriel Prosser. Nat Turner grew up near the North Carolina line in Southampton County, about fifty miles from Norfolk, seventy-five miles from Richmond. Before Nat Turner turned twenty-eight, three different men had owned him. In 1828, Putnam

(the same report is also quoted in the 2 September 1831 Richmond *Enquirer*); Thomas C. Parramore, *Southampton County Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 78, 247, note 42.

³ William Drewry, who wrote the first scholarly piece on the revolt, names this man Henry Edwards and, at another point, Henry Porter. Stephen Oates and Thomas Parramore each use the latter designation. Unfortunately for someone trying to reconstruct the story of the revolt, the most likely owners who shared those names can be ruled out. Almost certainly, Henry was not owned by either Peter Edwards, one of the larger slaveholders in the immediate neighborhood, who held seventeen slaves over the age of twelve, or Richard Porter, who held thirteen slaves older than twelve years old. These men lived on plantations visited by the rebels early in the revolt. Both of these men later made claims for compensation for slaves who were killed without trial, but neither asked for compensation for Henry. According to the black oral tradition, recorded a century after the revolt, Henry’s mother lived on Peter Edwards’ farm, although that record also suggested that “Henry” was tried. According to the trial records, no Henry was tried. See Drewry, 25, 33; Oates, 53; Parramore, 78; Peter Edwards and Richard Porter, 12 December 1831, Petitions; Southampton County Tax List, 1831. Allen Crawford, interviewed by Susie R. C. Byrd, ed. Charles L. Perdue, Jr. Thomas E. Barden, Robert K. Phillips, *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Ex-Virginia Slaves* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976, 1992), 76. On the suggestion that Henry had access to brandy, see the most important source on the revolt, Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, VA* (Baltimore, 1831), 11. Gray was a ne’er do well Southampton lawyer who transcribed Nat Turner’s testimony after he was captured. The reliability of this source has been debated for the past fifty years. The *Confessions*, which when capitalized and in the italics in this paper always refers to Gray’s *Confessions*, have been most compellingly defended by David F. Allmendinger, Jr. “The Construction of *The Confession of Nat Turner*,” in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 24-42. For my discussion of the *Confessions*, see Chapter 10.

⁴ T[homas] W[entworth] Higginson, “Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1861); online at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/1861aug/higginson.htm> [17 May 2003].

Moore, the child of his most recent owner, the late Thomas Moore, inherited Turner. Since Putnam was a child, Nat Turner stayed in the household of his master's mother. When she married Joseph Travis, Nat Turner moved with his owner's family to the Travis farm, remaining in the same neighborhood of St. Luke's parish where he had lived his entire life.⁵

In 1831, Nat Turner was described as "5 feet six or 8 inches high." If he was a hair shorter than the average American male—the typical Civil War soldier stood approximately five foot eight inches—he was probably a little heavier. William Parker described Turner as "broad shouldered," weighing between one hundred fifty and one hundred sixty pounds. Although only thirty-one years old, his hair was already "very thin" on the top of his head. He wore a goatee. Unsympathetic whites described other notable things about Turner's appearance: he had "broad flat feet." He was "knock kneed." He had a "large flat nose" and "large eyes." Over the years he had been literally scarred working in the fields of Southampton County: some animal or person bit the back of his neck; perhaps it was the same mule that kicked his forehead. He had "a knot on one of the bones of his right arm near the wrist," an injury that had been produced by some sort of "a blow." When whites tried to classify the skin color of Nat Turner, they enigmatically described a man with a "bright complexion but not a mulatto."⁶

The historian Kenneth S. Greenberg has reminded scholars that one must be careful not to accept Parker's description of Nat Turner uncritically. After all, this description was composed and promulgated by people who hated and feared Nat Turner. Nevertheless, there are

⁵ Gray, 7. On Nat Turner's owners see, Drewry, 26-27; Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion: Together with the Full Text of the So-Called 'Confessions' of Nat Turner Made in Prison in 1831* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 36-37; F. Roy Johnson, *The Nat Turner Story* (Murfreesboro, NC: Johnson Publishing, 1970), 38, 48, 55, 67; and F. Roy Johnson, *The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection* (Murfreesboro, NC: Johnson Publishing, 1966), 14, 28, 51-52; Oates, 8-10, 13-15; 29-32, 51-53; Parramore, 76-77.

⁶ W[illiam] C. Parker to John Floyd, 14 September 1831, in Tragle, 420-21. See *Richmond Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 136-138. On the question of Turner's complexion, Kenneth S. Greenberg suggests that historians must consider the possibility that Turner was in fact a mulatto, but this was denied because of its awkward

two good reasons to believe that the description is generally accurate: first, the whites who composed it had strong incentive to represent Nat Turner accurately. They created this description to help identify a fugitive. If it were inaccurate, then that would jeopardize their primary goal in composing the description, the capture of Nat Turner. Second, a correspondent to the *Richmond Enquirer*, who later compared Nat Turner to the description, insisted that he fit the description “exactly” with two caveats. First, the correspondent found Nat Turner darker than he expected. Second, Turner’s eyes were large, but not as prominent as he assumed that they would be.⁷ Even these qualifications suggest that the original description was accurate. Neither contradicted the original description. Instead each shows that the newspaper’s correspondent read more into the original description than it contained.

Portraits of Nat Turner’s family life are as tantalizingly incomplete as descriptions of his appearance. His family life when he was growing up seems relatively stable. He later recounted how his parents both influenced him in his youth and how he knew at least one grandmother, to whom—according to the *Confessions*—he was “much attached.”⁸ Like countless other black families in the south, slavery played a role in the break-up of his family. In the *Confessions*, Nat Turner recalled that the black community believed that his own father had escaped “to some other part of the country.”⁹ Although the protections of legal marriage were antithetical to the

implications. See Kenneth S. Greenberg, “Name, Face, Body,” in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion*, 2-23, esp. 17-18.

⁷ *Ibid.* 14-18; *Richmond Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 136-138.

⁸ Gray, 7-8. Nat Turner’s own description of his family has been the focus of much speculation of historians. For example, Nat Turner clearly referred to—but did not name—his grandmother in his *Confessions*. F. Roy Johnson accepted this and left her unnamed in his first volume on the revolt, *The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection*, 16. Four years later Johnson revisited this issue and, assuming that Turner’s grandmother probably lived on the same plantation, identified Bridget as “presumably Nat’s grandmother,” Johnson, *The Nat Turner Story*, 37. Steven B. Oates accepts Johnson’s presumption about Turner’s grandmother without any qualification. See Oates, 8-13.

⁹ Gray, 9. Perhaps because of the lack of documentation about Nat Turner’s father, he has been much contested. In the *Confessions*, Nat Turner recounts how the black community believed that his father was a slave who ran away. Historians have been inclined to believe this, although—as mention above—Kenneth S. Greenberg insists that historians consider the an interpretation proposed by a black man in Southampton, that—given Turner’s bright complexion—that his father was a white man. In the 1930s, Joseph Cephas Carroll develops the story that Turner’s

American system of slavery, Nat Turner married. Historians have disputed the identity of Turner's wife, with at least three different women—Fanny; Cherry; and Mariah—proposed by different people. The earliest reports of Turner's wife indicated that she also lived in the neighborhood, on the farm of Mr. Reese. Perhaps the most likely candidate of the three, Mariah, has been proposed by Thomas Parramore, although proof that would rule out any other candidates may never appear.¹⁰ Contemporary evidence for Nat Turner's children is less clear even than the evidence about his wife. At the time of the revolt, no sources mentioned Turner's children, who would have been too young to participate in the revolt themselves. Southampton's oral tradition filled in a blank. According to it, Nat Turner had at least one child. At the end of

father had runaway from slavery, presumably using the black oral tradition, suggesting that after Turner's father escaped, he emigrated to Liberia, Joseph Cephas Carroll, *Slave Insurrections in the United States, 1800-1865* (New York: Negro University Press, 1968), 120. A more recent account from the black oral tradition, suggests that Turner's father never ran away; he was secretly taken from the county and sold to slave traders. See Johnson, *The Nat Turner Story*, 50.

¹⁰ Early evidence for Turner's wife includes a letter written from Jerusalem less than a month after the revolt that refers to a whipping she received, *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831. Samuel Warner also states that Turner had a wife and Warner also identified Turner's wife's owner, "Mr. Reese," *Authentic and Impartial Narrative of the Tragical Scene Which Was Witnessed in Southampton...* reprinted in Tragle, 296. Thirty years later, Thomas W. Higginson also referred to Turner's wife in "Nat Turner's Insurrection." With the notable exception of Eugene D. Genovese, who saw Higginson's piece as the only evidence for Turner's wife, historians have generally accepted that Turner was married. William Sidney Drewry refers to an unnamed wife. More recently people have tried to identify Nat Turner's wife. Fanny was proposed by Lucy Mae Turner, who claimed to be Turner's granddaughter, but has been not given credence by historians. See Eugene D. Genovese, "The Nat Turner Case," *The Nat Turner Rebellion*, ed. By John B. Duff and Peter M. Mitchell (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 203-216, esp. 212 for a discussion of "Turner's alleged black wife." See also Scot Andrew French, "Remembering Nat Turner: The Rebellious Slave in American Thought, 1831 to the Present," (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 2000), 363; and Mary Kemp Davis' "What Happened in This Place? In Search of the Female Slave in the Nat Turner Slave Insurrection," in Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion*, 173. In 1970, F. Roy Johnson, focusing on women who belonged to Giles Reese, speculated that Reese's slave Cheery "seems to have become Nat's wife." This speculation seems to be based on process of elimination and is presented as little more than a best guess based upon Southampton County property records. He never explains how he concluded that "Mr. Reese" was Giles Reese and not some other Reese. According to the 1830 there are four men name Reese heading households in Southampton County alone, including Joseph William Reese, owner of Hark's brother-in-law Jack. See 1830 Federal Census, Southampton County, Va., <www.rootsweb.com/~usgenweb/va/southampton/census/1830/> (21 January 2002); Johnson, *Nat Turner Story*, 55. Steven B. Oates accepts Johnson's guess without reservation and describes elements from an undocumented wedding ceremony. See Oates, 29-30. The likelihood that Cherry was Turner's wife is diminished by other evidence uncovered by Thomas Parramore, which suggests that Mariah is the best candidate based upon indirect evidence about her and Cherry's ages. See Parramore, *Southampton County*, 243-44, n.43. For fuller background about the lively debate about Nat Turner's wife, see, Albert Stone, *The Return of Nat Turner: History Literature, and Cultural Politics in Sixties America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 327; French, 450-451; and

the nineteenth century, historian and Southampton native Thomas Drewry identified a son Redric.¹¹ Because slave law ruled that Turner's children would belong to his wife's owner, the children would have lived with their mother on Mr. Reese's farm.

If Nat Turner followed his usual pattern, he arrived after the four other slaves had gathered. A deeply religious man, Nat Turner had made a conscious decision years earlier to cultivate a persona to present to the world, white and black. He later admitted that he "avoided mixing in society and wrapped myself in mystery." Even to his best friends, which these men were, he still hesitated "to mix with them," afraid that it would undermine his carefully developed image.¹² No one will ever know what Henry, Hark, Sam and Nelson discussed as they waited for Nat Turner, but it would not be surprising if they were discussing what many Americans were discussing: a recent eclipse of the sun.

On Saturday, 12 February 1831, southside Virginia experienced an eclipse of the sun. The line of maximum eclipse, traced out beneath the moon's orbit, traveled from northeast to southwest, from east of Boston to west of New Orleans. Before the solar event, some newspapers reminded their readers that an eclipse was merely "caused by the regular operation of natural laws." Despite newspapers' emphatic assurances to the contrary, one suspects that many Americans still saw eclipses as "signs or forerunners of great calamities." The moon's shadow passed directly over Virginia between Norfolk and Richmond. In Richmond, the *Enquirer*

Charles Joyner, "Styron's Choice: A Meditation on History, Literature, and Moral Imperatives" in Greenberg, *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion*, 195-196.

¹¹ Drewry, 28.

¹² Gray, 8-9, 12. Charles Frederick Irons suggests that Turner may have spent the morning preaching. The lack of evidence for Turner preaching the morning of the revolt makes this speculation seem unlikely, but there was an early report that connected the revolt to a disturbance at Barnes' Church a week before the revolt began. According to this report, "The prevalent belief is that on Sunday week last, at Barnes' Church... the negroes who were observed to be disorderly, took offense at something; (it is not known what) [and] that the plan of insurrection was then and there conceived." I do not credit this story because the author of the report, John Hampden Plesants, omitted it from a later report in which he insisted that, "The origin of the conspiracy ... is matter of conjecture." 29 August 1831, Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, quoted in Tragle, 51-52, and 3 September 1831, quoted in Tragle,

reported that “Every person in the city was star gazing, from bleary-eyed old age to the most bright-eyed infancy.”¹³ Slaves, who were told what to do and often what to think, had the chance to look and decide for themselves exactly what it meant. Perhaps—as the men waited for Nat Turner—they debated the eclipse. If they had their own ideas, Nat Turner was going to suggest an interpretation of the eclipse that would lead to the most important slave revolt in American history.

None of the four men would have been surprised when Nat Turner arrived and explained to his friends that the eclipse was a message from God to him. Nat Turner believed that he had learned to communicate with God and had made no secret of his gift to those in his neighborhood. To him, the natural world was a backdrop against which he discerned messages from God. For example, a few years before the eclipse, he told many in his neighborhood, “white and black” alike, that he had found “drops of blood on the corn as though it were dew from heaven.” According to Nat Turner, this miracle meant that “the great day of judgement was at hand.” Likewise, he interpreted the stars and leaves on which he found “hieroglyphic characters” as signs of the second coming of Jesus, who “was about to lay down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men.”¹⁴ The end of the world was near, and Nat Turner felt guided by the Holy Spirit to share his knowledge.

67. See Charles Frederick Irons, “‘The Chief Cornerstone’: The Spiritual Foundations of Virginia’s Slave Society, 1776-1861,” (Ph. D. diss., University of Virginia, 2003), 134.

¹³ Southampton County Tax List, 1831; Louis P. Masur, *1831: Year of Eclipse* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 3.

¹⁴ Gray, 10, 10-11. For the discussion of another, contemporary millennial movement in America, Millerism, see Everett N. Dick, “The Millerite Movement, 1830-1845,” in *Adventism in America* ed. Gary Land (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986) 5, 8. See also, Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millenialism, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), Everett N. Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis, 1831-1844* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994). For an instance of a historian who noted similarities between Miller and Turner, see Peter Rodgers Brown, “The Theology of Nat Turner as Reflected in the Insurrection,” (M. S. T. thesis, Oberlin, 1949) 6, 46, 72.

People within the black community did not always accept Turner's confidence in his ability to prophesize. Turner's difficulties in convincing the black community of his divine inspiration date from no later than 1825. At that time, Nat Turner had just been placed under an overseer, perhaps for the first time. One historian insists that the placement of a new overseer "invariably" would be followed by "a period of testing as the slaves sought to determine the disciplinary parameters of the new regime." Whether or not Nat Turner was testing the discipline of the new regime, he made clear his unhappiness by running away. Slaves generally supported running away as a way of voicing unhappiness about a specific grievance or as a response to the totalitarian system of slavery. Turner's own father had escaped slavery, and if Nat Turner could have successfully followed his father's footsteps, his family, friends and neighbors would have been happy for him. If he had failed in his bid for freedom, the slaves of St. Luke's parish would have understood the obstacles, and respected him for his attempt.¹⁵

Nat Turner's bid for freedom ended in a way that seriously compromised his attempts to present himself as a prophet to the black community. After having been away a month, Nat Turner voluntarily returned to his plantation. According to the *Confessions*, the other slaves reacted with "astonishment" when he returned to bondage, because they "thought I had made my escape to some other part of the country." Their surprise became disapproval when they found out why he returned. Nat Turner recounted how the Holy "Spirit appeared to me" and told him "that I should return to the service of my earthly master."¹⁶

Nat Turner's Holy Spirit in this command echoed the message that slaves had rejected as long as white ministers and masters employed religious texts in defense of slavery. For instance,

¹⁵ William Kauffman Scarborough, *The Overseer: Plantation Management in the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966; reprint, with new preface, Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1984), viii; Gray, 9. For a more complete treatment of runaways, see John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Harriet Jacobs recalled a sermon that Episcopalian minister John Avery delivered sometime shortly after the revolt. “Hearken, ye servants!” he warned an audience of slaves in Edenton, North Carolina, roughly sixty miles downstream from Jerusalem. “You are rebellious sinners,” he scolded. “Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle and shirk your work.... Obey your old master and your young master—your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master.” Years later, Harriet Jacobs vividly remembered the response of the slave audience to the stern words: “We went home highly amused at brother [Avery’s] gospel teaching.”¹⁷ Turner’s Holy Spirit, who told him to return to slavery, sounded similar to Avery’s God, and Turner’s black audience had an inclination to mock or scorn anyone who told them that God’s highest calling for them was to be loyal slaves.

The more Nat Turner told his fellow slaves about the Holy Spirit’s message, the more astounding it sounded. The Spirit had criticized him for his concern about “the things of this world.” Instead, his attention ought to have been on “the kingdom of Heaven.” While that rebuke might have sounded plausible enough, the Holy Spirit then echoed Luke’s gospel: “For he who knoweth his Master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes, and thus I have chastened you.” Nat Turner understood his master to be God; but, in this context, Nat Turner could not avoid the unappealing implication that the whip was an important part of God’s providential plan. The most ardent proslavery writers would have been careful in making such a claim, especially focusing on the practice of beating slaves. Nat Turner asked his fellow slaves

¹⁶ Gray, 9.

¹⁷ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* ed. L. Maria Child, ed and intro. Jean Fagan Yellin (1861; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 68-69. Yellin identifies the “Rev. Mr. Pike” as John Avery, 270. The Nottoway River, which transverses Southampton County, becomes the Chowan River at the North Carolina line. At Edenton, the Chowan empties into Albemarle Sound.

to believe the unbelievable: that the often cruel and arbitrary punishment meted out by owners and overseers somehow made sense to God.¹⁸

Several sources describe how other slaves responded to those who preached this line from St. Luke. Lunsford Lane, born three years after Nat Turner, recounted how white ministers in Raleigh, North Carolina preached, “He that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.” Lane wryly noted that he became “quite familiar” with such verses from the Bible, to the extent that he commented, “The first commandment impressed upon our minds was to obey our masters, and the second was like unto it, namely, to do as much work when they or the overseers were not watching us as when they were.” Despite the effort that slaveholders put in getting slaves to accept this version of Christianity, slaves rejected these teachings outright. Even kind and good-hearted ministers who taught this pro-slavery version of Christianity were rejected. Lane recalled how one “one very kind hearted Episcopal minister ... was very popular with the colored people” until he preached a similar sermon. At this point, “Most of us left him.”¹⁹

Perhaps Frederick Douglass best captured the kind of injustices that led the slave community to reject any religious authority who invoked this line from St. Luke's Gospel. In his earliest book, Douglass remembered an episode when his master “tie[d] up a lame young woman, and whip[ped] her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip.” Douglass was outraged by the act, but wanted his audience to be at least as

¹⁸ Gray, 9, 9-10. According to Eric J. Sundquist, “Turner appropriates and overturns one of proslavery's favorite passages, transfiguring a text of racist subjugation into his own prophetic call to revolt.” This misreading ignores the context—the quote was part of the Holy Spirit's instructions for Turner to end his bid for freedom and also ignores the disdain that greeted Turner's pronouncement. See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993), 59.

¹⁹ Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C. Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption by Purchase of Himself and Family from Slavery, and His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin*. (1842; 1999 *Documenting the American South*, UNC—CH Libraries) online at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/lanelunsford/menu.html>, [10 May 2004].

incensed by how such a sadist could use Christianity to defend his actions. To justify “the bloody deed,” his master “would quote this passage of Scripture—‘He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes.’”²⁰ When Turner invoked this line as part of the message from the Holy Spirit, Nat Turner insured that most in the black community would reject Turner’s prophetic message.

Although Turner may have won a handful of disciples by the time of the revolt, the response of the black community to these early pronouncements was decidedly unsympathetic. Once Turner invoked this line as a part of his private revelation, the black community immediately rejected Nat Turner as a prophet. According to Turner’s *Confessions*, the reaction of Southampton slaves was similar to the response described by Jacobs, Lane and Douglass: “the negroes found fault, and murmured [sic] against me, saying that if they had my sense they would not serve any master in the world.”²¹ The slaves thought that God, who brought the Israelites from Egypt, wanted America’s black slaves to be free. They refused to believe that God wanted any slave to return to slavery. They scorned and mocked Nat Turner who voluntarily returned to bondage and who also acquiesced to southern brutality as part of God’s plan. Future generations would describe such an apologist as an “Uncle Tom,” and Nat Turner probably felt a similar stinging rebuke from the black community.

²⁰ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845; 1999 *Documenting the American South*, UNC—CH Libraries) online at: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/douglass/douglass.html> [10 May 2004]. Mrs. Joseph Smith, who escaped from slavery in Maryland sometime before 1835, also commented on how the message to slave to obey their masters was so common that “I never heard anything else.” Most damningly, “I didn’t hear any thing about obeying our Maker.” See John W. Blassingame, ed. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 1977), 411.

²¹ Gray, 10. For more on the relation of resistance within the black community to black Christianity, see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The ‘Invisible Institution’ in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), esp. 212-318; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Random House, 1974, 1976), esp. 232-84; John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972, 1979), 130-48; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 185-236; and Sylvia R. Frey, *Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 284-325.

There is no reason to think that Henry, Hark, Sam or Nelson thought more highly of Nat Turner in 1825 than the nameless black slaves who “found fault” with Nat Turner. None of them became disciples when, in 1827 or the spring of 1828, he baptized himself. In fact, there is no reason to think that Nat Turner had any black disciples as recently as three years before the eclipse, despite Turner’s assiduous efforts to cultivate his image. At some point between 1825 and 1828, Nat Turner’s message that the “great day of judgement was at hand” had won him by his own account his first disciple: Etheldred T. Brantley, “a white man.” Turner’s insistence on his divine inspiration and stark message about the coming end of time spurred Brantley to cease “from his wickedness” and reform his ways. The change in Brantley’s behavior coincided with the outbreak of a nasty skin affliction. Brantley oozed blood from his skin; but after nine days of praying and fasting, “he was healed.”²²

After Nat Turner converted, reformed, and healed Brantley, the Holy Spirit reappeared. It reminded Nat Turner that Jesus had been baptized and ordered that “as the Saviour had been baptized so should we also.” Prompted by the Holy Spirit, the two men petitioned one of the local churches to baptize them. The request was rejected. The “white people would not let us be baptised [sic] by the church.”²³ No doubt the white people who controlled the church disapproved of Brantley’s flouting the racial caste system, but if their foremost objective was to reinforce white supremacy, they could have achieved their goal by bringing Turner and Brantley under their control within the purview of church discipline.²⁴ Instead, they rejected the men’s

²² Gray, 11. On the time frame, see also Richmond *Enquirer*, 27 September 1831, in Tragle, 100.

²³ Gray, 11. Stephen B. Oates envisions another reason the whites refused to baptize Turner and Brantley: “When the word was out, it created a sensation in the neighborhood. A white man baptized by a Negro! Well, it was unheard of, even in tidewater Virginia, and white Christians absolutely refused to let Nat perform the ceremony at their altars.” Unfortunately for this interpretation, Brantley and Turner asked to “be baptised [sic] by the church.” Had the church agreed to baptize the two men, there is no reason to think that they would not have been baptized by the church’s minister. See Oates, 40.

²⁴ On examples of antebellum church discipline, see Mathews, 225-28; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Random House, 1976, 1977), 286-87; Jon F. Sensbach, *A Separate*

appeal for baptism, most likely because they did not want to do anything that could be interpreted as validating Nat Turner's visions. They did not want to put an imprimatur on the pronouncements of a slave who claimed to speak for God.

While the whites rejected Turner's prophetic pronouncements—Brantley excepted—there is little reason to think that the black community had warmed to his religious inspiration since Nat Turner had told them God had ordered him to return to slavery. Several years after the baptism, a white correspondent from Southampton described the Turner-Brantley baptism in a way that supported much of Turner's own description of the event. Turner remembered that he and Brantley "went down into the water together." The unnamed white correspondent, who wrote without any knowledge of how Nat Turner would later describe the event, agreed. Nat Turner "in the company of a white man, did actually baptize himself."²⁵ Both of these independent records of the event mention only the two principals involved in the baptism, suggesting that no black disciples were involved.

Further detail added by the anonymous white correspondent in his letter to the *Richmond Enquirer* reinforced the idea that the black community looked askance at their local prophet at the time of his baptism. According to the letter, Nat Turner had "announced to the Blacks, that he should baptize himself on a particular day, and whilst in the water, a dove would be seen to descend from Heaven [and perch on his head]." This story was plainly messianic, with Nat

Canaan: The Making of an Afro-Moravian World in North Carolina, 1763-1840 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 263; Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 76-78; and Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 69.

²⁵ Gray, 11; *Richmond Enquirer*, 27 September 1831, in Tragle, 100. The story of the baptism from the *Confessions* and the *Enquirer* both name only two men baptized. Despite their similarities on this particular and other details, the stories they relate appear to be independent. They tell the story in different ways and relate different details suggesting that they are independent sources. Since the *Enquirer* article was written before Nat Turner was captured, this version was related by neighboring slaves while the *Confessions* were Nat's own version of the same event. I infer that the sources for the *Enquirer* letter came from the black community. For evidence that Turner's religious status was not widely known among the white community, see *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 93. For the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism, see Matt 3:16; Luke 3:22; John 1:32.

Turner filling the role of a modern Christ. In an important respect, however, the story told to the white reporter was different from the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism. According to the Bible, the dove representing the Holy Spirit landed on Jesus' head. In contrast, the prediction of a dove descending from heaven onto Nat Turner was recounted as an empty boast. When the dove failed to appear, the black community had even more reason to doubt Nat Turner's astounding claims about himself.²⁶

The historian must be careful when handling hearsay recorded by an unsympathetic reporter years after the event occurred. That this story circulated does not mean that Nat Turner had predicted that a dove would land on his head. He might have simply said that there would be a sign. People familiar with the Bible may have misinterpreted his declaration that the Holy Spirit was with him as a claim that at his baptism everyone would see "the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him."²⁷ Or Turner might have said nothing about a dove appearing, and people used the idea of a dove to deride this messianic figure. Whatever Turner actually said, some black people's account of it recorded in a letter to the *Richmond Enquirer* reflected the deep-seated skepticism of the black community for its would-be prophet.

On the day of the baptism, Turner's detractors turned out to watch the ceremony. According to the letter in the *Richmond Enquirer*, Nat Turner hoped to "collect a great crowd," but that "assemblage was prevented," possibly by whites, who sometimes tried to prohibit large gatherings of slaves. Despite this attempt to contain the event, Turner remembered that the baptism evolved into something of a spectacle: "many" gathered at Person's Mill Pond to watch

²⁶ *Richmond Enquirer*, 27 September 1831, in Tragle, 100. For evidence against my argument that Turner had little support in the black community and that the dove did not appear, Frank Roy Johnson, a folklorist from near Southampton County found that some in the black community recalled the story that a dove had appeared. In the 1960s, Percie Claud and James Kelly Woodley told Frank Roy Johnson that some of Nat Turner's supporters "were made party to a vision in which a white dove came down and alighted on the 'prophet's' shoulder." See F. Roy Johnson, *The Nat Turner Story*, 66. I reject this story as inconsistent with contemporary reports that describe the event but omit this crucial detail.

as Turner and Brantley “went down into the water together.” Turner was aware of the hostility towards him. The crowd followed Turner not because they hoped to see a holy event, nor even in amusement to watch two grown men make fools of themselves; they were there hoping that Nat Turner would fail. “In the sight of many who reviled us,” Turner later recalled, he and Brantley “were baptized by the Spirit.”²⁸

Despite Turner’s marginal place in the black community, Hark, Henry, Sam and Nelson met with the prophet when he called them together in February 1831. They may have had a higher opinion of Nat Turner than the crowds who jeered him at Person’s Mill Pond or those who told him he was a fool when he voluntarily returned to slavery. Perhaps they sensed the growing radicalism of Nat Turner’s visions. According to the *Confessions*, Turner’s visions suggesting a race war had begun shortly after he had returned from his escape, but he admitted that he did not share these visions with other slaves.²⁹

Although he did not speak about what he had seen, Nat Turner’s visions seemed to have made him noticeably less tolerant of the indignities of slavery. According to one record, he received a whipping in 1828 from his master. (Thomas Moore died sometime during that year making it possible that Turner’s whipping was a part of the ritual of establishing boundaries between new master and new slave.) What had Turner done? He stated that “the blacks ought to be free, and that they would be free one day or the other.”³⁰ One whipping might not have made other slaves less dubious of Turner’s divine inspiration, but some might have seen Nat Turner in a more favorable light after he challenged slavery and withstood a whipping.

²⁷ Matt. 3:16.

²⁸ Richmond *Enquirer*, 27 September 1831, in Tragle, 100; Gray, 11. For other details not included in contemporary reports of the baptism, such as the location of the event, see Drewry, 33; Johnson, 66.

²⁹ Gray, 11.

³⁰ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 92. Parramore misdates this beating. See Parramore, *Southampton County Virginia*, 77.

While it is tempting to focus on the few dramatic moments that enter into the historical record, mundane events probably played as large a role in changing the four men's opinion of Turner. At Thomas Moore's death in 1828, Turner and five other slaves were bequeathed to Putnam Moore, Thomas' six-year-old son. By October 1829, Putnam's mother, Sally Francis Moore, married Joseph Travis, creating a complex new household for blacks and whites. The head of the family, Travis acted as guardian for Putnam Moore. Sally Travis also lived there and was soon pregnant with Joseph Travis' child. Among the black residents, the situation was also complicated. Some, such as Hark, belonged to Joseph Travis. Others, including Nat Turner, belonged to Travis' stepson Putnam Moore. Among the seven adults who lived on Travis' plantation, it seems possible that Turner was not the only one with a spouse and family abroad.³¹

Hark may have known Turner before he moved onto Travis' farm, but Hark may not have known the reclusive prophet well. When Turner recalled his life, one theme that emerged was his continual efforts to isolate himself. As a young man, he remembered: "I ... studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped myself in mystery." After the he returned from running away, he confessed, "I now withdrew myself as much as my situation would permit, from the intercourse of my fellow servants." In 1831, he still insisted that had tried "not to mix with them for years before."³²

Turner's attempt to distance himself from other slaves was always limited by an important caveat, "as much as my situation would permit." As a slave, he did not have final say over how he spent his time. Without too much difficulty, he could separate himself from someone such as Hark when they lived on different farms. After Nat Turner moved onto Travis' farm, however, he and Hark worked, ate and slept together. For almost two years they lived

³¹ Johnson, 67; Drewry, 26-27; Parramore, 76-77; Southampton County Tax List, 1831.

³² Gray, 8-9, 10, 12.

together and got a chance to judge each other independent of their public reputations. Turner's opinion of Hark was clear. Hark was invited to the February meeting as one of the "four in whom I had the greatest confidence."³³ As Nat Turner developed his plan, Hark was a central character, included in every decision and even bringing the first recruit outside Turner's circle of confidence. As far as Hark's opinion of Nat Turner, Hark at least gave the eccentric prophet the benefit of the doubt. When Nat Turner called the surreptitious meeting, Hark agreed to attend.

It is harder to find clues about how Henry, Nelson, and Sam came to accept Turner's invitation to meet. Some of them may have become disciples of the prophet sometime after Turner's baptism. Or, like Hark, they may have come into contact with the reclusive prophet through their daily routine as slaves. Henry, Nelson, and Sam may have liked Nat Turner well enough to ignore his public reputation and accept his invitation to attend a secret meeting. Or, they may have gone to the meeting at the prompting of Hark, not Nat Turner.

Once the five men gathered, Nat Turner told Hark, Henry, Nelson, and Sam about the most recent revelation from God. After Nat Turner arrived, he may have taken each one out, one at a time. In the course of the discussions, Nat probably explained his entire messianic calling. At the end, he told them that the eclipse was a sign from God that he should lead a slave revolt.³⁴ Would they join? Almost certainly, each man understood that he could take advantage of the situation and inform the whites about the talk of revolt. For his act of loyalty to the whites and betrayal to the blacks, he would have at least earned the gratitude of his master, who had at his

³³ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁴ The details of this meeting are drawn from a September 17, 1831 report from Southampton County that was reported in Richmond's *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831. The correspondent had looked into the revolt and hoped to undermine the "many rumors afloat." According to his report, the day before the revolt, at the first meeting of conspirators, Nat Turner met each of the individuals alone, a sensible precaution for men discussing revolt. Knowing that Nat Turner's own account described at least two separate meetings, the Whig's correspondent may have conflated the first meeting in February 1831 and the August 1831 feast. Many of the details of the first meeting suggest how the February meeting may have been handled. See Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 91.

disposal a plethora of possible rewards. As much as their masters had to offer them, Henry, Hark, Sam and Nelson refused to reveal the plot. Even if they were not sure if Nat Turner were the new messiah, none of them wanted to be a new Judas. For months after Nat Turner told them about his intention to begin an insurrection, they kept the revolt completely hidden from whites.

Although the men hated slavery and would never divulge Turner's secret, some of the group may have been hesitant to follow the reclusive prophet. Nat Turner assured them of success, but his confidence was founded on his belief in God's Providence: God protects his faithful servants. In the Bible, when the Lord's servants were rewarded with crowns of thorns, the true and faithful servant had to persevere and do as God commanded. Hark, Henry, Sam and Nelson lacked Turner's confidence in his visions, but they may have hoped that Nat Turner had been chosen by the Lord to lead the fight for an end to slavery.

Turner's faith-filled reassurances were not sufficient to answer all of their questions. On its face, his proposal was fantastic: they had no great underground network ready to support a vast uprising. To the contrary, few slaves knew about it because Nat Turner was aware that when slaves planned large rebellions the word "always leaked out."³⁵ Furthermore, they had no weapons. Turner was a preacher who struggled to win disciples, even among the slaves. How could he possibly rally an army strong enough to stand up to Southampton's whites, let alone the state's militia or the nation's regular army? If anyone of the men had not seen the risks associated with joining the revolt, the discussion made clear the odds that they faced. Each man understood that Nat Turner was asking him to join a suicidal mission. Nevertheless, perhaps even before the end of the meeting, everyone had agreed to join the revolt.

³⁵ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 93. It is unclear when the rebels realized the danger of telling too many people about the revolt. I suppose that it was early. Once the word of the revolt had spread, there would have been no way to limit the number of people who knew about the plot.

Hark and Sam survived the revolt and faced trial for their actions. At their trials, the prosecution proved that the men participated in the revolt, which was an easy task, given the unsympathetic court and the men's deep involvement in the revolt. But no one recorded why these men decided to follow Nat Turner to their deaths. Some whites assumed that Turner's followers were simply deluded pawns who "acted under the influence of their leader."³⁶ More likely, Henry, Hark, Sam and Nelson decided to join because of the attractiveness of Nat Turner's proposal, not his personality. If the revolt succeeded, they would live as free men. If it failed, they would die as men fighting for their freedom. Either outcome was acceptable to these men who otherwise faced life and death in slavery.

Beginning in February and through the spring, the five men discussed possible plans of revolt. God had shown Nat Turner "white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle" but had not revealed exactly how this battle was supposed to commence. The five struggled to devise their own plan. According to Nat Turner's account, "Many were the plans formed and rejected by us." Despite the conspirators' failure to settle upon a plan for their revolt, they looked forward eagerly to when the revolt would begin. At least two bragged about how bold they would be when the opportunity came to kill their white oppressors.³⁷ No record describes how these secret meetings were arranged. The five men might have had several meetings, or they might have met in smaller groups as their situations allowed. Hark and Nat Turner could have eluded supervision and discussed their plans since they worked for Joseph Travis, a lenient master according to the *Confessions*. Whenever they met, the conspirators struggled to devise a reasonable plan that might succeed despite impossible odds.

³⁶ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, quoted in Tragle, 54. For other examples of contemporary whites who assumed that the revolt was carried out by fanatical disciples of Turner, see the sentencing described by Gray, 21; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, quoted in Tragle, 92.

³⁷ Gray, 11. On the boasting, see Richmond *Constitutional Whig* 3 September 1831, quoted in Tragle, 67.

Later reports suggested at least one option that the rebels had carefully considered. When a new recruit at the start of the revolt objected to the small number of plotters, the rebels explained that the reason the plot was not bigger “was, that the negroes had frequently attempted, similar things, and confided their purpose to several, and that it always leaked out.” It is unclear what “similar things” the rebels had heard about. They may have had in mind the failures of Gabriel’s 1800 plot in Richmond or Denmark Vesey’s 1822 plot in Charleston. According to the standard history of these revolts, the rebels had brought several dozen—perhaps hundreds—of slaves into their circle of confidence. In each case, slaves who tipped off the whites undermined the plots. Or the Southampton rebels may have remembered an earlier plot in Southampton County. In February 1802, when Nat Turner would have been only sixteen months old, Southampton whites were alarmed to discover a letter that laid out an elaborate conspiracy based on the example of Haiti. The whites never discovered the provenance of the letter, but any plot that had been under consideration in the black community had been spoiled.³⁸ Whichever slave revolt the conspirators had in mind—and it is unclear how much they would have known about

³⁸ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 93. According to this account, Nat Turner responded to the unnamed rebel. I argue below that other sources suggest that the newspaper had the wrong people named; in fact Hark explained to his brother-in-law Jack the reasons why the plot was not bigger. Either way, a large-scale plot had been a plan considered and rejected by the rebels. On the excitement in Southampton in 1802, see Parramore, *Southampton County Virginia*, 67. For background on Gabriel, see Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords : Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Recently, Michael P. Johnson has revitalized Richard Wade’s contention that Denmark Vesey’s conspiracy was conjured by whites. If Turner knew about the plot, he would have had no reason to doubt the official history, that it was a real plot betrayed by slaves loyal to their masters. See Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and his Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. (Oct. 2001): 915-76 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/58.4/johnson.html>> (12 May 2002), the responses in the forum, “The Making of a Slave Conspiracy,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd ser. (Jan. 2002): 135-202 <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/wm/59.1/>> (12 May 2002) and Richard C. Wade, “The Vesey Plot: A Reconsideration,” *Journal of Southern History* 30 (1964): 143-61. For the traditional view of Vesey’s conspiracy, see John Oliver Killens, ed. *The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970); Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison: Madison House, 1999); the introduction to Edward A. Pearson, *Designs against Charleston: The Trial Record of the Denmark Vesey Slave Conspiracy of 1822* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

any of these revolts—they apparently learned enough from history to decided not to launch a general conspiracy.

Despite the men’s failure to settle upon a plan for the revolt, the rebels agreed to begin the revolt on the Fourth of July. This suggestion probably did not come from Nat Turner. Instead, one of the others may have proposed the date, placing Turner’s religious war within a secular framework. The prophet may have seen this revolt as part of the second coming, but the other rebels recognized how their struggle coincided with the principles laid out by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. Two decades later, Frederick Douglass lambasted the failure of Americans to extend to slaves the principles celebrated on the Fourth of July. He called Independence Day “a sham” and reminded his audience that, “The blessings in which you this day rejoice are not enjoyed in common.” Although the rebels were denied the podium available to Douglass, by selecting the Fourth of July to begin their revolt, they also made clear that the revolt was not simply an event within Nat Turner’s eschatology. By picking Independence Day, the rebels expressed their hope to fulfill America’s promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.³⁹

With the arrival of southside Virginia’s sultry summer days, the five collaborators still lacked a plan of action. When they let their imaginations roam, they developed many plans, but consideration showed them that each plan was doomed. Nat Turner was especially bothered by the impasse. God had told him to begin a revolt, but he and the others could not devise a plan on which they wanted to stake their lives. As the Fourth of July approached, Nat’s unease grew.

³⁹ Fredrick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855; New York: Dover, 1969), 441-45. The contrast in Turner’s actions on the Fourth of July and when the revolt actually began in August also suggests that Turner did not propose the date. When the Fourth of July arrived, Nat Turner described himself as sick with worry. After another astronomical sign in August, Turner was intrepid. One way of explaining Turner’s lack of fear is to suggest that he had less confidence in the proposals of the other rebels than he did in his own ability to discern God’s wishes. For more, see the discussion below. Eric J. Sundquist interprets the

According to his *Confessions*, the rebels' inability to settle on a plan "affected my mind to such a degree, that I feel sick."⁴⁰ Recounting the story months later, Turner recognized that his worries led to the illness that kept him from participating in an Independence Day revolt. Without a plan and lacking a fit leader, the other rebels allowed the Fourth of July to pass quietly.

For the next five weeks, the five conspirators continued to try to devise a plan that all would accept. Every time one of the rebels proposed a new plan, the others found reason to reject it. Despite his confidence in the men, Nat Turner's vision was essentially prophetic. He wanted another sign from God to confirm what the Holy Spirit had already shown him. Exactly forty days after the Fourth of July, the sign appeared. According to Benjamin Hallowell—an Alexandria-based, Quaker schoolmaster who instructed Robert E. Lee—on 13 August 1831 the midday sun appeared "silvery" as if it were "shinning through a vanishing fog." Its light also cast a peculiar hue, giving people "an unusually ghastly appearance." By the late afternoon, the sun's appearance had changed: "it assumed a greenish blue appearance." The sun also shone less brightly, and a sunspot appeared, visible to the naked eye. This phenomenon was observed from New York to Georgia, where the Georgia courier reported that the sun appeared "shorn of its beams." It could be looked at directly "and shed a grayish-blue light on the earth." Near Richmond, Emma Mordecai described the late afternoon appearance more dramatically. At "about 4 o'clock on looking up at the sun to our amazement, it was as blue as any cloud you ever saw."⁴¹

symbolism of the original date in a similar way, although he presumes that Independence Day was selected by Turner. See Sundquist, 65-66.

⁴⁰ Gray, 11.

⁴¹ Benjamin Hallowell, "The Solar Phenomena," *Niles Weekly Register* 41 (1 October 1831): 96. This letter was dated 20 August 1831, two days before the revolt began. For other descriptions of the solar phenomenon, see the Philadelphia Baptist *Christian Index*, 10 September 1831, which published reports from Georgia Richmond, Washington, D.C. and also noted that "The same aspect of the sun was exhibited in this city [Philadelphia], New York, and other places north." Emma Mordecai to Ellen Mordecai, 14 August 1831, Mordecai Family Collection, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, emphasis in original. On Hallowell and

The model scientist, Hallowell tried to explain the sun's appearance as a perfectly natural phenomena. He explained how the orbits of the moon and sun resulted in low pressure in the atmosphere, which led to increased evaporation and more moisture in the air. At the end of the letter describing his theory, Hallowell wrote, "If the above remarks are [in] any way satisfactory to you," he would be happy. The closing may have been formal false modesty, or he may have sensed the improbability of his explanation. He never explained how the orbits of the sun and moon caused extra humidity but not rain clouds. Perhaps there was a natural explanation for the "the very unusual if not unexampled appearance of the sun" but Nat Turner, who witnessed the same phenomena, recognized what it meant immediately. The odd appearance of the sun was a sign from God. According to a newspaper account, Turner interpreted the black sunspot, which appeared over the silvery sun, as God's way of letting him know that the revolt would succeed.⁴² The time had come to strike.

By August, the four other original rebels were fully familiar with how Nat Turner interpreted exceptional phenomena. An eerie sun shining silvery and then green-blue coupled with a sunspot visible to the naked eye were more remarkable than Turner's other celestial signs, the eclipse or the constellations. Noticing the "extraordinary appearances connected with sun," they could not have been surprised that Nat Turner told them that he was determined "not to wait longer." According to Turner's testimony, on Saturday, 20 August, Henry met Hark and Nat Turner to discuss the revolt. This meeting was different from their earlier sessions. Instead of spending all their time proposing and rejecting potential plans, the three principals planned a banquet for the conspirators. They agreed to meet the next day, Sunday, 21 August at Cabin Pond, on Giles Reese's plantation, only a few hundred yards from the plantation where Hark and

Lee, see Emory M. Thomas, *Robert E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1995), 43-44. No evidence suggests that anyone at the time of the revolt noticed that the eclipse was forty days after the Fourth of July.

Nat Turner lived. Hark agreed to steal a pig, and Henry told the other two that he could supply the brandy.⁴³ Fueled by pork and steeled by alcohol, the conspirators would launch the most famous slave revolt in the history of the United States. The meeting adjourned, and the three men left to prepare themselves for their fateful day.

After they separated, the three got word of Sunday's feast to Nelson on Peter Edwards' plantation, and Sam on Nathaniel Francis' plantation. They also contacted two new recruits, who had been told about the plans unbeknownst to the revolt's instigator. One of the new recruits, Will, was also on Nathaniel Francis' plantation. Whoever got word to Sam may have also told Will about the revolt. Given the remarkable secrecy that the conspirators sustained for six months, the person who informed Will probably was exceptionally close to Will, trusting him implicitly. Perhaps Sam who lived and worked with Will had let him know about the slaves' plans for a revolt. Recognizing that Will could be trusted to keep their plans secret, Sam may have told Will about the revolt any time between February and August, understanding that when the war began Will would want to be involved.

According to the *Confessions*, Hark had recruited his wife's brother Jack. Jack's owner, Joseph William Reese, lived in the immediate neighborhood with his mother, Piety Reese. His slave Jack, however, did not live in the neighborhood. He lived at Jordan Barnes'. Jordan Barnes owned eight adult slaves, but still needed more workers. He hired a family of four free blacks and leased Jack from Reese. Barnes lived far enough from the Reese's that when Jack sought permission to return to his home, he was granted permission for an extended visit.⁴⁴

⁴² Hallowell, 96; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 93.

⁴³ Gray, 11.

⁴⁴ Gray, 12; Jack's Trial, Southampton County Court, Minute Book, 1830-1835, quoted in Tragle, 228, 195-96, 197-98; Johnson, 85; Parramore, 79. For Jordan Barnes' holdings, see Southampton County Tax List, 1831 and 1830 Census.

Exactly why Jack returned to the starting point of the revolt on the weekend the revolt began remains a mystery. According to Jordan Barnes, Jack asked to return home to see his master. Another possibility was that Hark got word to him that the revolt was imminent, or, seeing the sunspot, Jack suspected that the revolt was likely to begin soon. Since Nat Turner had no idea that Jack had been recruited to join the revolt and since Jack later tried to beg his way out of the revolt, the timing of his visit was probably a coincidence. Jack's brother-in-law Hark took advantage of Jack's unexpected presence to recruit another slave to the revolt that was about to begin. According to Jack's own confession, Hark found Jack at Piety Reese's house on Sunday morning and brought him to Cabin Pond, "where several other negroes were assembled and a dinner party prepared."⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Jack's Trial, Southampton Trials, 196.

CHAPTER 3

“THE FIRST BLOOD”

On the morning of Sunday, 21 August, Henry, Hark, Nelson, Sam, Will and Jack met as planned at Cabin Pond. As they prepared the pork dinner and drank Henry’s brandy, the four charter members of the revolt began explaining to the new recruits their plans to “rise and kill all the white people.” Jack later told people investigating the revolt that he immediately balked. According to a newspaper account, Jack “objected to the proposition, and denied the possibility of effecting it.” Hark responded that “as they went on and killed the whites the blacks would join them.”¹ Jack never reconciled himself to this sketchy plan, but somehow Hark made sure that Jack remained with the rebels.

At about three o’clock in the afternoon, Nat Turner joined the small band. As he approached the group, he noticed both of the new recruits. He recognized Jack. Immediately, he surmised how Jack had gotten there. Hark had brought him. Based upon his experiences as a scorned prophet, Nat Turner understood that many in the black community would not spontaneously rise to rebel upon hearing his interpretation of the February eclipse or the recent odd appearance of the sun. The revolt would grow by force and suasion. It would grow by attracting the most desperate slaves. Most of all, it would grow as those who had already joined the revolt persuaded their friends and family to join the army. Hark had brought his wife’s

¹ Jack’s Trial, Southampton County Court Minutes, in Tragle, 196; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 93. I identify Jack as the one who “objected to the proposition” based upon his confession as reported at his trial. Jack’s trial record and the newspaper account disagree on one particular: according to the newspaper, Nat Turner responded that “their numbers would increase as they went along,” in Tragle, 93. Turner may have repeated almost exactly what Hark had said earlier, although I believe that the newspaper correspondent mistook Nat Turner for Hark. This makes sense given that Turner’s *Confessions* emphasized that he was not at the feast until much later and implied that Hark would have been the one to answer Jack’s questions. See Gray, 11-12.

brother into the revolt. Nat Turner knew both men and understood the influence that Hark had upon Jack. Even though Jack was never fully convinced of the wisdom of the revolt, Nat Turner accepted him without question as “only a tool in the hands of Hark.”²

In contrast, Turner questioned Will. Nat Turner asked Will pointedly “how he came to be there?” Will did not respond by explaining how Sam or one of the others had told him about the revolt. Instead, he told Turner the reasons he wanted to join the revolt. This answer, preserved in Nat Turner’s *Confessions*, is a remarkable piece of evidence. As Nat Turner remembered it, Will responded: “his life was worth no more than others, and his liberty as dear to him.”³ In this response, Will appeared different from the generalizations made by contemporary whites about Turner’s followers. One newspaper recorded the way that whites understood the rebels: the followers were a “few ignorant wretches” whose minds Nat Turner “deceive[d], delude[d] and overawe[d].” A letter written about the revolt to North Carolina’s governor explained how the rebels had been deluded: “Religion has been brought to their aid.” These rebels had even come to believe that their martyrdom would be rewarded with eternal salvation. “Many have said so when about to be put to death.” Will, too, was ready to die, but his reasons were different. Will wanted to fight for his freedom, and he indicated that he was ready to “lose his life” if the revolt failed. As revealing as what he said is what he did not say. He gave no hint that he was impressed by Turner’s religion. Will expressed no confidence in Nat Turner as a prophet, and provided no reason to think that he had acquired “an ascendancy over the mind” of Will. In fact, if one considers the hostility suggested by Turner’s pointed questions directed only to Will, Will seems to have joined the revolt in spite—not because—of

² Gray, 12. On the relationship between Hark and Jack, see Jack’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 196. For more on the recruiting patterns, see discussion of recruiting during the revolt and especially at James Parker’s farm in chapter 6.

³ Gray, 12.

Nat Turner. Whatever hostilities there may have been between Nat Turner and Will disappeared once Will explained that he understood the consequences of joining the revolt. According to Turner, Will's answers were "enough to put him in full confidence."⁴ By late afternoon, seven slaves had agreed to launch a war on slavery.

The odds against the crew at Cabin Pond were as overwhelming as they had been in February. Their greatest achievement over six months had been to keep the plot a secret from whites. One white, Caswell Worrell, believed that he had heard a veiled allusion to the race war days before the revolt began, when a slave under his supervision warned him to "look out and take care of themselves—that something would happen before long." At the time, however, he did not recognize the importance of the threat. Like the rest of the white community, he was caught completely unaware when the revolt began.⁵

The rebels had little else to show for the months of preparation. For weapons, they had only the tools they used everyday. When Nat Turner was captured, the whites asked him specifically about the weapons that the slaves had at the start of the revolt. He responded that "their only arms were hatchets and axes." While these weapons were sufficient to kill the sleeping families that the rebels found the first night, they understood that they would need more firepower if the revolt were to succeed. Aware that they lacked guns and horses, Nat Turner described his initial force as neither "armed" nor "equipped."⁶

Even more desperately than they needed arms, the rebels needed men. After the revolt, whites found among the papers of Turner's wife "a piece of paper, of a late date, which, all agree, is a list of his men." Turner clearly had some potential rebels in mind, but even if all

⁴ Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 134; Solon Borland to Montford Stokes, 31 August 1831, Governor's Papers, NCDAH; Richmond *Enquirer* 27 September 1831, in Tragle, 100; Gray, 12.

⁵ Nelson's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 193.

⁶ Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 137; Gray, 12.

those men joined once the revolt had begun, the total number of rebels would be something “short of twenty.”⁷ As it was, the number of rebels had increased in number from five to seven, but one of the two recruits, Jack, was hesitant, not certain that this revolt was how he wanted to end his life.

If this revolt was to be anything more than a suicidal mission, they needed to make a large number of recruits quickly. Finally, despite the months of talk, they still lacked a plan. According to Turner’s *Confessions*, only once Nat Turner arrived at the feast did they agree upon their first target: the farm where Hark and Nat Turner lived. Having decided to attack the whites on Joseph Travis’ farm, the rebels then made one more decision: they decided to wait until after it was dark to start the revolt.⁸

The feast at Cabin Pond lasted until about nine or ten o’clock. The small band then made its way to the Travis farm. The first person they encountered at Travis’ was Austin, another one of the eight slaves who lived on the farm. Since Austin lived and worked on a small farm with two of the revolt’s leaders, they must have known him well. Yet Nat Turner had neither invited Austin to join the conspirators in February, nor had he joined the other rebels earlier in the day at Cabin Pond. Austin’s distance from the rebels during the plotting stages supports later impressions that the plot was intentionally kept small during the planning stages. The record leaves no evidence that Austin felt any slight at the rebels’ decision not to include him earlier. Instead, he and six other rebels headed over to Travis’ cider press to continue the drinking that had begun at Cabin Pond.⁹

Jack, the most reluctant rebel, soon slipped away from the others. In the quiet of the night, sitting with his head held in his hands between knees, he tried to decide what to do. He

⁷ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 92; Gray, 12.

⁸ Gray, 12.

could have easily awakened the Travis family and warned them about the plot then underway; but he did not. He could have escaped, but he was afraid of Hark who had insisted that he join. When Moses, a young slave on the farm, approached the unhappy man, Jack explained to him that he was “sick and wanted to go home.” He was not sure that he was ready to die in this revolt, and he had little confidence that the small band of drunk, unarmed slaves and their reclusive prophet would succeed in liberating Southampton’s slaves. As when Nat Turner’s worries “affected my mind to such a degree, that I feel sick,” Jack worries soon made him feel physically ill. By the middle of the night, several hours after he complained about feeling poorly to Moses, Moses saw Jack again “in the yard sick.”¹⁰ While the others drank and Jack worried, Nat Turner remained by himself, alone, in a position he would often find himself during a revolt that he had begun and that would eventually best be known by his name.

Between one and two o’clock, Hark, Henry, Nelson, Sam, Will, and Austin returned from the cider press. According to one newspaper account, the drinking had slowed. “[S]everal” of the rebels who had “gotten beastly drunk, at their dinner on Sunday” had begun to “recover from their debauch.” When the band of rebels returned from the press, the young slave Moses, who gone to sleep, awoke and followed the rebels. Nat Turner also rejoined the insurgents in Travis’ detached kitchen.¹¹ After the rebels had reunited, they discussed how to proceed. They had to get into the Travis’ house, but the Travises barred their door at night. Hark volunteered to batter the door. Although crashing through a door might be a dramatic way to begin the revolt, the others rejected this offer, realizing that it would wake the family. More troublesome for their plans, it might wake others on the nearest farms, undermining the rebels’ surprise.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ Jack’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 196. For a discussion of similar calculations made by reluctant rebels in Brazil, see João José Reis, *Slave Revolt in Brazil: The Muslim Uprising of 1835 in Bahia*, trans. Arthur Brakel (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 66.

The rebels decided to sneak in a window and open the door from the inside. Travis' house had a second floor, and someone realized that they could climb through an open upstairs window and then unbar the door. They quickly agreed to the new plan. Hark placed a ladder under the window. Nat Turner scaled the ladder, climbed through a window, descended the stairs, and then opened the front door. According to the *Confessions*, before he exited the house, Nat Turner quietly stole "four guns that would shoot, and several old muskets, with a pound or two of powder." Another account described the events differently: Hark "went into the house and brought out three guns."¹² Having gathered their first firearms, the revolt was ready to begin.

Carrying the first booty of the revolt, Nat Turner and Hark returned to the small band of rebels, who had been followed by the boy Moses. Although they finally had guns, they choose to rely on their axes and hatchets, at least as long as the revolt had not been discovered. At this point, Nat Turner challenged "two others to make good their valiant boasting ... of what they would do." The two refused. Months of talk of revenge, full of bravado, was easier than striking the first blow. In response to Turner's request, one of the men "observed that Nat must spill the first blood."¹³ The revolt was Turner's idea, and the others accepted him as a leader. But they did not want to follow a man who was not as fully invested in the revolt as they were. If Nat Turner struck the first blow, he could not turn back. Having attacked a white person, he would

¹¹ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 95. On Moses' actions, see Jack's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 196.

¹² Gray, 12; Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 137. It is possible that the rebels got seven guns, but it seems more likely that the two versions conflated Hark and Nat. Without any other evidence to distinguish the two versions, I find the newspaper version slightly more believable, since—when reading two sources each describing Turner's testimony—an attribution of an action to someone other than Nat Turner is more compelling.

¹³ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 67; Gray, 12. Although it is unclear from the records which of the rebels he challenged to strike the first blow, since the boasts had been "often repeated," it must have been two of the original four.

see the revolt through to its successful end, or he would die. Nat Turner accepted the assignment and took a hatchet.

The rebels agreed that Nat Turner should “spill the first blood,” but it was unclear who would go with him. At this point Will volunteered. Will’s actions, at the Travis’ house and elsewhere, displayed an eagerness to fight in the revolt, an enthusiasm that eventually led to his being called “the executioner.” Will took a broadax and followed Nat Turner up the stairs to the Travis’ bedroom.¹⁴ The two men silently entered the Travis’ bedroom. Sensibly, Nat Turner approached the man he called “my master,” wanting to take advantage of the surprise to kill the person who could put up the fiercest resistance. He raised the hatchet and brought it down on the head of the sleeping Joseph Travis. Instantly, Travis awoke.

Somehow, Turner’s blow had failed to kill Travis. Nat Turner later blamed the darkness.¹⁵ Other factors may have contributed to Turner’s inability to deliver a deathblow. The hatchet was not an ideal weapon for killing a full-grown man. Light, and lacking the long shaft of an ax, his hatchet could not generate the force of a larger weapon. Turner’s own strength may have also hindered his ability to kill his master.¹⁶ Finally, Nat Turner might have had second thoughts that made him hesitate as he struck his master. Perhaps one of the reasons that he had challenged two others to strike the first blows that night was that he was queasy at the idea of killing someone. A month earlier Nat Turner had grown physically ill at the thought of beginning the revolt. These failures did not change the most important things about the moment: the revolt had begun. Nat Turner had struck the first blow.

¹⁴ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 95; Gray, 12, 13.

¹⁵ Gray, 12.

¹⁶ Governor John Floyd, “Proclamation of Reward for the Capture of Nat Turner,” 17 September 1831, Executive Papers, LV, in Tragle, 423, and discussed above, chapter 2.

Those factors that prevented Nat Turner from killing Joseph Travis did not apply to Will. After Nat Turner delivered his glancing blow, Travis leapt from the bed, startled and awake. He called to his wife, but Will attacked him in an instant. With a single lopping swing of his axe, Will killed Joseph Travis. Will then turned to Sally Francis Moore Travis. According to Turner's account, Sally Travis slept through her husband's cry and his execution, but since it was dark in the bedroom, Nat Turner probably would not have seen his mistress well enough to know for sure if she were awake or asleep. Nat Turner heard no words or screams from his mistress. Instead, "as she lay in bed" Will slew her with his ax.¹⁷

After killing the Travises, Will turned to two others still asleep in the house: Turner's owner, the nine-year-old Putnam Moore, and Joel Westbrook, who was hired to work at the farm. Contemporary reports listing the victims of the revolt often describe Joel Westbrook as a child, but according to the tax records from 1831, Westbrook was included on the militia rolls, which listed white men who were at least sixteen-years old. Will found Moore and Westbrook asleep in the same bed. Before either had a chance to try to make an escape, Will struck them, killing the two. It took only a "moment" before the four whites were dead. A newspaper account confirmed Turner's account that there was little evidence of resistance. According to the impression of the whites who found the carnage at Travis' house, "several [of the dead] never changed their positions," and added that "one blow seems to have sufficed for the two little boys, who were sleeping so close, that the same stroke nearly severed each neck."¹⁸

It is unclear what the rebels did during the first few minutes after Will committed the first murders. None of the slaves would have had to go upstairs to realize what had happened. Hearing Will's axe crushing bone and then seeing Nat Turner and Will covered with blood

¹⁷ Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 137; Gray 12.

would have been enough for any of them, even the young Moses, to imagine what had happened. Jack—who was already so sick with worry that he ended up vomiting in the yard—would have preferred not to witness the carnage. One might guess that some others of the six slaves who were waiting downstairs went up to see the corpses. If they did, they left the bodies undisturbed for the whites who later discovered the mayhem.

After the rebels left the Travis' household, someone realized that the youngest Travis, a baby, had survived the slaughter. What would they do? According to the *Confessions*, the rebels at Cabin Pond had agreed that “until we had armed and equipped ourselves, and gathered sufficient force, neither age nor sex was to be spared.” The results of this decision would later horrify whites, when they saw the lists and heard the stories of women and children killed. But, at least before the revolt had been detected, a woman or child who whites thought of as defenseless could easily spread word of the slave army. If the rebels wanted the revolt to succeed, they would have to kill some women and children. On the other hand, the caveat recalled by Nat Turner—that the slaves planned to stop indiscriminate killing once they had recruited and armed a significant force—implied that at least some of the conspirators had qualms about killing women and children when their deaths would not help the revolt. Those qualms were not shared by all of the conspirators: Henry and Will returned to the Travis' home to slay the baby that the rebels had “forgotten.” When the whites arrived at the Travis' house, they found the result of Henry and Will's work: “a little infant with its head cut off” unceremoniously dumped in the fireplace.¹⁹

¹⁸ Southampton County Tax List, 1831; Drewry, 37; Gray, 12; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 95-96.

¹⁹ Gray, 12; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 96. The correspondent whose letter described Turner's confession also noted that “He said that indiscriminate massacre was not their intention... Women and children would afterwards have been spared, and the men too who ceased to resist.” See Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 137.

After the murders at the Travis' home, the rebels made their way to the Travis' barn. According to Turner's account, "I formed them in a line as soldiers," and marched them through "all the manœuvres I was master of."²⁰ He never explained where he learned maneuvers. Nat Turner was a literate slave and may have surreptitiously read books or articles on military affairs. Much more likely, he had witnessed muster day exercises in southside Virginia and had seen how the white officers commanded the militiamen. Nat Turner also never explained why he chose to spend the time drilling his followers. Already the rebels had wasted hours while some of them drank and then sobered up. Every minute that they worked on marching cost them a minute of darkness. Dawn was nearing, and Nat Turner was marching the rebels from one side of the barn to the other. He may have hoped that this practice would make the collection of nine slaves into a more effective fighting force, but each one of the rebels understood that if the army was not much bigger than this small force, the revolt would be suppressed quickly.

Perhaps the significance of this episode can best be understood as an attempt by Nat Turner and the rebels to change the dynamic of how the rebels interacted. Throughout the planning stages, the rebels sought consensus. According to Nat Turner's account, in the summer, "it was intended by us to have begun the work of death on the 4th July last." Describing how they selected to attack the Travises, Turner recalled, "it was quickly agreed we should commence at home (Mr. J. Travis') on that night." After the first blood had been spilled, the dynamic changed. At the barn, Nat Turner gave the orders, and the rebels obeyed. "I formed them in a line," and later he "marched them off."²¹ The conspirators were becoming an army; Nat Turner was its commander.

²⁰ Gray, 12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 11, 12.

An article written in early September noted, “Their banner was a red-cross in a white field. Some of the wretches wore red caps, and others had their hats ornamented with red bands of various materials.” William Sidney Drewry, whose 1900 *Southampton Insurrection*, recorded much of the region’s oral tradition about the revolt, suggested that the rebels added these distinctive touches while they were at the barn. The unsympathetic Drewry mocked the rebels, who had “decorated themselves in the most ludicrous and fantastic style, with feathers in their hats and long red sashes around their waists and over their shoulders.” To Drewry, the outfits seemed outlandish, but the rebels had a more practical goal. Ripping the red lining out of gigs for sashes and putting feathers in their hats, the rebels were consciously creating their own uniforms, as was appropriate for the members of a new army.²² The red caps and sashes would allow the rebels to immediately distinguish those blacks who had been part of the revolt since its inception.

The change in dynamic suggested by the marching in the barn and the fashioning of uniforms was at some point formalized by the assignment of rank. In the trials after the revolt, several blacks used a title when referring to Nat Turner. They called him either “General Nat” or “Captain Nat.” The titles were interchangeable. In fact, one witness used both titles describing the same episode in two different trials. While the exact titles were not important to the rebels,

²² This letter appeared in Boston’s *Christian Register*, 1 October 1831, quoted from the New York *Courier*, which apparently quoted it from the Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 8 September 1831, quoted in Parramore, 245, footnote 4; Drewry, 37. By the time this letter was published in Boston, the date it was written in “Petersburgh” was given as 10 September 1831, presumably a mistake made in one of its iterations. Brown proposes that the color red was chosen to evoke a sacrificial blood offering. Given the bloody work then begun, this is plausible. Michael A. Gomez’s work suggests another possibility: in Congolese symbolism, the color red was associated with both heroism and death. One should also consider the possibility that red was a choice of convenience, not ideology. It is also possible that the red material from the gigs was simply the most readily available material. See Brown, 107; and Michael A Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 204-207.

the idea of a title was. Titles conveyed prestige and authority, and the man who led the revolt adopted the use of a military title.²³

The other rebel leaders also used titles and were assigned different military roles. A letter written on Friday, five days after the revolt began, reported that Nelson was “called by the blacks, ‘Gen. Nelson.’” Robert E. Lee at Fort Monroe, across the James River from Norfolk, heard similar stories and told his mother-in-law about “Maj. Nelson.” At Hark’s trial, Levi Waller testified that he heard the insurgents call Hark “Captain Moore,” although no one ever explained why Hark used an alias. A newspaper story in early September noted that “Gen. Porter was taken.” (This may have been Henry.) No contemporary evidence attributed a title to Henry, but Henry was assigned the important position as paymaster. At some point, the rebels also agreed on a pay scale that paid the leaders more. According to a newspaper report, the rebels had fixed the “pay of the General, say \$10 a day, [\$]5 to the paymaster, ... and \$1 to each private per day.”²⁴

²³ For references to Nat Turner as General Nat, see the testimony of Henry and free black woman Eliza Cratherton at Hardy’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 202-03. For references to Captain Nat, see Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831; Jarrell Judkins during Davy’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 195; and Henry at Isham’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 203-04. (Henry was the one who used Captain and General interchangeably.) Newspaper reports also often gave Nat Turner a military title. An unusual one reported that, “The leader of the band Nat. or Gen. Cargill as he styled himself, has not yet been taken.” Richmond *Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 61. Interestingly, there is no example of contemporary Southampton blacks bestowing on Nat Turner any religious titles such as “Prophet,” “Reverend,” “Minister,” or even “Brother” Nat. Whites correspondents to newspapers often followed the blacks and described Nat Turner as General or Captain, although they also paid more attention to his religious background.

²⁴ For references to General Nelson, see Norfolk *American Beacon*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 50; Robert E. and Mary Lee to Mary Fitzhugh Custis, 28 August 1831, Lee Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society. Not surprisingly, Lee, who was far from the scene of the action, made several mistakes, among them conflating Nelson and Nat Turner, and misidentifying Nelson’s owner as Catherine Whitehead. For General Porter, see Richmond *Enquirer*, 2 September 1831. For Levi Waller’s testimony on Hark as Captain Moore, see Hark’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 192. An early letter, from Southampton on Thursday 25 August, reported, “A negro, called captain Moore, and who it is added is a preacher, is the reputed leader.” This correspondent mistakenly conflated Nat, the leader and preacher, and Hark, a leader called “Captain Moore,” an easy mistake in the confusion immediately after the revolt. A postscript added two days later corrected the mistake, referring to “their leader Nat, a preacher and a prophet.” See Norfolk *American Beacon*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 52-53. On the paymaster and the pay scale, see Norfolk *American Beacon*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 52; Richmond *Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 62. For an example of the use of military titles by whites in Virginia, see K. R. Constantine Gutzman, “Old Dominion, New Republic: Making Virginia Republican,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1999), 18.

One other piece of evidence supports the idea that Nat Turner was trying to position himself as an officer: by dawn, Nat Turner had selected his weapon, a sword. This was not a weapon that Nat Turner chose lightly, and he held onto the same sword for more than two months. In fact, it was the only weapon he kept with him while he tried to elude capture. Nevertheless, he must have retained it for a reason other than its potency. It failed him the two times he tried to use it as a weapon, and Turner himself acknowledged its blade was “dull.” Nor had Nat Turner chosen his sword because he lacked options. As the acknowledged leader of the revolt, he could have demanded the best weapon that the rebels found over the entire course of the revolt. Nat Turner had his choice of weapons, and he chose a dull sword. Despite its obvious drawbacks as a weapon, the sword was more important to Nat Turner for what it meant than what it could do. The sword suggested authority, and Nat Turner cherished it as a symbol of his leadership.²⁵ Ordering the other rebels about on marching drills also reinforced Turner’s newfound authority. As a general, Nat Turner enjoyed a position of prestige and leadership among blacks, a marked change from his earlier position as a lonely prophet.

As important as the marching was to Nat Turner—it was the only activity that he mentioned in his account of the revolt after the Travis executions—the rebels also took time after the murders to distribute the four guns and several muskets among themselves. They “deliberately cleaned and loaded them” in anticipation of the battles ahead. Likewise, once in the barn, they divided and saddled the horses. It is unclear if Nat Turner took one of these horses. Later in the revolt, he was spotted on a horse belonging to “Dr. Musgrave,” a neighbor

²⁵ Gray, 13. Thomas C. Parramore makes a similar point about the symbolism of the sword. See “Covenant in Jerusalem,” in Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 61

whose house was never attacked.²⁶ The rebels understood the advantages of having the horses—both for speed and intimidation—so they brought them along.

Finally, the rebels had to decide how to handle two of their number. The young slave Moses had witnessed most of what happened at the Travis' home. What would they do with him? When he was examined, Moses recalled “that he had been compelled to go with them.” This may have been true, or he may have told this to the court hoping to escape the gallows. The latter seems likely, since Moses did not escape from the rebels during the revolt. On the other hand, no record suggested that he was involved in the fighting. Given his youth, it is plausible that, as a newspaper reported, he was brought “along to hold their horses.”²⁷ By holding the horses, he could see what was happening and aid the revolt without killing anyone.

Jack posed a more vexing problem. Unlike young Moses, Jack was a fully grown man, exactly the type of person the rebels needed to recruit. But his actions, his testimony, and the testimony of others, all indicate that from the start Jack wanted nothing to do with the revolt. Jack's enthusiasm for the revolt did not increase once the bloodshed began. The others must have realized that Jack was probably going to be useless as a soldier, but they also understood that letting him remain behind would be a mistake. By himself, Jack would be free to divulge what had happened, possibly giving the whites early warning. As important, if he deserted, he would have established a precedent that, if established, would ensure the destruction of the revolt. It would not do to have someone—such as Moses—telling potential recruits that if they did not want to join this suicidal mission they could simply walk away as Jack had. Finally,

²⁶ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 96; Nat Turner's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 222. Travis had five horses. Robert Musgrave had six slaves over twelve and three horses, Southampton County Tax List, 1831. Robert Musgrave died at some point during 1831, leaving the farm to his son, George Musgrave. None of the Musgrave's slaves appear in any of the accounts of the revolt. See Fred Calvin, “Dr. Robert T. Musgrave's Home,” Works Progress Administration, Virginia Historical Inventory, Southampton County Homes <lvimage.lib.va.us/VHI/> [21 January 2002].

Hark did not want his own brother-in-law, to desert before they had left the first house. As a result, the rebels decided, as Moses testified at Jack's trial, to make "the prisoner [Jack] go with them."²⁸

With Nat Turner as their leader, the nine rebels, including the recent additions—Austin, the reluctant Jack and the boy Moses—marched to Salathiel Francis' home beneath the light of a full moon. In the *Confessions*, Nat Turner did not explain how they selected Salathiel Francis as the second target. Historians have speculated that he decided not to double back by Cabin Pond to Giles Reese's because Turner's wife and family may have lived there. It is possible that Nat Turner wanted to shield his family from the bloody affair, although these historians fail to explain why he would want to kill the man he called his "kind master" but did not want to kill the man who enslaved his wife and children.²⁹

Drewry's sources recalled that "on the gallows" Nat Turner explained to Giles Reese that the rebels had not gone to his house because "Marse Giles, you were too powerful a man to begin with, and besides we were afraid of your two fierce bulldogs." The part of this quote flattering Reese seems too self-serving to be given much credence, but the dogs would have been a factor that the rebels would have been smart to consider. If the dogs were especially vicious or loud—and the rebels would have known which neighbors had aggressive dogs—the dogs could have provided Reese enough warning that the rebels would have lost a crucial tactical advantage,

²⁷ Moses' Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 220; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 67.

²⁸ Jack's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 196.

²⁹ Gray, 11. For information of the phase of the moon, see U.S. Naval Observatory, "Sun or Moon Altitude / Azimuth Table for One Day," <mach.usno.navy.mil/> [1 March 2002]. On his wife living on Giles Reese's farm, see Samuel Warner, "Authentic and Impartial Narrative of the Tragical Scene..." in Tragle, 296. Based upon this evidence, Johnson identifies Turner's wife as "Cherry," Johnson, 55-57; Oates, 69. Thomas C. Parramore disagrees, suggesting that Giles Reese's Mariah was Nat Turner's wife. Parramore shows that in the late 1820s, Charry was listed as a "girl" while Mariah had a child. Since Mariah had children—Drewry and the black oral history agree that Turner had children—Parramore's identification seems compelling. See Parramore, *Southampton County Virginia*, 243-44, fn. 43.

surprise. The rebels may have decided to go to Salathiel Francis' instead of Reese's for some other reason. They might have wanted revenge against Francis, or they may have had reason to believe that they would have an easier time recruiting from among Francis' slaves. While all of these were possible factors, Nat Turner may have decided to lead his men to Salathiel Francis' for the most obvious reason of all: simply because it was close to the barn, according to the *Confessions*, "about six hundred yards distant."³⁰

The nine arrived at Francis' home while it was still night. Certainly, the rebels' reasons not to batter down the Travis' door held at Francis'. Sneaking in—as they had done at the Travis' house—might not work at Salathiel Francis' smaller house.³¹ They decided on a different tactic: Will and Sam, who both were owned by Salathiel's brother, Nathaniel Francis, knocked at the door. Roused from his bed, Salathiel asked who was there. Sam identified himself and explained that "he had a letter on him." Salathiel may have guessed that his brother Nathaniel had dispatched his slaves in the middle of the night to pass along an urgent message. Salathiel "got up and came to the door." Once he opened the door, Sam and Will grabbed him, "dragging him out a little from the door." They killed him, although unlike at the Travis', where Will killed everyone cleanly and quickly, Salathiel died slowly, "dispatched by repeated blows on the head."³²

³⁰ Drewry, 36; Gray, 12. One other part of Drewry's story seems questionable. Drewry noted that Turner made these comments to Giles Reese "on the gallows," but the account of Turner's hanging reported that Turner refused the opportunity to make a statement before he died. See 15 November 1831, *Petersburg Intelligencer*, quoted in Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 50.

³¹ Drewry contends that Francis lived in a single room house. While this is possible, the WPA research by Fred Calvin suggests that Salathiel Francis lived in a three room house, complete with a gabled roof and an attic. On the details of Francis' household, Drewry contradicts other sources. (He suggests Francis had only one slave, while, according to the 1831 tax list, Salathiel Francis paid taxes on five slaves over 12 years old.) Calvin's portrait of a man in a modest house rather than a single room shack, also seems more plausible than Drewry's account in which he tried to "dispel a prevalent idea . . . that the life of the Virginian has been one of selfish luxury and ease." Drewry, 38, fn. 1; Fred Calvin, "Dr. Robert T. Musgrave Home," WPA Homes.

³² Gray, 12-13; Drewry records a remarkably different story about the death of Salathiel Francis: In his story, "Red" Nelson, "known to be loyal" escaped while Salathiel Francis called to him for a gun to defend himself. According to this story, Nelson was shot by the rebels as he tried to escape, but he survived. This story seems

According to the *Confessions*, “A general destruction of property and search for money and ammunition, always succeeded the murders.” At this early stage, one would expect the searching to be especially vigorous. The rebels had plenty of needs: they had not yet taken enough guns to arm even their small force. There was no way that they would know how much ammunition and powder they would use, but prudence would instruct them to take all that they could find. They also understood the value of horses and may have taken from among the four on which Francis had paid taxes earlier in 1831.³³ The men also took other items of interest, including money and perhaps some of the high-quality goods, including good shoes and clothes, denied to the men as slaves.

They also recruited. Emory Evans, a free black, lived on Francis’ farm, in addition to five slaves over 12 years old. If the slaves were among the six listed on the 1830 census, then the young teenager was male, as were two or three of the adults. Not counting “Red” Nelson—a slave who claimed to have fled while Salathiel was murdered—there were still three or four potential male recruits, which would increase the number of rebels more than a third.³⁴ The

suspect on several counts. First, it fits remarkably the Hegelian paradigm of southern honor described by Bertram Wyatt-Brown and Kenneth S. Greenberg, among others: the white man fights to the death; the loyal but unmanly slave flees. Second, this story implied that the silence maintained by the rebels had been broken by the second house. On the other hand, Turner insisted that even after they left Salathiel Francis’, the rebels still were “maintaining the most perfect silence,” Gray, 13. This story that a slave, Nelson, was the first person shot in the revolt leads to an even more improbable turn in the story: Nelson claimed to go to the house of Nathaniel Francis’, but he did not tell them about what had happened at Salathiel Francis’, even though Nelson would later save the life of Lavana Francis. At the same time, the whites did not ask any questions of the shot slave who appeared unexpectedly at their door. Finally, when the rebels arrived at the Francis house, they did not recognize Nelson, their neighbor who they had shot earlier in the morning, and were deceived by his misdirections as he led them away from where Lavana Francis hid. See Drewry, 38. Far more likely, Nelson exaggerated his fidelity by adding this dramatic episode to his story of the revolt. Drewry himself provides the evidence that Nelson may have had reason to spin a dramatic tale. According to Drewry, Nelson used this story to ease the weight of his bondage: “[H]e was the real master of the plantation, receiving and entertaining gentlemen who visited his master. A gentleman who knew him well relates that he has seen him drink with whites, and that he went wherever he pleased, from one section of the county to another, hospitality received at every home, where his deeds were fully esteemed and commended,” Drewry, 46, fn. 1. On death and honor, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), esp. 34-45; Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery...* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 87-114.

³³ Gray, 13; Southampton County Tax List, 1831.

³⁴ Southampton County Tax List, 1831; 1830 Census, 260; Drewry, 38.

rebels failed to get these men to join them en masse. Given the size of the rebel forces later in the revolt, they could not have gotten more than two men to join.

Even though Salathiel Francis had not been killed cleanly, his execution and then the ransacking of his home must not have raised a ruckus. As they left his house, the rebels focused on “maintaining the most perfect silence on our march.” Apparently they were undetected by whites. Drewry recorded the story of the rebels passing through the yard of the Elizabeth Harris’ house. Decades after the revolt, Bettie Powell Barnes recalled that night. An eight-year-old girl living at her grandmother’s house, Barnes remembered that the rebels were so quiet that the family, which had been spared, was “unconscious of their narrow escape, and proceeded to their daily tasks. The children went to school, several miles away, and it was an hour or more before they were warned of the state of affairs.”³⁵ The detail Barnes provided to Drewry suggests that seventy years failed to dim her memory of the day she almost died.

Barnes also remembered that one of the slaves from her grandmother’s farm joined the rebels as they passed through. According to her account, when the rebels saw Joe, they insisted that he join the revolt on pain of death. He agreed with one condition: he would join the rebels only if “they promised to spare his ‘white people.’” The rebels agreed, and one more man joined their force. Barnes may have been mistaken in believing that Joe negotiated her family’s survival; but even seventy years later, it seems likely that a woman would remember the dramatic death of one of fourteen slaves who lived on her family farm. In this case, census and tax records are consistent with Betty Powell Barnes’ account. According to the 1830 census, Elizabeth Harris owned eight slaves over ten years old. In 1832, only seven slaves over twelve lived on the farm.³⁶

³⁵ Gray, 13; Drewry, 39.

³⁶ Drewry, 36; 1830 Census, 260; Southampton County Tax List, 1832.

After they passed through the Harris farm, Nat Turner and the rebels decided to go to reluctant Jack's own home, the farm of Piety and her son Joseph William Reese. It seems unlikely that the most reluctant rebel had much to do with the selection of these victims. According to the testimony of young Moses, Jack had been forced to stay with the rebels as they went both to Salathiel Francis' and the Reese's. When they arrived at the Reese house, they found the doors unlocked. No contemporary account identified who was responsible for these murders, although Will, "the executioner," probably played a leading role. Will had been involved in every one of the six deaths to that point and Piety Reese was "murdered ... in her bed, while sleeping," exactly as Will had slain Sally Travis.³⁷

Nat Turner was also in the house. He recalled that Piety's son, Joseph William, awoke as his mother was killed and with his last breath asked, "Who is that?" In an instant, Turner remembered, "he was no more." As usual, after the murders, the rebels recruited slaves and searched for useful items. Piety Reese paid taxes on six slaves over sixteen years old, although—because she cannot be traced on the 1830 census—it is unclear how many of these were men capable of joining the revolt. Fortunately, there is another source that supplies some evidence about the recruiting efforts at Piety Reese's farm. After the revolt several Southampton slave owners petitioned the Virginia legislature to compensate them for slaves killed as the revolt was put down. (Virginia law required reimbursement for owners whose slaves were transported or executed by the state.) In one of these petitions, someone writing on behalf of Piety Reese sought compensation for one slave who joined the revolt and died without trial. Since none of

³⁷ Jack's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 196; Gray, 13; "Piety Reese," 29 December 1831, Petitions.

her slaves were tried and this was the only claim on her behalf, it seems likely that this unnamed man was the only slave who joined the revolt for any length of time.³⁸

One item taken after the murders suggests that reluctant Jack may have warmed somewhat to the revolt. When Jack was captured, he was, according to one witness wearing “a pair of shoes and socks which the witness believed to be William Reese’s.” (Joseph William Reese apparently went by “William.” Only months later did the courts note that Jack’s owner’s full name was “Joseph William.”)³⁹ Whites at the time interpreted evidence that slave stole items during the revolt to mean that those slaves were willing participants in the revolt. In this case, such an interpretation may be in error, especially in the light of Jack’s earlier behavior and the evidence that Jack ran away from the revolt later that morning, before the rebels had met any serious resistance. If Jack were wearing clothes stolen from his late master, Hark and the other rebels may have pressured Jack to take the clothing, or Jack may have decided that—since he was probably going to die anyway—he might as well take the items he particularly coveted.

Over the course of the first night of the revolt, the rebels had killed eight whites: two adult men, two adult women and four children. All of the dead had lived in slaveholding households. At the same time, the once-secret plot of five men to fight slavery had gained its first new recruits. A dozen men were part of the army that sought vengeance in Southampton County. As the makeshift squad traveled along the dirt roads of St. Luke’s parish, the first

³⁸ Gray, 13; Southampton County Tax List, 1831; “Piety Reese,” 29 December 1831, Petitions; Jack’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 195-98. On 29 December 1831, a petition from “Piety Reese” was submitted to the legislature, asking for compensation for losses sustained during the revolt. The contemporary accounts and historical accounts each list Piety Reese among those killed during the insurrection. I accept the tradition that Piety Reese died during the revolt. If so, unless an heir shared the same name, someone submitted the petition in her name. Consistent with an interpretation that Piety Reese had only been wounded, other estate administrators made similar requests more carefully, identifying themselves as, for instance, “The administrator + distributees of Elizabeth Turner, dec.d.”

³⁹ Jack’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 197, 228.

morning light was starting to emerge in the eastern sky. Before sunset, 22 August 1831, the fate of the most famous slave revolt in the history of the United States would be clear.

CHAPTER 4

DAWN

Under a brightening morning sky, the group of a dozen slaves—plus or minus one—made their way toward their next target: home of Nat Turner’s former mistress, the widow Elizabeth Turner.¹ In the *Confessions*, Nat Turner did not explain why they selected her house. Personal connections to slaves at his old mistress’s plantation may have led him to believe that he would be able to recruit men there. (Two of Elizabeth Turner’s slaves joined the revolt.) Or he might have wanted revenge against the woman who had been his mistress and who inherited his mother when his master died in 1822.² If he had wanted revenge for himself or his mother, one should not be surprised that Nat Turner did not tell the whites about it. As forthcoming as he was about his religious inspiration, his confessions sensibly protected his family, hiding any inspiration they may have provided to the revolt.

According to the *Confessions*, the rebels reached Elizabeth Turner’s “at about sunrise,” roughly 5:20 A.M. The revolt, discussed for months, was about four hours old, and it had begun

¹ Drewry suggests that the insurgents left Reese’s house and headed “three miles south of the Reese farm.” According to this story, after marching three miles, the slaves arrived at Wiley Francis’s home at least a half hour before the sun rose. Nevertheless, the entire household was up. The women had escaped into the woods, but a manly Wiley Francis challenged the insurgents, “Here I am, boys; I will not go from my home to be killed!” At the same time, loyal slaves “declared that they would die for the whites.” According to Drewry’s account, after coming this far, the insurgents fled, retracing their path “several miles” to the north, wasting an hour of darkness marching for no good reason at all. Lavana Francis, who told this story, might not have invented it out of whole cloth, but almost certainly whatever bravery Wiley Francis may have shown during the revolt was not against Nat Turner and the main rebel forces at this early stage of the revolt. See Drewry, 40.

² Johnson, 96; Parramore, 83. Thomas C. Parramore argues that Elizabeth Turner’s Sam also joined. According to an allegation, two slaves gave Sam aid on 30 August 1831 in exchange for “a gold watch and a ‘large sum of money,’ which he had ‘received by robbery during the insurrection.’” This allegation, in my mind, however, does not outweigh the evidence that no other slaves of Elizabeth Turner were involved. If any of Elizabeth Turner’s slaves had survived the revolt and been accused of taking money during the revolt, he would have been tried. On the other hand, if he were involved and died, Turner’s executor could have easily added him to the petition that he

well. Up to this point, the rebels had been able to escape detection. They traveled quietly: twice, Turner described how he “marched” the rebels off during the night. If they rode the horses they had commandeered, the mounted men rode slowly and quietly, never separating from the men afoot.³ More surprisingly, the rebels had been able to raid three households without being detected. Relying on Will’s trusted axe, they had killed eight whites without firing a shot. The success of these stealthy raids made the rebels’ most important jobs easier. In the course of one night, the rebels had increased their number from seven to about a dozen. They had also started to accumulate arms and horses.

In the light of the day, the rebels changed how they conducted their attacks. Instead of focusing on remaining undetected, during the day Nat Turner and the rebels traveled fast. Noise was no longer an anathema, and for the first time, they divided into groups to attack and kill different targets. At Elizabeth Turner’s farm, one group—including Henry, Sam, and Austin—went to the farm’s still. When they reached the still, they found the overseer, Hartwell Peebles. Austin, the recruit who had joined the revolt at Travis’ plantation, shot and killed Peebles.⁴ For the first time in the records, one of the rebels used a gun. The silence maintained through the night was broken.

None of the rebels ever explained the decision to use the gun. Perhaps they had discussed it as a possibility now that the sun was up and Southampton’s residents were beginning to awake. Or perhaps the detachment went to the still to get alcohol—Henry, who was with this group, had brought the brandy to Cabin Pond—and was surprised by Peebles. Without time to react, Austin used the gun to make sure Peebles would not escape. Or maybe Austin, unlike

submitted to the legislature for compensation. See Parramore, 245, fn. 11; Elizabeth Turner, decedent, 29 December 1831, Petitions.

³ Gray, 13; U.S. Naval Observatory, “Sun or Moon Table.” Some of the dozen rebels were on foot at this point, because the rebels had only nine horses after they left for Catherine Whitehead’s.

Will, simply preferred shooting a gun to hacking a man to death. Whatever led Austin to pull the trigger, the gun had sounded. From this moment, the rebels showed little interest in trying to muffle their noises.

The two white women in the main house, Elizabeth Turner and Sarah Newsome, may have wondered who fired a gun at 5:30 in the morning. At least one of them looked outside and saw a small contingent of black men—armed and on horseback—approaching their house in the morning light. Recognizing danger immediately, the women barricaded themselves in the house. Their task was impossible. In addition to the doors, the house had eleven windows in six rooms. Aware that they had been seen and unconcerned about detection, the main force of rebels used the tactic that Hark had suggested at Travis' house. Will approached the farmhouse and with a single swing broke down the front door.⁵

Against armed slaves, the women were defenseless. The slaves found the white women in the middle of the large front room, according to Nat Turner, “almost frightened to death.” Will attacked Elizabeth Turner and killed her with “one blow of his axe.” At the same time, Nat Turner attacked Sarah Newsome. He grabbed her hand and “struck her several blows over the head” with his dull sword. Again, as with Joseph Travis, Turner could not kill his victim. Will, turning from Elizabeth Turner's lifeless body, realized that Nat Turner was struggling to kill Sarah Newsome. Will “despatched [sic] her also.”⁶ Up to this point in the revolt, ten whites had died, and Will had delivered the deathblow to six. Only one of the first ten deaths—Peebles'—was attributable to someone other than Will.

No primary evidence suggests what the slaves took during the requisite “destruction of property and search for money and ammunition.” Bettie Powell Barnes's memory of the capture

⁴ Gray, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13; Fred Cavin, “Elizabeth Turner Home,” WPA Homes.

of Elizabeth Harris's slave, Joe, implied that one of the newest recruits used this opportunity to acquire some goods. After the revolt, Joe was identified wearing the clothes of Hartwell Peebles.⁷ At the same time that Joe filched some of Peebles' clothes, the others were busy recruiting more slaves to join the revolt. As usual, the insurgents relied on threats to urge Elizabeth Turner's slaves to risk death and join the revolt. The slaves found Davy before he got dressed for the day. According to the testimony of young Moses, the rebels told Davy "that if he did not join them he should die there." After weighing his options, Davy "put on his clothes and went off with the insurgents." Another slave belonging to Elizabeth Turner, Jordan, also joined the rebels.⁸

With the two new recruits, Jordan and Davy, the nine who had left Travis's farm had increased in number to fifteen, including Elizabeth Harris's Joe and Piety Reese's unnamed slave. They had increased their firepower and had commandeered nine horses. No longer concerned about the noise made by galloping horses, the rebels split up again. The mounted rebels went ahead directly to Catherine Whitehead's, while the six on foot stopped at the home of Henry Bryant on their way to rendezvous with the other rebels. Based upon the record, only one man—the new recruit Davy—can be placed among the six men who walked to Henry Bryant's. No account described what occurred at the Bryants' household, but before long the six had rejoined the rest of the insurgents at Catherine Whitehead's. Nat Turner later remembered that the six "informed me they had done the work of death assigned to them." Henry Bryant, his young wife Sally, her mother, and a child no older than a toddler were dead.⁹

⁶ Gray, 13.

⁷ Drewry, 39.

⁸ Davy's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 185; Elizabeth Turner, decedent, 29 December 1831, Petitions.

⁹ Gray, 13; Davy's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 185. According to the 1830 census, Henry Bryant was between twenty and thirty years old, and his wife was still a teenager. Her mother was in her forties. When the census was taken, the Bryants had not had children suggesting that their child in 1831 was less than two years old. 1830 Census, 257. For the identification of Sally Bryant, see Parramore, 83.

The main force of rebels on horseback arrived at the Whitehead house at about 6:30 A.M. As the nine men on horseback approached the house, they saw Richard Whitehead already at work in a cotton field. No one will ever know what Whitehead—a Methodist preacher—was thinking as he saw the nine armed slaves riding towards his mother’s house in the early morning hours. According to Turner’s *Confessions*, the rebels beckoned the minister. Whitehead approached the insurgents. If he were in denial about what was happening, the blood splattered clothes of some of the rebels may have made it perfectly clear; but by that point there was no way for him to escape: Will “with his fatal axe” decapitated Richard Whitehead. After this death, the household included only women and a child: Catherine Whitehead, who was in her fifties, five adult daughters, Margaret, Minerva, Marion, Morning [?] Ann and Harriet, and one five-year-old grandson.¹⁰

After Will executed Richard Whitehead, the nine resumed their march toward to the Whitehead plantation. It seems that those in the household had an intimation of what was underway. As the rebel force approached the house, a figure darted toward the garden. The small rebel army continued toward the house while Nat Turner chased the person who ran away. When he caught the person, he realized that it was not one of the Whiteheads but a “servant girl.” He let her go and followed the others, who had already reached the house, where bedlam had broken out. By the time Nat Turner had made it back to the Whitehead’s plantation the rebels were already killing the Whitehead family. As Nat Turner approached, he 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.” According to the family tradition, which relied heavily on the testimony of the

¹⁰ Joe’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 207; F. M. Capehart to Benajah Nicholls, 23-26 August 1831, Benajah Nicholls Papers, North Carolina Department of Archives and History [hereafter NCDAH]; Gray, 13. The names of the Catherine Whitehead’s daughters were mentioned in a 6 January 1844 diary entry by Hugh Blair Grigsby, See Diary, 13 Nov 1843 – 17 April 1847, Hugh Blair Grigsby Papers, VHS. On Richard’s decapitation,

family's slaves, Catherine Whitehead was one of the first murdered. Two of the remaining daughters hid in a bedroom, while the oldest daughter had made it out of the house.¹¹

Catherine Whitehead's oldest daughter, Margaret—called Peggy—had successfully evaded the first wave of murders by silently hiding behind a cellar cap on the side of the house. Although she had evaded the other insurgents, Nat Turner saw her as he approached the house. Realizing that she had been spotted, Margaret fled. Nat Turner was after her in an instant, and he caught her on the edge of a field. Again he pulled out his sword. Despite “repeated blows” with the sword, he could not kill her. Looking for a more effective weapon, Nat Turner grabbed a fence rail. With a rail in his hands, Nat Turner killed Margaret Whitehead.¹²

The youngest of Catherine's daughters also made it out of the house before she was killed. According to the family tradition, which was recorded a year later, the youngest daughter, accompanied by a “young negro girl,” Aggy, eluded the rebels and hid in a cornfield. Despite the relative safety of her hiding place, the girl was overwhelmed as she listened to the rebels murder her mother and sisters. Aggy tried to keep her mistress quiet, but the stress was

see Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 26 August 1831. In 1830, Catherine Whitehead's daughters ranged in age from a teenager over fifteen to a woman in her thirties. See Census, 260.

¹¹ Gray, 13; Minor L. Blackford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Story of a Virginia Lady, Mary Berkeley Minor Blackford, 1802-1896* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 26.

¹² Gray, 13-14. On Margaret's nickname, see Nat Turner's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 222. For the description of Margaret as the oldest daughter of Catherine Whitehead, see Richmond *Enquirer*, 15 November 1831. Not surprisingly, Grigsby list Margaret first when he writes the names of the sisters. As the oldest daughter, Margaret was already in her thirties in 1830. See Hugh Blair Grigsby Diary, VHS; 1830 Census, 260. Since the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, the murder of Margaret Whitehead has been the subject of much speculation. In the novel, Styron imagines that Whitehead was a love interest of Turner. Historians have recoiled at such a provocative idea, but struggled to explain why this was the one person Turner killed. For example, Thomas C. Parramore suggests that Turner “may have been forced to kill Margaret Whitehead because he had black witnesses.” This explanation seems unlikely to me. Black witnesses did not help him kill anyone at the Travis' or Elizabeth Turner's, two times earlier in the revolt that he tried to kill someone. I believe that Turner's unique perspective at the rear of the rebels is sufficient to explain both his killing of Margaret Whitehead and his lack of involvement in any other murders. His unique perspective allowed him to spot Margaret Whitehead when she had eluded the others. Turner's position alone at the rear also can explain why it fell to him to kill her. See William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York: Random House, 1967), 336-340, 413-415, Parramore, “Covenant in Jerusalem,” 61. For a description of the criticism of Styron, see John Henrik Clarke, ed. *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968); Albert E. Stone, *The Return of Nat*

too much for the youngest Whitehead daughter and “losing all presence of mind” she began to scream. Immediately, the rebels realized exactly what had happened: one of the Catherine Whitehead’s daughters had made it away from the house. Before she could escape, “the murderers rushed upon her.” Throwing Aggy to the ground, the rebels “contented themselves by the murder of her young mistress.” According to this account, Aggy fought hard to save her mistress’s life, but her efforts were foiled by the rebels who manhandled Aggy roughly enough to tear off “the strong Virginia cloth dress she had on.”¹³

While Nat Turner killed Margaret and other rebels killed her youngest sister, two other sisters hid in a bedroom. When the rebels searched the house, they found one of the sisters. The unidentified rebels killed her at the foot of the bed and left her “lying dead in the fireplace of her chamber.” While her sister was executed, Harriet remained silent under a mattress. The rebels searched amid the carnage to make sure no other whites escaped, but never found Harriet.¹⁴

After the killings had ended, the six rebels who had been to Henry Bryant’s house rejoined the group. Also—according to Catherine Whitehead’s slave Hubbard—sometime shortly after the murders, two more slaves, Joe and another Nat, appeared from out of the woods. The two men had spent Sunday night hunting in the woods, and Hubbard later testified that they had a raccoon to show for their efforts. Joe may have regularly stopped by after a Sunday night’s hunt to drop his catch and say goodbye to his family before he had to return to John C. Turner’s plantation about a mile away. Or given the early morning commotion on the plantation

Turner: History, Literature and Cultural Politics in Sixties America (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1992); and Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave*.

¹³ Blackford, 26.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27; 26 August 1831, Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*.

where Joe's family lived, Joe and Nat may have stopped by to make sure that Joe's family was safe.¹⁵

When they arrived at the scene, they discovered the tumult. By this point, Davy, who had joined the revolt under threat of death, had warmed to the idea of fighting for his freedom.

Another one of Catherine Whitehead's slaves, Nathan, recalled that Davy tried to convince Joe to join. Davy explained that he had been "forced to join," but he had no regrets. If Joe wanted Davy's advice, he would join too. Despite vigorous recruiting, Joe hesitated. According to Hubbard, Joe "appeared reluctant to go" but finally he did. Nat, Joe's friend who was owned by James and Elizabeth Turner, also agreed to join.¹⁶ The rebels were now at least seventeen.

The Whitehead plantation offers a unique opportunity to examine the effectiveness of the rebels' recruiting. According to the 1830 census, twenty-seven slaves, including eleven children under the age of ten, lived with Catherine Whitehead. Of the sixteen slaves over ten years old on the Whitehead plantation, the majority were women. Some slave women supported the revolt, but there is no evidence that the rebels recruited any women to join their army. Because of this decision, the rebels were left with a pool of potential recruits made up entirely of men and older boys, probably corresponding to six males listed on the 1830 census, the youngest of whom was at least eleven years old.¹⁷

Records of the events at Catherine Whitehead's detailed the action of six male slaves. When the rebels first arrived, three of the slaves fled. All three were eventually tried for their participation in the revolt. Tom was discharged by the court, and as was the practice with those released, the evidence used in his case was not recorded. Fortunately, Tom's story can be

¹⁵ Gray, 14; Joe's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 207.

¹⁶ Davy and Nat's Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 186, 196-97. For the identification of Nat's owners, see Parramore, 84, 246, fn. 13.

reconstructed from another source. According to the account Mary Blackford recorded in 1832, Tom, a young stable hand, was watering the horses when the insurgents arrived. Tom fled with Jack and Andrew, although he testified that he left the two while all three were “without any understanding” of what was happening on the plantation. Tom ran away and might have even been seen carrying a hatchet, certainly evidence enough to have him arrested.¹⁸

The story that the Whiteheads told Mary Blackford less than a year later probably contained many of the same elements that were used in Tom’s successful defense. According to the Blackford’s account, Tom ran away from the plantation to sound the alarm. At one house, “the Master gave him a hatchet to defend himself should the insurgents attack him.” If that were what happened, the unnamed white man was a fool. Tom hid the hatchet to make sure that the insurgents would not get it, but one wonders if Tom was more worried about what the whites would do to him if they saw him running around with a weapon during a slave insurrection. Tom ran until he arrived at a guard house at about noon, probably five hours after he first left. Whites later rewarded the feat with “much praise and a certificate testifying to his exertions in saving the lives of so many whites...”¹⁹ Because so many elements of this story would have been easily verifiable using white sources, the acceptance of this story by the court and white society suggests that the parts that could be verified—for instance, Did he warn white people?—were true.

¹⁷ 1830 Census, 260. On women’s role in the revolt, see Mary Kemp Davis, “‘What Happened in This Place,’ In Search of the Female Slave in the Nat Turner Slave Insurrection,” in Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 162-176.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 260; Tom’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 179; Blackford, 27. Trial Notes, Judgements, Southampton County Court, Box 95, LV. [hereafter Trial Notes]. The ages of the six are not given in the records. If one of the six slaves mentioned, perhaps young Tom or Nathan, was ten years old or younger, then there might have been one unnamed slave who joined the rebels. If so, he did not live long enough to be tried. This would be consistent with the accounts that suggest that three slaves from the plantation—perhaps Andrew, Jack and the unnamed man—joined the rebels.

¹⁹ Blackford, 26-27.

If young Tom's actions were enough to get the charges against him dismissed, the actions of two others who fled with him, Andrew and Jack, were more complicated. Like Tom, Andrew and Jack fled the Whitehead plantation "before any murder was committed." They returned about an hour later and asked someone—probably one of the Whitehead's slaves—whether the insurgents had left. According to the story they told a free black later in the day, the rebels had left word that Jack and Andrew should follow behind and catch up, "if they did not it should be death." By all accounts, Jack and Andrew were deeply distressed by this ultimatum. George Booth, a white man who owned one slave himself, testified that they came to his house and told him what had happened. Evoking Jesus' crucifixion, they said, "Lord have mercy on them for they know not what they do." James Powell, another white witness, found the two "very humbled (and) much grieved."²⁰

Although the two slaves had seen a distressing amount of mayhem, including the shocking executions of all but one of their mistress's family, Jack and Andrew were not simply scared. Other slaves' testimony implied that Jack and Andrew were attracted to the rebels' bloody cause. While both whites who testified at the trials swore that the two defendants behaved in a subservient and docile manner, two of the black witnesses had a markedly different perspective on Andrew and Jack. When Jack and Andrew left the Whitehead plantation the second time, riding on one horse, Hubbard "thought [that] they went to join the insurgents." He was not alone in this belief. Andrew and Jack had followed the insurgents' trail to Richard Porter's house. When they got there, they asked a female slave Venus, "where the black people were (meaning the negroes that had been there.)" She explained that the rebels had left and the

²⁰ Jack and Andrew's Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 180-2; Trial Notes; Southampton County Tax List, 1831. The testimony of Powell and Wallace disagree about one point. Wallace claimed that the defendants returned to the plantation after visiting Booth and Powell. Powell testified that when Jack and Andrew came to his house he detained them. Later he turned them over to the custody of the forces assembled at Cross Keys. Given the other

two potential rebels told her, “they were going after them, that the negroes had left word for them to go on after them and they did not know what else to do.” Even Thomas Haithcock, a free black witness for Jack and Andrew, testified that when they came to his house, they asked him “what they should do.”²¹ Away from coercive rebels, Andrew and Jack at a minimum seriously considered joining the revolt.

One could argue that Jack and Andrew were deeply committed to the revolt, but if that were so, Why did they flee as soon as the rebels arrived at their plantation? On the other hand, one could argue that they were intrinsically loyal to their white masters, but then, Why did they leave the Whitehead plantation a second time? How could they have left both Hubbard and Venus with a strong sense that they intended to join the rebels? The most probable answer is that Andrew and Jack had not resolved what they should do. Jack and Andrew may have been repulsed by the gore and the risks of fighting the whites and also scared of disobeying the dangerous rebels and attracted to the idea of fighting for their freedom. With a sudden choice to make, the two young men struggled to determine the path they should follow.

While Tom, Jack and Andrew fled the rebels, Nathan, Hubbard, and Wallace remained on the plantation. According to one report, Wallace, ‘an old negro man,’ showed the most incredible loyalty to Catherine Whitehead. When Will grabbed Whitehead, Wallace begged the rebel to spare the “life of his old Mistress.” The pleas had no effect on Will. After killing Whitehead, the rebels threatened Wallace, who reportedly answered that “he cared not to live now she was dead.” Wallace’s exclamations reported by the whites sound melodramatic. But he provided no support for the rebels, correctly surmising that the rebels were not about to kill slaves. It is not implausible that Wallace rejected the rebels and whatever threats they made.

testimony, Jack and Andrew probably returned to the Whitehead plantation after the rebels left and then set out again.

Since Wallace was old, the rebels might have simply decided to let the old man be. Nathan was another slave who was present after the rebels had killed the family, but appears not to have joined the revolt. (He later testified at Davy's trial. He told the court what the band who had been to Mr. Bryant's had said they had done once they arrive at the Whitehead farm.) It is unclear whether he refused to join the revolt as Wallace had, had not been recruited for some reason, or was recruited but quickly escaped. Whatever he did, the whites saw no reason to try Nathan after the revolt.²²

While Wallace and Nathan refused to join the revolt, the "old man" Hubbard "assisted in saving Miss Harriet." During the murders, Harriet Whitehead had remained hidden beneath the mattress next to the spot where her sister had been killed. The rebels never found her. Once the rebels left the plantation, Hubbard and some of the other slaves decided to secrete Harriet away from the house in case the rebels returned. As it turned out, sometime after the rebels left they realized that they had not killed Harriet. According to one account, "some of their number who were well acquainted with the family" figured out that all the women had not been killed. The oblique mention of slaves "well acquainted with the family" may refer to Joe, whose family lived on the plantation. This reading is supported by the testimony that Joe and Nathan appeared at the Whitehead plantation after the murders. Had the rebels "well acquainted with the family" witnessed the murders, they could have called the other rebels' attention to the fact that Harriet had not been killed while everyone was still at the plantation.²³ Instead, Joe and Nathan realized what had happened only after they heard the rebels' accounts of the events at the Whitehead

²¹ See Jack and Andrew's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle 180-182.

²² Blackford, 26. For Catherine Whitehead's Nathan as a witness, see Davy's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 186. One rebel named Nathan was tried, but he belonged to Benjamin Blunt's estate. If Catherine Whitehead rented Nathan from Blunt's estate, then the slave Nathan on the Whitehead estate did join the revolt, albeit unwillingly. This seems especially unlikely given that no evidence of his actions on the Whitehead plantation was used against Nathan at his trial. See Nathan's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 200.

²³ Blackford, 27. For the timing of Joe and Nat, see Joe's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 207.

plantation. Having learned of the oversight, the rebels sent two unnamed volunteers back to the Whitehead plantation to kill Harriet.

While the two assassins were walking back toward the Whitehead house, the slaves loyal to Harriet had placed her in a disguise and were carrying her away from the house. Seeing the two rebels in the distance, some of the Whitehead slaves “went immediately to meet them & contrived by some means to turn their course.” The rebels assigned to kill the last Whitehead were delayed and misdirected until the other slaves could get Harriet to “a swamp near the house.”²⁴ Hampered by the slaves at the Whitehead plantation, the rebels never found Harriet, the only white member of her household who survived the revolt.

Of the six identifiable potential recruits at the Whitehead plantation, three fled, two of whom, Jack and Andrew, later spent some time trying to join the rebel army. Even if Jack and Andrew ultimately made a firm decision to join the rebel army, one result of their initial indecision was that they never joined the insurgents’ army. As a result, rebels had enlisted no one into their army from a plantation of twenty-seven slaves. Even more ominously for the rebel cause, four of the six most likely recruits actively worked against the revolt, saving Harriet or spreading the alarm.

After the raid on the Whitehead plantation, the rebels divided themselves into two groups. One group, including Nat Turner, went to Richard Porter’s. When they got there, they heard what Porter’s slave Venus would later tell Andrew and Jack when they asked if the whites had been killed: Venus informed them that the Porters “were gone before the negroes got there.” Tom, who fled the Whitehead plantation as soon as he recognized the intentions of the insurgent army, may have warned the Porters, although. Drewry suggested that “Mary, a mulatto girl” had warned the white family. The year after the revolt, Mary Blackford also heard that a woman had

saved the Porters: “A negro woman ran from a distance to warn them just in time for them to escape to the woods in the sight of the house.” Having been warned, the whites on Richard Porter’s plantation, which in 1830 included two adult couples and eight children under fifteen, hid beyond the view of the rebels.²⁵

The Porters had been warned, but—with the cooperation of the blacks on the plantation—whites believed that the rebels might have regained the advantage. Blackford heard that, “By a point of the finger of any slaves there, the family might all have been murdered, but so far were they from being betraying them they contrived to direct the steps of the murders in another direction.” At first glance, this story is plausible, especially in light of the efforts of some of the Whitehead slaves to save Harriet. But the paternalistic story of thirteen adult slaves entirely uncooperative with the rebels ignored Daniel, who became an effective recruit.²⁶ Similar to Davy at Elizabeth Turner’s, Daniel may have been a hesitant recruit at first and then warmed up to the revolt. But his involvement makes Blackford’s story harder to believe.

The success of the rebels recruiting at Richard Porter’s plantation—contrasted to the failure of the rebels to enlist any recruits at Catherine Whitehead’s plantation—ultimately makes the story of an entire plantation perfectly loyal to the whites hiding nearby unbelievable. For the first time since the Travis’ farm, the rebels convinced a sizeable number of black men, probably the majority of potential recruits, to join the revolt. According to the 1831 tax list, Porter paid the taxes on thirteen adult slaves, including both men and women. At least five were men, and four enlisted in Nat Turner’s army. In addition to Daniel, who was convicted for his role in the revolt, Porter’s twenty-two-year-old slave Jacob and his nineteen-year-old slave Moses

²⁴ Blackford, 27.

²⁵ Gray, 14; Jack and Andrew’s Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 180-181; Drewry, 45; Blackford, 27; 1830 Census, 256.

²⁶ Blackford, 27-28; Daniel’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 177.

confessed to John Edmunds that they “were engaged in the late insurrection.” Richard Porter also made a claim for Aaron, a slave belonging to a child in his household, who was seen with the rebels by another witness.²⁷

Recruiting four men—especially four effective soldiers—at one plantation was a major accomplishment for the rebels, who were able to increase their force by twenty percent. From this point, the exact number of slaves in revolt is hard to fix. At least twenty-one slaves had joined the revolt, not counting Catherine Whitehead’s Jack and Andrew, who apparently never caught up to the main army. Others not named in the historical record also joined. At the same time, some of the less committed rebels started to melt away. The most reluctant rebel, Jack, for instance, left the rebels sometime in the morning. Knowing that his owner was dead, Jack fled to Jordan Barnes’s farm. Barnes had been at work that morning and had already heard about the insurrection when Jack told him that the Whitehead family had been massacred. Jack may have accompanied the rebels to Porter’s, but he made his escape before the rebels had met any organized resistance.²⁸ Others may have also escaped, evading both the rebels and any record suggesting who was involved in the revolt. Even if the rebels lost a few reluctant soldiers, the force that left Richard Porter’s was larger, stronger, and more enthusiastic than it had been when it arrived.

Despite the reinforcements at Porter’s, Nat Turner realized that the rebels’ task had become more difficult. They had lost their greatest tactical advantage, surprise. The Porter family had been warned. No doubt the alarm was spreading quickly to other farms. The rebels might catch some families unaware, but that was no longer certain. More important, at some

²⁷ Southampton County Tax List, 1831; Richard Porter, 12 December 1831, Petitions. For Aaron’s involvement, see Levi Waller’s testimony in Daniel’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 178. It is unlikely that Waller saw a different slave Aaron. No other Aaron was tried. Furthermore, at the time that Waller saw Aaron, he was with Daniel, another slave from the Porter plantation.

point, the whites would rally and attack the rebels. Knowing this, General Turner revisited the decision to divide the forces. He never explained the original rationale, but with two forces the rebels could visit more plantations, increasing the pool of potential recruits and the amount of devastation they could inflict. Now that the whites had begun to assemble their own forces, the small wings of Turner's army would be vulnerable to counterattack. Realizing that the dynamic of the revolt had changed, Nat Turner decided to reunite the two wings of his small army. The main squad of the rebel army left Porter's home with their new recruits and continued onto Nathaniel Francis' farm. At the same time, Nat Turner headed back to "bring up those sent to Mr. Doyles, and Mr. Howell Harris'."²⁹

Nat Turner found the group that had been sent to Trajan Doyle's and Howell Harris's out on the road. By the time Nat Turner found the group, they had taken it upon themselves to visit the house of John R. Williams. "Choctaw" Williams, as he was called, had heard the commotion at the Whitehead house. He decided to investigate it, leaving "his wife [Louisa] + Deare little child at home while he went to assist his neighbors." After seeing the carnage at the Whitehead plantation, Williams returned to his own farm, but it was too late. "[H]e was met by one of his own negro boys with the horrible tidings that his wife and children had been murdered in his absence." While he was away "they had killed his wife + cut his child's head off."³⁰

²⁸ Jack's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 197.

²⁹ Gray, 14.

³⁰ F. M. Capehart to Benajah Nicholls, 23, 24, 25, 26 August 1831, Benajah Nicholls Papers, NCOAH; Parramore, 85. Parramore implicitly, and I believe correctly, identifies Williams as the source of Capehart's account. See also Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 26 August 1831. For Louisa's name, see Parramore, 246, note 14. I assume that the contingent that left the Whitehead's without Nat Turner was responsible for these deaths, since he included no record of it in the *Confessions*. Drewry reports an entirely different story, that Louisa Williams was killed visiting the Francis plantation, but I do not believe Drewry's account because he was much more removed from the revolt than the correspondent to the *Herald*, who wrote his letter two days after the revolt. Furthermore, Louisa Williams was not listed with those who died at the Francis plantation, as Drewry suggested. Unlike George Vaughn, who was listed as a death on John T. Barrow's plantation, she was listed on her own line. For an example, see Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 53.

After leaving the Williams' home, this group of rebels encountered Trajan Doyle. Doyle was out on the road away from his house when the rebels found him. They killed him on the spot. Hark, who had Doyle's pocketbook with him when he was captured at the end of the revolt, probably led this group. Once Nat Turner found Hark and this group of rebels, he received more intelligence. "Some" men from the neighborhood had joined the rebels, and they told Nat Turner that "Mr. Harris was from home."³¹ If Nat Turner had not already decided to skip Howell Harris's plantation, this added piece of information convinced him not to stop on his way to meet the other rebels.

Meanwhile, the other contingent of rebels had reached the farm belonging to the owner of two of the rebels: Sam, one of the original rebels, and Will, who Nat Turner called 'the executioner.' According to Drewry, before the rebels arrived a "little negro boy" had come from Travis's home and told Nathaniel Francis that the rebels "'had killed all the white folks.'" Francis went to his neighbor's place to investigate the rumor. Soon his mother—presumably the woman in her sixties who lived with him in 1830—also went to the Travis' house "to see if she could be of any assistance." This left only four whites: Lavana Francis (Nathaniel Francis's wife), "A. Doyle" (the overseer) and three-year-old John and eight-year-old Samuel Brown, two orphaned nephews of Lavana Francis. No contemporary account described the murders at the Francis farm. Drewry's suspect account described how John L. Brown was killed when the toddler approached the insurgents begging a ride on their horses. He was picked up and slain, "with his head severed from his body." His brother, Samuel, witnessing the murder, screamed and was also killed by the insurgents. Once Doyle realized what was happening, he ran to the Francis house and warned Lavana Francis. Having warned his employer's wife, he tried to

³¹ Hark's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 192; Gray, 14.

escape the house himself, but was shot by the insurgents.³² All the whites at the house, except Lavana Francis, were dead.

Above the first floor in the Francis home, the building had a high roof with a steep pitch. The attic had a low dark area between the room's wall and the roofline—Gray described it as “a closet.” After being warned by Doyle, Lavana Francis hid in this small dark space. According to Drewry, “Red” Nelson, one of Salathial Francis's slaves, pretended to search for his late master's sister-in-law. When he looked into the space where Lavana Francis hid, he told the rebels that she was not there. He suggested that she must have escaped from the house and suggested that the rebels look “in the garden concealed by the tall cabbage.”³³ The story—probably told by Nelson to the whites, confirmed by Lavana, and later enshrined in the white tradition of the loyal slave—seems consistent with the actions of other loyal slaves, such as Catherine Whitehead's Hubbard.

One detail in the story Nelson and Lavana related, however, makes this story possibly even more interesting. According to the story reported by Drewry, Nelson fled Salathial Francis's home well before dawn but did not arrive at his master's brother's nearby house in time to sound the alarm. Instead, he appeared exactly when a group of rebels appeared at the Francis house several hours into the morning. The timing could have been a coincidence, or Nelson might have been an unidentified recruit. If Nelson had joined the revolt at Salathial Francis'

³² Drewry, 45, 47; Southampton County Tax List, 1831; Fred Calvin, “Lavana Francis Home,” WPA Homes. For the identification of the Brown boys, see Parramore, 87. Drewry's account is suspect because he contradicts reliable sources on several points. He names the overseer Henry Doyle, although the tax record clearly noted that “A. Doyle” resided on the plantation early in 1831. (It is possible that A. Doyle went by “Henry” or Henry Doyle went by some name beginning with “A.”) His acceptance of “Red” Nelson's involvement is discussed at length below. Finally Francis places Louisa Williams and her child at the Francis household, which I reject above.

³³ Fred Calvin, “Lavana Francis Home,” WPA Homes; Gray, 19; Drewry, 47. Drewry's account of the details of the events at the Francis Home also agrees with the stories that were told in the black community. Allen Crawford, who was born on Peter Edwards' plantation a few years after the revolt, later recounted how “Miss Venie Francis ‘hid herself in a closet between the lathes and plastering.’” See Allen Crawford, interviewed by Susie R. C. Byrd, in *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews with Virginia Ex-Slaves*, ed. Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E Barden, and Robert K. Phillips (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 76.

farm, then this would easily explain how he managed to arrive at Nathaniel Francis' home exactly when the rebels did. It would also explain how Nelson gained the rebels confidence so easily and steered the rebels away from Lavana Francis's hiding place. Some of Nelson's motivations for sparing Lavana Francis may be imagined. He may have wanted to save her life. It probably also occurred to Nelson by saving a white person, he created a defense for himself if he were ever accused of being a party to the revolt. Lavana Francis would be his patroness. If this was his plan, it worked: 'Red' Nelson survived the revolt and was never brought to trial.

While "Red" Nelson helped save his late master's sister-in-law, other slaves on the Francis farm showed less loyalty to their white masters. Although no evidence exists that black women joined the rebel army, two used the chaos brought on by the revolt as an opportunity to redistribute some of the goods denied to slaves. While Lavana Francis was hiding undetected in the closet, two of her slaves, Lucy and Charlotte, decided to take advantage of the tumult to divide their mistress' clothes. According to Allen Crawford, a former slave born after the revolt who heard about these events as he was growing up in the neighborhood, "They thought ... their missus [was] kilt after nobody could find her. Ha, ha, ha so dem gals was standing dar 'viding her clothes and things—argueing who should have dis and dat like you 'omen folks do."³⁴

Women fighting over their mistress' clothes reveal something about the dissatisfaction created by the system of slavery, but as far as the rebels were concerned such a quarrel was a distraction from their immediate purpose. The rebels needed more men, and on Nathaniel Francis' farm they were able to get several to join the revolt. Before they left the Francis home, the rebels enlisted four more recruits, although Moses, later testified that three "were constantly guarded by negroes with guns who were ordered to shoot them if they attempted to escape." Moses' testimony on behalf the slave was all the more believable because—as the only witness

against the three—he had already said enough to get them convicted. The three unwilling recruits—Nathan, Tom, and Davy—were also young. At their trials, the court decided that the oldest was “not more than fifteen years, the other two much younger.” Only one boy under ten lived on the plantation in 1830, suggesting that the “much younger” recruits were probably preteens. On the other hand, the rebels found Dred, “a negro man slave,” a more willing soldier. Before noon, he was “mounted and armed with a gun or rifle.” By the time the rebels had left the Francis farm, six of Nathaniel Francis’s slaves—including Sam and Will, who had both been part of the revolt from the start—had joined the revolt, an impressive number from a plantation that held ten slaves over twelve years old in 1831.³⁵

The advance wing of rebels left the Francis plantation and headed to Peter Edwards’ nearby plantation, north of Francis’s home. The Edwards had heard about the revolt and had fled their plantation. Without any potential victims, the rebels ransacked the plantation and built upon their recent recruiting successes. According to the 1831 tax list, Peter Edwards owned seventeen slaves over twelve years old. If the turnover since the 1830 census had been low, then the majority of these seventeen slaves were men.³⁶ As at Travis and Francis’ farms, the rebels had more success recruiting on their home turf. Aided by Nelson, a charter member of the revolt who was probably from the plantation, the rebels were able to enlist four more recruits into their growing army. According to the trial records, Berry Newsom was an “indented apprentice to Peter Edwards.” Since his trial was remanded to the Superior Court, he was probably a young free black bound to work for Edwards for a term of years. Although he was legally free, Newsom was eager for the opportunity to join the revolt. Henry, a witness at later trials,

³⁴ Allen Crawford interview, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 76. See also Drewry, 47.

³⁵ Drewry 48; Gray, 20; Nathan, Tom, and Davy’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 200-01; 1830 Census; 259; Dred’s Trial, 198; Southampton County Tax List, 1831.

remembered that on Monday morning, at about 7 A.M., he heard Newsom damn Henry's unnamed master and swear that "they would get him before night."³⁷

In addition to Nelson and Barry Newsom, three other slaves from Peter Edward's plantation also joined the revolt. Sam was tried and convicted for his part in the revolt, although sources suggest that Sam was not an eager participant. Levi Waller, a white who from a hiding spot witnessed much of the carnage at his own home, "did not see the prisoner [Sam] engaged" in the massacre, but saw him "at some distance wiping his eyes." Also, the rebels themselves doubted Sam's commitment to their cause. They placed him "rather in the rear" of their group, significant since Nat Turner remembered positioning "the best armed and most to be relied on, in front." Nevertheless, Sam stayed with the rebels for the rest of the day. Two other men belonging to Peter Edwards were more willing rebels. Joseph Joines swore that "he had no doubt that" nineteen-year-old Jim "was guilty of insurrection as charged against him." More compelling evidence linked twenty-two-year-old Austin to the revolt. After Austin was killed, John Womack remembered finding that "he had a powder guard in his pocket."³⁸

The rebels left Peter Edwards' and headed for John T. Barrow's home, less than a mile away. The alarm, which had saved the Edwards and Nathaniel Francis, had reached Tom and Mary Barrow, but they had not yet made their way to safety. Early accounts of the insurrection reported that while Tom had been "apprised of their intentions, [his family] could not get away sufficiently soon." The tradition, recorded by Drewry in 1900, supplied one reason that they

³⁶ Southampton County Tax List, 1831; 1830 Census; 259. According to the 1830 census, five of the nine adult slaves were men, as were eight of the thirteen slaves between the ages of 10 and 24.

³⁷ Berry Newsom and Hardy's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 211, 202; Trial Notes. Henry described the time as "an hour + half by sun."

³⁸ Sam's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 218; Gray, 14; Joseph Joines' affidavit, Petitions.

may not have been able to escape. According to this account, Mary Barrow “did not wish to appear beyond her home in her daily costume, and was making her usual preparations.”³⁹

Tom Barrow had taken advantage of the delay to assemble and load his guns in case he met the rebels. When the rebels rode up to his house, they were attacked. In the first gunfight of the revolt, Tom Barrow shot his rifle, but there is no evidence that he hit anyone. Nat—the slave who had been hunting with Joe before they joined the revolt at Catherine Whitehead’s—returned fire, aiming at the master of the farm where he had worked as a slave a year earlier. Almost certainly, other insurgents also fired at the lone white gunman, but Tom Barrow survived the volley. Not having time to reload his rifle, Barrow picked up and fired a musket. By this point, the rebels were almost on top of him, and he used the backend of his musket “over the villain who first approached him.” Against the small rebel army, one man had no chance. He was “overpowered, and slain.” Drewry reported that he was killed by one of the insurgents who reached in an open window and slit Barrow’s throat as he fought the rebels in the house. Contemporary newspapers did not record such gory details, but reported that the rebels remembered Barrow’s particularly tenacious defense. After they had killed him, they supposedly assured themselves, “there were no more Tom Barrows to contend with.” By the time, the story of Barrow’s manly defense reached Robert Parker in North Carolina, the story had grown more heroic. In a “desperate battle V. S. 5 he kill’d 3.” Despite the potential exaggeration of Barrow’s success against the rebels, it seems plausible that Barrow put up a vigorous fight.⁴⁰

³⁹ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831; Drewry, 50. A letter written Wednesday, two days after the attack reported that the Barrows had “received some notice in the course of the morning of the murderous deeds that were going on; but placed no confidence in the story,” Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 44-45. While Thomas Barrow may have not initially credited the story of a slave revolt, his actions reported by other sources describe a man who—by the time the slaves arrived—was taking seriously the news of a slave revolt. Or this source may have had someone else in mind. The description of the attack at Barrow’s invoked details from Richard Whitehead’s death and Lavana Francis’s escape.

⁴⁰ Nat’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 196; Gray, 20; Drewry, 51; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 96; Robert S. Parker to Mrs. Rebecca Mannet, John Kimberly Papers, SHC. For a

While Tom Barrow was fighting for his life, his wife, Mary, had finally made her way away from the house. Tom had “told his wife to make her escape,” when—according to Mary’s testimony—their slave Lucy grabbed her and “held her about one minute.” Mary Barrow later told the court that she did not know what the twenty-year-old slave intended by holding her, “but [Barrow] thought it was to detain her” and prevent her escape. Lucy’s bold action—for which she would lose her life—is a rare example in the record of a slave woman actively supporting this revolt. Although the rebels apparently did not recruit slave women to join their army, they would have been grateful to Lucy for helping them catch Mary Barrow. Lucy’s efforts were foiled by another slave, unnamed in contemporary reports but identified as “Easter” by Drewry. The unnamed “negro,” who freed Mary Barrow from Lucy, led Mary to the woods where she hid from the rebels.⁴¹

After Mary Barrow escaped, Lucy returned to the Barrow house. Young Moses, who had been with the rebels from the beginning, later testified that he had seen Lucy “in company with the insurgents at the door.” When the rebels left, Lucy did not accompany them, but her actions seemed to encourage the insurgents in their battle against the slaveholders. Other slaves at the Barrow home may have joined the revolt, but at least one of the two or three most likely candidates, Moses, who lived with Lucy was away from the farm when the rebels arrived.⁴²

The contemporary death lists include George Vaughn, Mary Barrow’s brother, and his name is usually immediately after John T. Barrow’s. On the lists where those killed are subtotaled by house where they were killed, George Vaughn is included in the Barrow subtotal.

remarkable example of the glorification of Thomas Barrow’s death, see the ode “To the Memory of Thomas Barrow,” *Tarboro Free Press and Southerner*, 15 November 1831.

⁴¹ Gray, 20; Lucy’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 208; Drewry, 51; 1830 Census, 259. Drewry actually identified the slave woman as “Aunt Easter,” but no female slave on the farm would have been old enough to have been called “Aunt.” The oldest female slave on the farm was less than twenty-five years old.

⁴² Lucy and Moses’ Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 208, 182-84; 1830 Census, 259; Southampton County Tax List, 1831.

No contemporary account described his death, leaving Drewry's account written two generations later as the only record of Vaughn's death. Drewry reports that Vaughn was heading "to his sister's for a fox hunt."⁴³ No matter Vaughn's purpose, the rebels found and killed him as he approached the Barrow's house.

Having killed two men in the vicinity of the Barrow home, the rebels continued north to an obvious destination, the home of Captain Newit Harris. Harris lived on the road that led east, toward Jerusalem. Equally important to the rebels, Harris was one of the larger slaveholders in the parish. Out of the roughly nine hundred households listed on the 1831 tax list for St. Luke's Parish, only twenty-two slave owners had at least twenty slaves over twelve years old. Newit Harris owned thirty-one. Seven St. Luke's plantations held more adult and adolescent slaves than Harris', and only two of them held more than fifty slaves.⁴⁴ Harris' extensive holdings made him an important man in the neighborhood—evidenced by his title—and made his plantation an important target for the rebels hoping to gain the recruits that they needed for the revolt to succeed.

⁴³ Gray, 22; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 53; Norfolk, *American Beacon*, 14 September 1831, in Tragle, 78; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 97; Warner, in Tragle, 286; Drewry, 51.

⁴⁴ Southampton County Tax List, 1831.

CHAPTER 5

TO JERUSALEM

The detachment of the rebels who killed Trajan Doyle, now led by Nat Turner, followed the destruction left in the wake of the rebel army. At Newit Harris' plantation, they finally rejoined the main rebel force, which had found Harris' plantation deserted by the whites. When Nat Turner approached the rest of the rebel army, the troop, which now numbered about forty, "shouted and hurraed as I rode up." The general was back with his army. Flush from their victories, the rebels were enthusiastic about the ease of their revolt to this point. Up to this point late Monday morning, they had met no resistance, except the futile defense put up by thirty victims. Nat Turner—who had been reviled as a pariah when first told the black community about his messages from the Holy Spirit—was finally basking in the glory of an incredibly successful revolt. Seven rebels had grown into a small army of more than three-dozen men.¹ Perhaps the men who had joined the revolt, whose actions would surely cost them their lives if they failed, wondered if it were really as easy as it had been so far. All one had to do to overturn slavery was fight. The whites offered no resistance.

While easy victories buoyed the rebels' confidence, early less noticeable failures had created a dynamic that would lead to the defeat of the rebel forces. Ten hours after the first blood was split, having faced no resistance, the rebels were still scrounging for weapons and ammunition. At each plantation, the rebels scrambled for guns, and Nat Turner afterwards remembered that when he arrived at the Harris plantation, "some were in the yard, loading their

¹ Gray, 14.

guns.” At least those who were finding and loading guns were doing what they could to prepare themselves for the battles ahead. Others rebels had “destroyed the house, robbing him [Newit Harris] of money or other valuables.” Still “others [were] drinking,” which made the small army less dangerous.²

The biggest problem that the rebels had faced to this point in the revolt was the reluctance of other blacks to support their cause. After the revolt, whites celebrated the “true fidelity” displayed by many slaves during the uprising. The antislavery writer Mary Blackford, who visited Southampton less than a year after the revolt, recorded several “instances of faithfulness” by “the poor negro.” With these examples, Blackford hoped to “prove how much goodness and kindness there is in his nature.”³ One need not presume that blacks were especially good or kind to understand why many of them did not join Nat Turner and the other rebels. Many of those blacks who failed to support the revolt saw it as a tactical mistake, unlikely to attain its ends. Others may have thought that murder was no way to respond to bondage, or recoiled at the thought of killing people with whom they lived. Some may have thought a revolt foolhardy, not worth the vengeance that the whites would inflict upon innocent people. Others still may have been cowards, to whom the risk of death was too much to wager on any cause. For a slew of reasons, the rebels struggled to gain the support of the black community for their revolt.

Recruiting soldiers for the rebel army continued to be troublesome. At the time of the trials, many defendants suggested that they were unwilling soldiers who had been impressed against their wills. This defense was a natural one for men who had been seen with the rebels, but hoped to survive their trials. What else could they say? But just because it was the best defense did not mean that it was untrue. William Reese’s Jack, Nathaniel Francis’s Nathan, Tom

² *Ibid.*, 14.

³ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 95; Blackford, 28.

and Davy, Benjamin Blunt's Nathan and Peter Edward's Sam each offered witnesses who testified at their trials that they were neither willing recruits nor active rebels. While some of these six may have tried to appear reluctant to the whites only after the revolt failed, even the rebels themselves understood that some recruits did not want to support the revolt while it was underway. The rebels kept the least trustworthy rebels in the rear of their army, under an armed guard instructed to kill any who tried to escape.⁴

At least those recruits who had been dragooned accompanied the rebels. At some point, they might decide that they might as well support the revolt, as Elizabeth Turner's Davy had.⁵ A bigger problem for the rebels was their failure to recruit slaves from the plantations that they had visited. The rebels' ability to recruit varied by plantation. Fifteen of the rebels came from three farms on which one of the original five conspirators lived. Richard Porter's farm, where they enlisted four men, was the only other place that the rebels recruited successfully.

Other than those four plantations, the rebels recruiting efforts were notably unsuccessful. At Catherine Whitehead's, for instance, they failed to enlist any of the six men whose stories can be traced. At Newit Harris', the rebels failed to recruit many insurgents at a place where they could have increased the size of their army by a third or more. Drewry recorded the white story about the Harris plantation, which emphasized the loyalty of the Harris slaves: "[A]rmed with pitch-forks and hoes, they prepared to defend their master in case an attempt was made to find him."⁶ Much of this account is implausible: armed unfriendly slaves would have indicated to the rebel army that there was something or someone that the Harris slaves were hiding. Moreover, the next day, the rebels would return to this plantation with the intention of recruiting more men.

⁴ Nathan, Tom and Davy's Trial, and Jack, Nathan, and Sam's Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 200-01, 195-98, 200; 217-19; Gray, 14.

⁵ Davy and Joe's Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 185-86, 207.

⁶ Drewry, 54.

They would not have retreated from the whites to a place that they had encountered armed slaves loyal to their white master.

Despite Drewry's mistakes, his report that "Not one [Harris] slave joined the insurgents" cannot be easily dismissed. One contemporary newspaper article noted, "from the chief settlement among them," possibly an allusion to Harris's large slaveholdings, "not a man was obtained." No slave belonging to Harris was ever tried for involvement in the revolt. None were mentioned in any account, and, if any were killed, no compensation was sought from the Virginia legislature. Finally, the year after the revolt, Harris held more slaves than he had the year before. It is possible that a few slaves joined the revolt from Harris's plantation unbeknownst to white observers, but it seems doubtful that more than a few did. On the plantation belonging to the eighth largest slaveholder Southampton County, the failure to enlist any slaves into the rebel army was a tremendous setback.⁷

The rebels' inability to recruit at the plantations that they visited was only overshadowed by a more ominous but less obvious failure: their inability to recruit from plantations that they had not visited. As the word of the revolt spread throughout the neighborhood, few if any black men spontaneously joined the revolt. With the possible exception of Joe and Nat joining at Elizabeth Turner's, there is no record of spontaneous recruits. Whites at the time suggested that this pattern held throughout the revolt. Less than a month after the revolt, one correspondent from Southampton boasted that "there was not an instance of disaffection, in any section of our

⁷ *Ibid.*, 54; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 95; Southampton County Tax Lists, 1831, 1832. The argument that few, if any, slaves joined at the Harris plantation is also supported by the idea that some people had joined the rebel force during the morning but were not noted in any historical record. By the time that the rebels reached Harris's, thirty-two slaves can be identified as having joined the revolt. That leaves fewer than ten of the rebels who left Harris's unidentified. It is hard to imagine that all of the recruits invisible to the record came from one plantation, especially since it is unclear when some rebels, such as Will Artist, Edwin Turner's Nat, and Marmaduke, joined.

country; save on the plantations which Capt. Nat visited.”⁸ The contrast to the whites’ ability to muster a force is remarkable: those whites who believed the stories of the revolt fled to any safe haven they could find. White refugees flooded towns, crossroads, bridges, and strong houses. As a result, many white men were able to take the field in a relatively short time. Against white forces that would mass from throughout Southampton County and many parts of Virginia and North Carolina, a rebel army that could recruit only as fast as the army could travel was doomed.

Despite these bad omens, the troops of the unified army were in high spirits as they left the Harris plantation. Heading east, they went to Levi Waller’s plantation, which included a home, an iron works and a school. Waller later testified that he heard that the slaves had risen between 9 and 10 A.M. He sent his son, Thomas, to the schoolhouse to warn the master about the insurrection and have “his [other] children to come home.” Instructing the children to return home was a fatal mistake. No doubt the children would have increased their chances to escape the raid if they scattered in the woods and fields, but the children from the school dutifully headed to Waller’s home, a quarter mile from the schoolhouse. After the children arrived, Waller sent William Crocker, the schoolmaster, to the house to load the guns, but before Crocker could collect the weapons, he spotted the rebel army. Crocker ran to the still where Waller was and announced the frightful news.⁹

Unprepared to defend the home against impossible odds, the men fled from the still and tried to escape the rebels intent on murder. According to the story that Crocker’s daughter told Drewry, Crocker fled through a cornfield. In the field, he stopped, dropped his sword and prepared to shoot the rebel who had chased him. At that moment, however, a girl ran across the lane and distracted Crocker’s would-be assassin. Crocker then fled to a safer location, but not

⁸ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 95.

before he had picked up a gold watch that he had dropped, which he feared might provide the rebels a clue about the direction he went.¹⁰

Waller's testimony at the trials described his own flight in an unheroic way, making his own testimony about the events particularly compelling. According to his testimony, several insurgents saw Waller and chased him as he ran from the still. Hoping to make an escape, Waller hurdled a fence and hid among the weeds behind the corner of the fence. During the chase, Dred, who joined the revolt at Nathaniel Francis's, might have recognized Waller, a man who claimed to know Dred "well." Mounted and armed, he rode over to the fence to try to spot anyone who was trying to escape. Even though he was only thirty feet away from the rebels, Waller's hiding spot was good enough. Dred—distracted by the rebels who had spotted Alfred, Waller's blacksmith, running away—stopped looking for Waller and rejoined the rest of the raiding party.¹¹

Once Waller escaped the rebels, he watched the slaveholding south's worst nightmare unfold on his plantation. Waller "saw his whole family murdered in the yard within two rods of him." A letter written from a tutor in Virginia to his family in New Hampshire immediately after

⁹ Nat Turner's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 221; Drewry, 56. As one might expect for a schoolteacher, William M. Crocker owned no slaves. See Southampton County Tax Lists, 1831.

¹⁰ Drewry, 57.

¹¹ Dred and Nat Turner's Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 198, 221-22; and *New Hampshire Post*, 14 September 1831. Drewry recounts a story about how Waller was saved by a misdirection of Waller's blacksmith Davy, who distracted Dred and other rebels from conducting a more thorough search for Waller. Levi Waller rejected this story and was a primary witness against his own slave, remembering that Davy "drank with them—rode his master's horse off in good spirits—was called brother *Clements* by one of the company—left there in great glee." See Drewry, 56-57; Davy's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 194. The only way that this story makes sense is to suppose that Levi Waller owned two slaves named Davy. Parramore revises this story, recognizing that Davy joined the revolt and was probably not a blacksmith—he was valued at \$300, less than the average compensation for a slave executed for involvement in the revolt. Instead, Parramore writes that Waller's blacksmith Alfred led the rebels away from Waller's hiding place. Parramore is silent about Drewry's claim that the blacksmith meant to save Waller, but Drewry's image of the loyal slave appears suspect. Alfred may have led the rebels away from Waller, but Alfred could have simply intended to flee, inadvertently saving his master without knowing it. Alfred was killed in the aftermath of the revolt, and Waller implied that he had joined the revolt, describing the "dreadful atrocities which this wretch and his misguided associates had committed." See Parramore, *Southampton County*, 90; Waller Petition, 12 December 1831, Petitions. Another possibility is that in an effort to win compensation for a slave, Waller's petition ungratefully de-emphasized Alfred's role in saving his master.

the revolt described how the event shocked Waller—according to the letter “ra[vin]g distracted”—but by the time of the trials Waller had collected himself and was giving precise testimony. He testified that he saw Daniel and Aaron, two rebels who had joined at Richard Porter’s, accompany one of the original conspirators, Sam, and chase Waller’s wife and a small girl. The two ran into a log house where the three insurgents trapped them. After a while, the rebels left the house, Daniel holding Mrs. Waller’s scissors. Much later, after the rebels had left the plantation, Waller went into the log house and confirmed what he knew: his wife and the child were dead. Waller may have been spared witnessing the execution of his wife and the child; but he saw at least one of his children’s executions. In a deposition recorded in November in Jerusalem, the clerk wrote that Waller plainly described seeing Peter Edwards’ Nelson, “knock one of the family’s brains out with the but [sic] of a musket + further he saith not.”¹²

During the melee, one of the insurgents glimpsed Waller. Realizing that he had been spotted, Waller ran away from the house. Two rebels pursued the white man, but they were unable to find him once he made it to a nearby swamp. Eventually they gave up the chase and returned to the other rebels. The murders continued although no contemporary report described how the rest of the children were killed. Drewry recorded how Clarinda Jones fled from the approaching rebels. One of the rebels, who Drewry described as pursuing William Crocker, shot the little girl who was scurrying over a fence, hitting her with two buck-shot in her leg. She fell but remained silent and was not discovered. According to this account, her sister, Lucinda, had less luck. She tried to hide by concealing herself in the chimney, but she was discovered. As the insurgents yanked the young girl out of the chimney, “the flesh was torn from her fingers” as she

¹² *New Hampshire Post*, 14 September 1831; Daniel’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 177-78; Richard Porter Petition, 12 December 1831, Petitions; Sam’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, 191. One rod is 16.5 feet. Parramore correctly identifies the three insurgents who killed Waller’s wife and notes the scissors that Daniel

tried to hold on the rod on which pots could be hung. After they pulled her out of her hiding place, the rebels killed her.¹³

This dramatic story, related third hand to Drewry seven decades after the revolt, however, has enough in common with the contemporary reports that it seems at least partly derivative, although possibly mistaken in some important details. According to the first report from Jerusalem that described the events at Waller's home, the first survivor that forces from Southampton found was a young girl "who had sagacity enough to creep up a chimney." John Hampton Pleasants, the editor of Richmond's *Constitutional Whig*, who traveled to Southampton as part of the Richmond troop, confirmed the early report. "One small child in the house at the time, escaped by concealing herself in the fireplace, witnessing from her place of concealment, the slaughter of the family, and her elder sisters among them." In Thomas Gray's comments at the end of the *Confessions*, he described how the little girl escaped by running "up a dirt chimney, (such as are common to log houses,) and remained there unnoticed during the massacre." Two girls may have climbed separate chimneys, or the first reports to Jerusalem may have been wrong about what the girl they found said, but Drewry's report seems the least reliable on this point. Still, Clarinda Williams may have been among those lucky enough to escape.¹⁴

While at least four men and one child survived, seven more children suffered the same fate as Mrs. Waller and the two girls who Waller saw killed. One other victim, "an infant child," survived the raid but endured such serious wounds that he died two days after the raid. Drewry tried to explain the discrepancy between the perfect survival rate of the white men over sixteen

carried away after the murders. He also identifies Waller as the person who had had the mental breakdown described in the *New Hampshire Post* letter. See Parramore, *Southampton County*, 90.

¹³ Drewry, 57.

¹⁴ Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 44; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 51; Gray, 19. Parramore implied that Drewry mangled the story of Clarinda and Lucinda Williams, identifying Clarinda, the survivor, as the one who climbed the chimney. See Parramore, *Southampton County*, 90. For the survival of Waller's sons, see Southampton County Tax List, 1832.

and the remarkable murder rate of women and children on Waller's plantation. He remarked, "Mrs. Waller had advised the men to flee, as she thought the negroes would not kill the women and children."¹⁵ There is no collaboration for this account, so one might dismiss it as an effort to justify an example of a plantation on which the southern chivalric code blatantly failed. Waller, his sons, and William Crocker abandoned Mrs. Waller and ten children in order to save themselves.

Not many people have ever found themselves in the situation that Levi Waller was in late in the morning on 22 August 1831. His children, including "one at the breast" were killed while he sat and watched helplessly from a nearby field. Despite his impotence, he was a persistent witness. After he was chased away into the swamp, he waited until he was sure that his pursuers had left. "After remaining some time," Waller crept to a plum orchard and watched as the rebels celebrated their successful raid. At this point, it seems that all the murders had been committed. His own slave Davy, who had not been around when the rebels struck, returned to the plantation and appeared pleased with the developments. According to Waller, after Davy returned to the plantation, he "dressed himself clean—drank with them—rode his master's horse off in good spirits—was called brother *Clements* by one of the company—left there in great glee." Waller specifically recalled Nathaniel Francis's Dred also was drinking, and his testimony at Nat Turner's trial, that "the negroes were drinking," made the celebration appear general. Hark seems to have been among those celebrating another successful raid. Waller remembered him in the yard of his house, acting "as one of the company of the insurgents." As much camaraderie as

¹⁵ Daniel's Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 178; Drewry, 58.

the men enjoyed, Hark was not just one of the men. Although the revolt was only hours old, the insurgents had already learned to address Hark as “Captain Moore.”¹⁶

In one of the most arresting vignettes of the revolt, Waller—a man who reportedly broke down after the revolt—described how one of the rebels seemed unenthusiastic about the revolt. Sam, who had been enlisted on Peter Edwards’ plantation, seemed upset at the developments. Waller had not seen Sam involved in the murders, but afterwards Waller noticed him “some distance” away “wiping his eyes.” When the rebels got ready to leave the Waller plantation, Sam “seemed disposed to remain,” but Nat Turner went over and told Sam “to get on his horse.” Despite his hesitance, Sam obeyed the order: he “did get up and go off with them.” Even reluctant recruits respected the command of General Turner. Nat Turner was not simply one of the principals of the revolt. He was its leader. According to Waller, he “seemed to command the party ... [and] gave the command to the party to ‘go ahead,’ when they left his [Waller’s] house.”¹⁷

With Sam and two new recruits, Davy and Alfred, the rebels left Waller’s farm, continuing on their way toward Jerusalem. On the way, they stopped at William Williams’ home. They caught Williams and two little boys, named Miles and Henry Johnson, according to Drewry. While the rebels executed these three, Mrs. Williams ran away. She survived long enough for Nat Turner and the rebels in the rear to catch up to the vanguard. Nat Turner later described her death. She “got some distance from the house, but she was pursued, overtaken, and compelled to get up behind one of the company, who brought her back, and after showing her the mangled body of her husband, she was told to get down and lay by his side, where she

¹⁶ John H[ill] Wheeler, *Historical Sketches of North Carolina from 1584 to 1851* II (Philadelphia, 1851), 210; Nat Turner, Davy, and Hark’s Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 198, 222, 192.

was shot dead.” This was the final execution of a white that Nat Turner witnessed.¹⁸ There is no record whether any of Williams’ three slaves over twelve years old were men or whether they joined the revolt.

After the rebels left William Williams’ farm, they headed to the nearby plantation of Jacob Williams, Williams’ uncle. According to the slave Stephen’s testimony, he and Edward Drewry were considering how they were going to measure the corn that they were loading. Seeing the vanguard of the rebels force galloping towards them, Edward turned to Stephen and exclaimed “Lord, who is that coming?” Drewry did not recognize what was happening in time to make his escape, and the rebels killed him. After Drewry died, Stephen joined the rebels. One slave named Stephen, belonging to James Bell, was tried for his involvement with the revolt, but he was acquitted. It is highly likely that this was the same person who described Edward Drewry’s death. The historian William S. Drewry recorded the story that Edwin [sic] Drewry also worked for Bell. After Drewry was killed, Stephen was impressed into the rebel army, but he escaped soon enough for the white court to find him not guilty of participating in the revolt.¹⁹

Leaving the corncrib and Drewry’s corpse, the rebels then went to Jacob Williams’ home. At his house, the rebels found his wife and two sons, but Jacob and his two daughters were away. The rebels also attacked the home of Caswell Worrell, a neighbor, who “overlooks for Jacob

¹⁷ *New Hampshire Post*, 14 September 1831; Sam and Nat Turner’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 218; 222. See also Waller’s statement in Trial Notes, Library of Virginia. Thomas Parramore found this letter and is the first to identify Waller, who was unnamed in the *New Hampshire Post* letter.

¹⁸ Gray, 14-15; Drewry, 61. Turner testified that since he traveled in the rear of the rebels, he only saw one execution after they left Catherine Whithead’s. The detail provided in his account of Mrs. Williams’ death suggests that this was the murder he witnessed.

¹⁹ Nelson’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 95-96; Drewry, 61.

Williams.” Worrell had been at work with Williams’ slaves working a “new field,” leaving Worrell’s wife and child home alone. The rebels killed the woman and her child.²⁰

Having killed five whites at Williams and Worrell’s homes, the rebels recruited another soldier, Jacob Williams’ Nelson. Four witnesses testified at Nelson’s trial about his actions but the lacunae and conflicts in their testimony created an imperfect image of the events on the Williams’ plantation. When Worrell, the overseer, went to Nelson’s home on the morning of the revolt, he “found him [Nelson] from home.” According to Cynthia, another slave, Nelson returned later on Monday morning “seemingly very sick.” No one explained why he felt sick; it is possible that he was worried about the revolt, not unlike Jack and Nat Turner. Apparently, Nelson had advance knowledge about the revolt. Three days before the revolt began, Nelson had told Caswell Worrell to “look out and take care of themselves—that something would happen before long.” He also told Worrell, “any body of his practice could tell these things.” While Nelson presented himself as a soothsayer, his mystical skills may have been aided by a source close to the rebels. Knowing that the revolt was approaching, however, made him no more eager to join the rebel forces, and Stephen recalled that Nelson “seemed unwilling to go.”²¹

With a small army of slaves telling him that participation in the revolt was not optional, Nelson finally agreed to join the revolt, but with one condition: that he first change into his best clothes. All four witnesses at Nelson’s trial noted his special attire, although none offered any

²⁰ Nelson’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 193. Early reports describe three children dying on Williams’ plantation but these numbers were revised down. According to the 1830 census, Jacob Williams had four children—two boys and two girls—all under five years old. No record from the time explained how the two daughters who survived managed to survive. See 1830 Census, 259. For an example of an early estimate, see Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 53. For the “corrected statement of the names and numbers of persons murdered” in Norfolk’s *American Beacon* 14 September 1831, in Tragle, 78-79, and Gray’s list of those killed, 22.

²¹ Nelson’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 193-94. One other possibility was that Nelson was the original Nelson with the conspirators at Cabin Pond. In this case, he appeared in the morning before the other rebels. I reject that possibility for reasons explained above, not least of which was that General Nelson had died before this Nelson had been tried.

description of the peculiar dress. Sometime after Nelson had changed into his finest outfit, Jacob Williams returned to the plantation. Since Jacob Williams survived the revolt, the rebels must not have been there at the moment. Yet Williams' testimony at Nelson's trial about his clothes suggested that the rebels had already visited the plantation. One might try to reconcile the testimony at Nelson's trial by supposing that Williams returned to his home after the rebels had left for a first time—perhaps for the Worrell's house—but before they returned to collect Nelson. Maybe the vanguard of the force left Williams' house, planning to return and reunite with Nat Turner and slower part of their forces, who had not seen the assault on Williams' home.²² If so, Jacob Williams' family would have already been dead as Jacob Williams left his plantation after seeing Nelson that morning.

Stephen swore that Nelson seemed unwilling to go with the rebels, but Jacob Williams had a different impression. According to him, when he found Nelson at home dressed in his best clothes he had “a suspicion” that Nelson “had some intention of attacking him.” Without the support of the other rebels, Nelson decided not to attack his master. Jacob Williams went to work in the woods where he spent the day measuring some timber, oblivious to the revolt, his family's fate, and exactly how close he had come to dying. Caswell Worrell, Nelson's overseer, also testified that Nelson tried to lead him into a trap. According to Worrell's testimony, Nelson went out to field where Caswell and Williams' other slaves were working. Nelson was already dressed in his best clothes, which puts this episode after the rebels' initial visit to the plantation. When Nelson got out to the new ground, he told Worrell that he was “too sick” and he asked his overseer “to go to the house with him.” Nelson led Worrell back to the Williams' main house

²² *Ibid.* I accept that Nat Turner and the trailing group of rebels were not at Jacob Williams' because he testified that “I never got to the houses, after leaving Mrs. Whitehead's, until the murders were committed except in one case,” Gray, 14. Turner makes no mention of the murders of Caswell Worrell's family, which supports the idea that it was a strike that was done without Turner's knowledge. This hypothesis implies that the time that Jacob Williams

just before the rebels arrived, and Worrell later swore that he believed that this was done so that the rebels could “trap him that he might be killed.” If the rebels went away with the intention of returning, it would explain how Nelson knew that the rebels would soon return, the key to the trap Worrell described. Nelson’s plan—which I assume was his alone, since a better plan would have simply been to get several of the rebels to rush Worrell—failed when Worrell headed back to work “just before the insurgents arrived.”²³

The testimony about Nelson’s actions consistently described a man who had no love for the whites on his own farm. When he came across the corpses of his mistress and her children, Nelson “stepped over the dead bodies without any manifestation of grief.” Despite his lack of grief over these murders and his apparent desire to kill his master and overseer, Nelson may have been less enthusiastic about the revolt once it left his own farm. Stephen, the witness who testified about Drewry’s death, remembered that Nelson “was forced to go with them [the rebels and] lagged behind when he was guarded.” If he were not enthusiastic about joining the revolt at first, his commitment to the revolt grew quickly. He stayed with the rebels the rest of the day, long after most of the reluctant rebels deserted.²⁴

On the road, the rebels also encountered Moses, who belonged to the recently killed Thomas Barrow. Moses had met Newit Drew on the road shortly before he encountered the rebels. What he was supposed to be doing on the road was disputed. According to Moses, Newit Drew had sent him to Rebecca Vaughn’s to “see what the news was.” Drew disagreed, remembering instead that he had “ordered him [Moses] to go home.” Whether he was supposed

realized that he escaped from the rebels in the evening was the second time he had nearly been killed. For my discussion of Turner’s perspective, see chapter 10.

²³ Nelson’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 193-94.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

to return to Thomas Barrow's or head on to Rebecca Vaughn's, Moses ran into the rebel army and Hark remembered "that the prisoner [Moses] joined them voluntarily."²⁵

With these new recruits—Stephen, Nelson and Moses—the insurgents traveled the house of a neighbor, Rebecca Vaughn. The most reliable account of the events at the Vaughn's was that of a "venerable negro women," perhaps Delsy, a slave who lived on at the Vaughn's house who later testified at a trial about the revolt. This slave woman told John Hampden Pleasants, the newspaperman who traveled with the Richmond troop to Southampton, what had happened at the Vaughn's during the revolt. According to this account, Rebecca Vaughn was at work "making some preparations for dinner" on her porch "near noon." (Another account explained that Vaughn was giving "some directions to a servant who was peeling peaches for dinner.") While on the front of her house, she saw the cloud of dust being raised by the rebel's cavalry "and wondered what it could mean." As soon as the mounted black men emerged from the cloud, Rebecca Vaughn recognized the danger. She made "an exclamation indicative of her horror and agony" and then ran into the house. The rebels dismounted and surrounded the house, covering all windows and doors with their guns. Understanding that she could neither flee nor fight the rebel army, Vaughn appeared at a window and begged that the rebels spare her life. One rebel responded with a gunshot. That shot missed, but another rebel fired and killed her as she was "inviting them to take everything she had."²⁶

Eliza Ann Vaughn was also in the house when the rebels approached. According to the unnamed slave, the younger Vaughn heard the commotion as she was upstairs. Understanding

²⁵ Moses' Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 183.

²⁶ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 68. The 1830 census recorded nine slaves, including one black woman between the age of 35 and 55 at Rebecca Vaughn's farm. See also Emma Mordecai to Ellen Mordecai, undated (possibly 1 September 1831), Mordecai Family Collection, SHC. Mordecai's reported added the detail about the peaches. This detail, which was not in the *Constitutional Whig* article, suggests that Emma Mordecai had a different source than Pleasant's article. Since Mordecai's account follows Pleasants' in

what was happening, she barged from the house and begged that the rebels spare her life. Twenty-one-year-old Marmaduke, shot the young Vaughn before she could run a few steps from the house. Since Nat Turner placed the most reliable rebels in the front of the strike force, Marmaduke had earned the trust of the leaders of the revolt. Even after he was captured, Marmaduke had the respect of the other prisoners, and Pleasants described him as “the principal” among the thirteen prisoners he saw at Cross Keys after the revolt had failed.²⁷

Arthur Vaughn, Rebecca’s fifteen-year-old son who had been working at the family’s still, heard the attack that killed his mother and sister. He went to investigate. As he climbed a fence heading back to the Vaughn’s main house, the rebels spotted and shot him. Once the fighting had ended at Vaughn’s farm, the rebels turned to drinking and eating. According to one witness, the rebels “called for drink, and food, and becoming nice, damned the brandy as vile stuff.” When the trailing rebels arrived, they joined the celebratory meal. Even Nelson, one of the most recent recruits, warmed to this part of the revolt. According to Stephen, Nelson drank with the others, and “had his tickler filled by his own request.”²⁸

At this point, the rebel army consisted of fifty or sixty men “all mounted and armed with guns, axes, swords and clubs.” While some rebels were brought into the insurrection against their wills, the rebel leadership avoided mutiny and foiled any mass desertions. With this impressive force, Nat Turner headed towards Jerusalem. In Jerusalem, Turner hoped the rebels would be able “to procure arms and ammunition.”²⁹ There, he believed, those rebels who carried axes, clubs, and muskets would find rifles. Bullets would replace birdshot.

every major detail, it seems that at a minimum they were drawn someone who heard the same slave woman’s testimony. Delsy gave testimony in the Trial of Moses, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 183.

²⁷ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August and 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 52, 68. No evidence allows the historian to say where Marmaduke lived, who his owner was, or when he joined the revolt.

²⁸ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 68-69; Nelson’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 194.

²⁹ Gray, 15.

Until then, the rebels would be forced to carry on their battle with the motley assortment of weapons they had accumulated. Despite the outdated weapons his men carried, Nat Turner believed that his four or five dozen men, all on horseback, were powerful enough to overwhelm the town and whatever defenses the inhabitants had prepared upon hearing of the revolt. The unified rebel force left the Vaughn place and started on the road that led directly into the county seat. They had to ride only three miles before they reached the bridge across the Nottoway River, which led into Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 6

WAR

As the rebels rode northeast on the road to Jerusalem on Monday afternoon, they approached the gate to James Parker's farm. Someone had told the rebels that the Parkers had already left. Since Nat Turner understood that time was critical, he wanted to bypass the farm that the whites had abandoned, but some rebels who had relatives on Parker's place objected. They wanted to enlist their relatives in the rebel army. According to the 1831 tax list, Parker had thirteen slaves over twelve years old. Probably seven or eight of these were males, and at least four were men between sixteen and thirty-five years old.¹ With a prime recruiting opportunity at hand, Nat Turner relented and agreed to let the main force of rebels head down to recruit Parker's slaves from his farm, half a mile from the road.

The story of Nat Turner not joining the recruiting party at Parker's farm fits a surprising pattern. After the meetings of the five first conspirators in early 1831, there is no account—even in the *Confessions*—of Nat Turner recruiting any of the rebels himself. During the revolt, Turner's ability to recruit was limited by the place he took in his army. As the small force wended its way toward Jerusalem, its general rode in the rear. As a result, Nat Turner was not among those rebels who first encountered the potential recruits and tried to convince them to join the rebel army. Although some of the new recruits may have joined simply because they heard that Nat Turner led the revolt, this pattern seems to increase the likelihood that others joined for different reasons. Like Will, some may have joined out of their hatred of slavery. Like Jack and

the potential recruits at Parker's farm, some may have joined at the instigation of family and friends. They may have joined for the chance to carry guns, to dress and eat well. They may have seen the revolt as a path that led to freedom, whether permanent or just long enough to get drunk. Some may have even joined to save themselves from the retribution that the rebels threatened. Whatever inspired the new recruits to join this band, one thing is clear: at Parker's place and elsewhere, the new recruits did not join because Nat Turner had asked.²

Nat Turner waited at the gate with the seven or eight other slaves who had remained behind while most of the rebels went to the farm. According to Drewry, as the recruiting party was destroying the abandoned household, they came across barrels of brandy stored in the cellar. They pulled the barrels out into the yard. After the rebels drank their fill, they decided to "lay down to slumber before returning to their leader." There is plenty of evidence of the rebels drinking along the way, so it would not be surprising that they drank Parker's brandy. The story of naps is less plausible. Although some of the rebels were in the middle of their second day with little or no sleep, the recruiting party had left a handful of rebels standing at Parker's gate, including Nat Turner. Precious time was melting away and Nat Turner, who admitted that he had become "impatient," eventually headed across a hill that separated those at the gate from the farm.³

¹ Southampton County Tax List, 1831. The 1830 Census noted that James Parker had eight male slaves over ten-years old, two of whom were over thirty-five years old. The numbers I give are estimates based upon both the census and the tax list, assuming that the makeup of Parker's slaves had not changed dramatically since 1830.

² The idea of Nat Turner as personally responsible for the involvement of other rebels was asserted in contemporary accounts. According to Gray's description of Turner's sentencing, Jeremiah Cobb described Nat Turner as the "author of their [the other rebels'] misfortune," who "forced them unprepared, from Time to Eternity." Gray, 21. More recent historians have also emphasized Turner's sway in the black community, although no evidence for this can be seen in the recruiting patterns during the revolt. Eric Foner insists that "Turner had acquired an immense reputation and influence among the county's slaves.... [I]t is certain that Turner's position as a preacher made him a leader of the slave community." *Nat Turner: Great Lives Observed* ed. Eric Foner (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 2. Kenneth S. Greenberg agrees that Turner's talents and persona "marked him as a leader in the community." *The Confession of Nat Turner and Related Documents* ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (St. Martin's Press, NY: 1996), 2.

³ Drewry, 63; Gray, 15.

While Nat Turner was rallying the main rebel force, a force of about sixteen to eighteen whites under the command of Alexander Peete had come across the remnant of rebels who had remained on the road. Not from the immediate neighborhood of the revolt, Peete lived in St. Luke's Parish near enough to the revolt that he was among the first to respond. Although no sources describe how this force assembled or organized itself, it is not surprising that the man who assumed command of the first white forces to respond to the revolt was himself a major slaveholder. Peete owned thirty-one slaves, and two free blacks lived on his plantation. None of them, including twelve men between the ages of eleven and thirty-seven, seems to have participated in the revolt.⁴ Peete and the men who followed him had followed the rebels' trail from Newit Harris' plantation along the road to Jerusalem.

At Parker's gate, Alexander Peete and his forces finally came within sight of the rebels who had stayed behind when the other rebels went to recruit soldiers at Parker's farm. When the white force approached, the seven or eight rebels who had remained at the gate scattered. Nat Turner said that the whites "fired on those at the gate," even though the white men were under orders not to fire. As soon as the handful of rebels at the gate saw that they were outnumbered, they fled. None of these rebels retreated toward the main rebel army, suggesting that they were not among those most committed to the revolt. Perhaps they included those reluctant recruits who were impressed into the rebel army and kept under guard. Drewry reports that Stephen, who was conscripted at Jacob Williams' plantation, fled from Parker's field and rode his horse into Jerusalem "halloing at the top of his voice who he was and why he was riding so rapidly."⁵ Others probably drew less attention to themselves as they escaped from both the whites and the

⁴ Census 1830.

⁵ Richmond *Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 60; Gray, 15; Drewry, 61.

rebels. Maybe they hoped they could escape the fate that everyone knew awaited the rebels should the revolt fail.

The confidence of the white militiamen must have been buoyed by the ease with which they dispersed the first rebel force they had encountered. They turned off the road and headed down towards the main rebel army, hoping that the next victory would be as easy. Captain Alexander P. Peete apparently understood the real danger. After his men fired their guns, his force would be vulnerable to a counterattack before his men could reload. He ordered his men to hold their fire until they were within thirty yards of the rebels, hoping to get maximum effect from the volley and buy enough time for his men to reload their weapons.⁶ If the rebels—who had a force twice the size of Peete’s—rallied before his men could reload, he knew that there was nothing he could do to prevent his force from being destroyed.

The battle on Parker’s field began badly for the whites. Peete’s intelligent order to hold fire was ignored by one of his men—Drewry said Hartie Joyner fired the shot—who fired at the rebels from about a hundred yards. With the shot, any of the rebels who had not yet seen the militia that was heading their way looked up and realized that the first battle of the revolt had begun. The first response of men on both sides was the same: the men—none of whom had ever been in a battle—panicked. A week after the revolt, a white correspondent penned one of the earliest descriptions of the battle. Writing about the white militia, he said that only “very few of whom came into action,” although he did not explain why. Nat Turner’s *Confessions* described the context more fully. Even before Nat Turner ordered his men forward, he “discovered about half of them [the whites] retreating.”⁷ This left the white force of fewer than ten men armed

⁶ Gray, 15.

⁷ Drewry, 65; Richmond *Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 60; Gray, 15.

mostly with shotguns facing a rebel army five or six times its size that had already killed more than four dozen whites.

Many rebels were no less terrified than the whites; Nat Turner acknowledged that his men “appeared to be alarmed.” A white force was approaching and the rebels were unready for battle. Nat Turner quickly assumed his position as the leader of the revolt and ordered his men to halt and form ranks. Some of the main rebel force probably fled on the first sight of the whites, but the steady influence of the bravest and most committed rebels, ensured that the rebels were not routed by a smaller force that had only fired a single shot. The efforts to rally the rebels worked. Sampson Reese, a white soldier who survived the battle, remembered seeing the rebels who he saw fighting “in a body” together.⁸

According to the *Confessions*, Nat Turner called for his troops to counterattack. The rebels approached the handful of white militia men who now held their ground. Once the rebel force came to within about fifty yards, the whites fired a volley. It is unclear from the record how effective that volley was, but the remnant of the white force—with unloaded weapons and no time to reload—now faced an organized and deadly rebel army. The white soldiers had no option but to retreat, and the rebels began pursuit. The rebels won the field and caught several militiamen “who we thought we left dead.”⁹ As the rebels chased the whites back towards Parker’s gate, they must have believed that they had a chance of annihilating the entire white force.

On their way to Parker’s gate, the rebels had knocked one of the white soldiers from his horse when they were greeted with a round of fire. This volley broke the rebel advance and saved the life of one white man who had been unseated by the rebels. The rebels were stunned

⁸ Gray, 15; folder “Daniel,” Southampton County, County Court Judgments, LV.

⁹ Gray, 15.

by the ambush. Even after the revolt, Nat Turner did not realize what had happened. Nat Turner suspected that the volley had come from the men who had first “fallen back to meet the others with amunition [sic].” In fact, another white party in the area heard the sounds of the battle on Parker’s field. When these men reached Parker’s gate, they dismounted their horses and prepared the ambush.¹⁰

As the rebels pursued Peete and the surviving remnant of his force, the rebels walked right into the withering fire of a second party of whites. Nat Turner immediately realized that he had engaged a much larger force than he first saw approaching the rebels across Parker’s field. In his quick reassessment of the situation, however, he made a critical mistake. Not realizing that the rebels were now fighting two parties, he did not realize how thoroughly the rebels had defeated the first contingent of whites. He assumed that, except for inflicting a few white casualties, the rebels had done nothing more than force a tactical retreat of Peete’s men. In fact, between the militia who fled and those who were injured by the rebels, the first force had been soundly defeated. Underestimating the rebel’s initial victory and overestimating the discipline of his opponents, Nat Turner saw the effect of the ambush and decided that his men could not dislodge the whites. While the rebels fled, Nat Turner remembered that “[t]he white men pursued and fired on us several times.” During the retreat, Hark had his horse killed, but Nat Turner corralled another. Nat Turner and Hark got away.¹¹

While a report written by a white correspondent a month later recalled that seven blacks died during the battle, Nat Turner recalled leaving no dead on the field. Even if Turner’s

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16. See also Gray’s parenthetical explanation of the arrival of the other troops. David F. Allmendinger, Jr. argues that although Gray’s *Confessions* are generally reliable, they are not trustworthy on the events at Parker’s farm. There, he argues, Gray’s perspective trumps Turner’s. I disagree for reasons I explain in my discussion of the *Confessions*. See Allmendinger, “The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,” in Greenberg, 32, and Chapter 11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 15-16. Turner was also wrong about the white casualties, at least according to Gray’s own parenthetical comments in the *Confessions*.

assessment were right, the rebels' defeat was damaging enough for the rebels' cause: since the first whites arrived at Parker's gate, the rebels had lost most of their men. A crew of fifty to sixty men had been reduced to a main force of about twenty in a matter of minutes.

As bad as the defeat was for the rebels, the simple headcount probably overstates the damage to the rebel force. One suspects that some who had been separated from the main rebel force wanted to continue fighting and would when they had the chance. A large part of the losses also included those who had joined the revolt under duress and had never fully committed themselves to the rising. Moses, the young slave who had been brought along from the Travis's plantation, admitted that he left the rebel army after "the insuregants [sic] were repulsed by force to retreat from Parker's field." Sam—the rebel who had been crying at Levi Waller's before Nat Turner had ordered him to rejoin the rebels—also made it home to Peter Edward's plantation a couple hours after the battle, leading the whites to conclude that he likely left the rebels "at Parkers field after the insurgents retreated." Drewry reports that another slave, who belonged to Mrs. Gideon Bell, who—if the story is true—was completely invisible to the contemporary historical record, used the confusion surrounding the battle as a chance to escape the rebels, "leaving his pursuers far behind, he spread far and wide the intelligence of the movements of the blacks."¹²

Reflecting on the battle, Nat Turner seemed more discouraged by the wounds suffered by "several of my bravest men," than by the decrease in the size of his force. None of the men who were injured can be definitively identified. While the identities of the injured rebels and the

¹² *Ibid.*, 15-16; John T. Brown to Henry Brown, Jr. Brown-Coalter-Tucker Papers, 26 September 1831, Special Collections, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary; Moses and Sam's Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 220, 218; Drewry, 68. It is unclear from Southampton County's 1831 list and the 1830 census who Mrs. Gideon Bell could have been.

wounds they sustained are unknown, Turner's later testimony made clear that his army took casualties in the first battle of the revolt.¹³

After the battle at Parker's, Nat Turner hoped that he would be able to reassemble a fighting force large enough to attack Jerusalem. If the rebels could cross the Nottoway River and enter from the southeast, he believed they would be able to enter the town unobstructed. From the available evidence, he gauged the white response perfectly. According to a report published in the *Richmond Compiler*, most of the white men had been sent west toward Parker's to engage the rebels. This left the town full of women and children "guarded by only a few men." As the rebels made their way east toward the Cypress Bridge, which was two or three miles east of Parker's field and about three miles downstream from Jerusalem, they came across "two or three" stragglers who told them that the other rebels had "dispersed in every direction." At this point, Nat Turner surmised that the rebels' efforts to "collect a sufficient force" from among the stragglers "to proceed to Jerusalem" were "in vain." Drewry suggests that the rebels also found out that Cypress Bridge was guarded, which, if true, would have also encouraged the rebels to develop a new plan.¹⁴

Nat Turner quickly revised his plan. Instead of sacrificing his small and injured force in attacks on Cypress Bridge and Jerusalem, the rebels would return to the places where they had recruited the best. He guessed that many of those who had deserted the rebel army would return to their homes. Thus, if the rebels retraced their steps, they would find many of those who had been separated from the rebel army. Once they found them, Nat Turner believed that the rebels

¹³ Gray, 16; Oates, 89; Drewry, 67, fn. 1. Stephen B. Oates guesses that Nathaniel Francis's Dred lost his arm during the battle. Oates bases his identification on Drewry, who notes that a slave who worked for Nathaniel Francis had returned to his home after the revolt "one arm having been shot off." Unfortunately for Oates's interpretation, it seems unlikely that Dred had been shot. The report that described Dred's capture noted that he "surrendered himself to his master, in the apprehension, no doubt of starving in the swamps or being shot by the numerous parties of local militia." *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 70.

¹⁴ *Richmond Compiler*, 29 August 1831, quoted in Johnson, 121; Gray, 16; Drewry, 67.

who fled “would rejoin me” and others who had not been a part of the revolt would enlist.¹⁵

Amid the chaos that followed the first battle, Nat Turner planned to rebuild his army and then make war on Jerusalem again.

One can infer from the *Confessions* that the rebels took the road southwest from Cypress Bridge toward Newsoms’ farm. Apparently, they wanted to avoid the whites who they believed would have been massed at Parker’s gate. This roundabout route also gave them the opportunity to visit farms not near to the places they had been. According to the account in Drewry, James Gurley had been keeping a lookout for the rebels in the neighborhood, and when the rebels turned up a back road behind their plantation he warned a nearby family, the Thomases, whose fifteen-year old son George became a Union general during the Civil War. With the warning, the Thomas family fled the plantation through the front gate. “The ‘stiller,’ seeing the insurgents coming, jumped over the well and hid in the bushes, where he could see and hear them as they assembled under his ‘still’ shed.” According to Drewry, the rebels recruited at least two more soldiers on the Thomas’s plantation, although Drewry also notes that the plantation’s driver, Sam, and his son, Nat, each escaped as soon as they had the chance.¹⁶ No slaves from Thomas’ plantation were tried for their participation in the revolt.

Nat Turner mentioned stopping at “Mrs. Spenser’s house and several other places,” but they killed none, “the whites having fled.” Jacob Williams, who was lucky to survive when the rebels first visited his plantation again found himself in the rebels’ path. In the evening, after Williams had spent a day measuring timber, he returned home, where he found his murdered family. He remained there “some time” before he saw the insurgents approaching. He made his

¹⁵ Gray, 16.

¹⁶ Drewry, 68. See map of Southampton County.

escape for the second time in a day, but not before he spotted his own slave Nelson “distinctly ... among the foremost” of the rebel party.¹⁷

William Sidney Drewry adds others to the list of the people and families who found themselves in the path of the rebels. Before the rebels reached the Thomases’ home, Drewry remarks that they went to the house of “Sugars Bryant, who fled as the blacks came in sight.” After leaving the Thomases, Drewry records that the rebels were on the trail of Mrs. Barrett and her children, but the family were saved by Pitt Thomas, who then “held the rebels at bay until ... Mrs. Barrett and her children escaped to the home of her mother.” Drewry probably overstates the importance of Thomas’ defense, which earned him a commission. If Thomas had engaged the rebels, most likely someone would have been injured or killed. Since Turner testified that “we found no more victims,” the rebels probably had not seen the Barretts or their escort.¹⁸

Fred Calvin, who recorded oral histories in Southampton County during the Great Depression, also records a family history that celebrates the bravery of another white man who remained calm in the face of the rebels. According to this story, Henry Vaughn, a bachelor, “armed his slaves with axes, hoes or what could be found and dared Turner and his band to molest him.” Drewry recounts the same episode in a different way: upon hearing of the revolt, Henry Vaughn told his slaves “they were at liberty to do as they liked, either to remain or to go with the insurgents. They chose the former course, and not one of them deserted.”¹⁹ If Vaughn sincerely gave his blessing to his slaves to join the rebels, it demonstrated a certain immodesty. If ever there were a time that slaves did not need a master’s blessing, it was during a revolt.

¹⁷ Gray, 16; Nelson’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 193. See also Parramore, 248, fn. 51.

¹⁸ Drewry, 67, 69; Gray, 16.

¹⁹ O. Fred Calvin, “Walnut Grove,” WPA Homes; Drewry, 69. Calvin’s source was Lula Jackson Whitehead, “a direct descendant of the original owner.”

Although the family history and Drewry's description of Vaughn's interaction with his own slaves describe Vaughn in different ways, the note they sound—of loyal slaves refusing to join the rebels—is consistent with contemporary accounts. None of Vaughn's slaves was tried, nor did Nat Turner mention any recruits made there. Most of Vaughn's slaves probably remained loyal, but not necessarily for the reasons suggested by Calvin and Drewry. Both histories suggest that the main reason for the lack of recruits was the bravery of Vaughn and the loyalty of his slaves. One must remember, however, that the loyalty of slaves at plantations controlled by whites was the norm in Southampton County. Typically, recruits joined the uprising only after the rebel army took control of the plantation. Why then, did Nat Turner and his men not visit Vaughn's? It could have been, as Calvin records, that they were afraid of Vaughn, who "dared" them to visit. Or it might have been because they had in mind that they wanted to reach Ridley's slave quarters to rest after two long days of riding, drinking, killing, and fighting.

When the rebels arrived at Thomas Ridley's quarters on Monday night, they were again "about forty strong," the same size that they had been that morning when they left Newit Harris's plantation. The rebels had saved the revolt by staunching the flow of deserters. They had recruited at least twenty more soldiers, including recruits from among Ridley's slaves and those stragglers they found after the battle. Despite this significant increase in the size of the rebel force, the number of slaves recruited by the insurgents must have been disappointing to Nat Turner and the other rebels. Their roundabout ten-mile march through parts of Southampton County with large slave populations produced about a dozen recruits, not counting those rebels who rejoined after the battle. At Ridley's, the failure to enlist rebels was most clear. According to the 1831 tax list, Thomas Ridley was the second largest slaveholder in St. Luke's Parish with

seventy-nine slaves over the age of twelve. Many of these were potential recruits; in 1830 the census taker counted forty-one men between the ages of ten and thirty-five years old. Despite the huge pool of potential recruits, only four joined the revolt.²⁰ The rebels needed many more men if they wanted to survive.

The ragtag group of thirty or forty sleep-deprived rebels, including several who were seriously wounded, was less impressive than it had been earlier in the day, especially to those slaves who had seen armed white men organized in pursuit. Also, the news of the militia's victory at Parker's gate must have been prominent among the confused stories and rumors that spread around the neighborhood on the day of the revolt, reminding everyone of the potential price to pay for supporting the revolt. Finally, after an exhausting first day in revolt, the rebels themselves may have put less effort into recruiting.

At Ridley's slave quarters, the rebels were on the same plantation where the whites had created a strong house. Nat Turner testified that he knew that there was "a company of [white] men there," but he guessed that the whites were no more ready to renew the war than he was. He was confident in his estimation of his opponents, for Nat Turner simply set up some pickets and then went to sleep. At some point, the whites at the plantation house realized that the rebels were a few hundred yards away.²¹ Exactly as Nat Turner predicted, the white men at the main house did nothing to engage the rebels in a fight.

By one o'clock on Tuesday morning, the news had reached Jerusalem that two hundred rebels were "assembled at Ridley's quarter, about four miles from Jerusalem." The leader of Jerusalem's defense, who had under his command sixty men, decided not to attack. A week later, he wrote a letter explaining that his first impulse was to attack the rebels, but the "families

²⁰ Gray, 16; Southampton County Tax List, 1831; 1830 Census, 243.

²¹ Gray, 16.

here were strongly opposed to it.” According to his letter, he remained to protect the families assembled at Jerusalem in case the slaves decided to approach on a different route, although one might wonder if this man revised what actually happened to explain why he, with a larger force, did not engage his smaller and injured foe. Whatever the reasons for his decision, the white forces remained in Jerusalem overnight.²²

Not long before dawn, one of the rebel pickets detected something beyond the rebel’s perimeter. He sounded “the alarm that we were about to be attacked.” The news caused “great confusion.” By the time that Nat Turner appeared from his bed, he found some rebels panicking and others mounted ready to fight. Nat Turner settled his men down and ordered a contingent on horseback to investigate if there were any danger. This sensible order backfired: after finding no cause for panic, the search team returned. Before they could convey their reassuring news, the nervous rebels in the camp mistook the returning horsemen for a white force. Many rebels

²² Richmond *Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 61. In an earlier piece, I suggest that Congressman James Trezvant was the initial leader of the Jerusalem defenses. More recently, David F. Allmendinger, Jr. argues that William C. Parker “was undoubtedly” the initial leader of the forces in Jerusalem. Both candidates agree with the internal evidence from the letter that suggested that the leader was among the twenty-seven whites most involved in the trials. Parker’s candidacy is supported by Drewry, who notes that Parker had been the head of “thirty or forty men,” Parker also was elected captain of the Southampton Grays when they were organized in September 1831. On the other hand, Trezvant was the most prominent man in Jerusalem and a natural choice to take control. According to one source, he was a Colonel, clearly outranking the uncommissioned Parker. Trezvant also was active on the scene in Jerusalem. Allmendinger eliminates Trezvant as the leader of the troops in Jerusalem on the grounds that he had left with an express to inform the rest of Virginia about the revolt. Unfortunately, Trezvant did not travel with an express. Instead, he sent a note on an express. In fact, in Petersburg they spent time deciphering the letter, which “Col. Trezvant” had “written in great haste... To remove any doubt of its authenticity, Mr. Gilliam of Petersburg had certified that he knew Col. T’s [sic] handwriting and that it was genuine.” Drewry also identified someone else, “Mr. Thomas Jones” as the rider who killed two horses on the express to the governor. If Trezvant had not left on an express, but been one who dispatched them, then he seems a viable candidate to be in charge of the forces in Jerusalem. Given this uncertainty, I adopt an agnostic stance as to the identity of the early leader of the Jerusalem troops. See Patrick H. Breen, “A Prophet in His Own Land,” in Winfred B. Moore, Jr., Kyle S. Sinisi, and David H. White, eds. *Warm Ashes: Issues in Southern History at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003); David F. Allmendinger, Jr., “The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,” 29-30; Drewry, 86; 77 fn 1. For the evidence that Trezvant dispatched the expresses, see Richmond *Compiler*, 24 August 1831, in Tragle, 36. For the letter describing a trip on the express that Allmendinger attributes to Trezvant, see Raleigh *Register*, 8 September 1831. By Wednesday, at the latest, Richard Eppes took charge of the forces in Jerusalem. See Richmond *Compiler*, 27 August 1831, in Tragle, 47-48.

scattered. Between the two false alarms, the rebels lost half their men. Again, Nat Turner's army was reduced to a force of twenty stalwarts.²³

With the remnant of his army wide awake, Nat Turner decided to resume the war. He understood that they had to find more men; so, under a full moon, the small rebel army struck camp and left Ridley's heading west, toward the places they had been more successful recruiting. Shortly before dawn, his army arrived at the gate leading to Dr. Samuel Blunt's house. According to the 1831 tax list, Blunt and his two sons owned thirty-six slaves over the age of twelve, including perhaps as many as nineteen men and boys over ten. The rebels assumed that Blunt and his family had fled. (Nat Turner guessed that they fled to the defended main house on Ridley's plantation.)²⁴ Shortly after dawn, the rebels approached Blunt's main house.

As the rebels approached in the light of dawn, a couple of figures emerged from the house running to a side garden. Moses, who lived on Thomas Barrow's plantation but enlisted at Rebecca Vaughn's home, rode ahead of the other rebels and chased the figures. After he "flashed" his gun and dropped it to the ground, he dismounted at the edge of a fence. He hurdled the garden fence swearing, "Oh God dam you[,] have I got you" to the figures who were running away. As it turned out, the figures included Mary, a slave, and possibly the Blunts' preteen daughter. Mrs. Blunt had sent Mary away with the child when the whites in the house realized that they were being attacked. Mary ran until she lost her breath. At that point, she instructed

²³ Gray, 16.

²⁴ Southampton County Tax List, 1831; 1830 Census, 264; Gray, 16. William Drewry names Blunt "Simon," but there was no Simon Blunt on the Tax List or the Census. Drewry identification is accepted by Parramore, 94; Oates, 94; Johnson, 124; and Henry Irving Tragle, "Styron and His Sources," *Massachusetts Review* 11 (1970): 135-53; reprinted in Tragle, 413. Contemporary reports, on the other hand agreed with the government records. According to one newspaper report, the final battle was at "Dr. Saml. Blunt's house. See *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 96.

the child to hide in the bushes. Apparently not overly worried that Moses would harm her, Mary returned toward the house, where the fighting had already begun.²⁵

While Moses chased Mary and the child into the garden, the rebels—with Hark in the lead—approached the house. Having seen the shadowy figures emerge from the house, Hark wondered if the house were empty. To check, he fired a shot. In the clearest and most deadly way that they could muster, the whites made the rebels aware of their presence. Unfortunately for the rebels, in addition to the men who lived on the plantation—Samuel Blunt, his fifteen-year-old son Simon and Shadrach Futrell, the overseer—Blunt had convinced three of his neighbors, including Drew Fitzhugh, to help defend his plantation. The six men had “six guns, and plenty of powder and shot in the house,” so everyone of the white men got a gun, including the sickly Blunt who kept one for himself “resolved if the house was forced to sell his life as dearly as he could.” Blunt directed the others to fire in sequence. By the time all five had fired once at the rebels—who had gotten within fifteen or twenty steps of the house—the rebels retreated.²⁶ Hark, however, did not return with them, having been knocked down and injured by an explosion of shot fired at close range.

As the rebels reeled backwards, Blunt’s slaves—who according to one account had been “armed,” perhaps with farm tools—counterattacked. Several correspondents emphasized the role of Blunt’s loyal slaves. One described how Blunt’s slaves “repelled the brigands.” Another report suggests that when the rebels arrived “they were met by the Doctor’s own servants, who resolutely opposed their entrance, declaring that they would lose every drop of blood in defense of their master and his family.” Blunt’s own account gave his slaves less credit, but

²⁵ Moses’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 183-84; 1830 Census, 264.

²⁶ Gray, 16; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 68. Simon is identified by Drewry, 71, fn. 3. Shadrack Futrell testified against Moses, Moses’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 182. D. W. Fitzhugh was mentioned in Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 96. Drew Fitzhugh was

acknowledged a role in the victory. He admitted that his slaves enthusiastically pursued the rebels “with shouts and execrations.”²⁷ Presumably, the whites remained close to the house, in case the rebels attack them again.

The rebels, who were surprised to find any whites at all, had no intention of renewing the fight. Nat Turner recalled that his force lost several men during the ambush and the retreat. A slave who saw some of the rebels later that day recalled that they told him that two of their number had been shot at Blunt’s. Early newspaper reports reduce the number of casualties again, describing how the rebels “were finally routed, leaving one of their party and two horses,” presumably those of Moses and Hark, “behind them.” What one might expect to be the most reliable account—the one that Blunt and his son told John Hampden Pleasants, the editor of Richmond’s *Constitutional Whig*—tentatively described the results of the attack. The rebels retreated after the fifth shot, “leaving one killed (we believe) and one wounded (a fellow named Hark).”²⁸ It is a measure of the confusion of the time that an account from one of the principles was unclear on whether a rebel was killed, even as it specified the number of shots fired and the name of Hark.

As Hark fell and the rebels fled, Moses found himself alone in the garden. Frank, one of Blunt’s slaves, saw Moses run into the garden after Mary and the child. After witnessing Hark get shot, Frank ran into the garden after Moses. At his trial, Frank testified that Moses “was lame and could not run.” To make matters worse for Moses, he was a “small man” and he had

the only Fitzhugh in Southampton in 1830 and he lived near Blunt, see 1830 Census, 243. See also A. P. Peete, 20 December 1831 and 18 January 1832, Petitions.

²⁷ Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 45; Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 26 August 1831; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 68. I believe that the story of Blunt’s arming his slaves conflates later events at the Blunts’, when he did arm slaves with guns, with the events on the morning of 23 August 1831. While it is not unreasonable to think that Blunt had armed his slaves with guns before the rebels attacked, the reports contradict Blunt’s story as told to John Hampden Pleasants.

²⁸ Gray, 16-17; Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 26 August 1831; and Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 68. See also A. P. Peete, 20 December 1831 and 18 January 1832, Petitions.

dropped his gun. Unprepared to fight and unable to flee, Moses was trapped. He hid in the corner of a “house” that he found in the garden. It took Blunt’s slaves fifteen or twenty minutes after the battle to find him, but finally Frank did, at which point he delivered Moses to the whites, who “secured” their first two prisoners and then sent them to the jail in Jerusalem.²⁹

After Nat Turner escaped Blunt’s, he rallied his men again. Drewry recorded that Nat Turner was “very much discouraged,” but the only contemporary evidence of the rebels’ state of mind at this point suggests that—despite the setbacks—Nat Turner convinced them that they were on the cusp of success. One black man who encountered the insurgents during the day on Tuesday recalled them describing for him their surprise at Blunt’s. Instead of moaning about the defeat, the rebels looked forward to revenge. They boasted that they would return to Blunt’s that night “and they would see if he and his company could keep them out of his house.”³⁰ Perhaps they hoped to revisit Blunt’s when they had recruited enough men to renew their attack on Jerusalem.

For the time, the rebels continued heading west, retracing their steps to Newit Harris’, knowing that they need to recruit more men to replace their rapidly declining numbers. They had little if any success recruiting there the day before, which left many potential recruits among his slaves. It seems unreasonable to think that the rebels could expect more luck on their second visit to Harris’s plantation; but what choice did they have? More and more armed white men were collecting and preparing to fight the rebels. To fight these men, the rebels needed soldiers quickly, and they had to go to the largest plantations to do it quickly. It was probably still morning when the small rebel force arrived at Harris’s plantation. When they arrived, they found a “party of men at the house.” They immediately fled with the white men in pursuit. No

²⁹ Moses’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 182-83.

³⁰ Drewry, 73; A. P. Peete, 18 January 1832, Petitions.

contemporary account described the events at Harris's plantation, although Drewry reported that Will—the executioner—was among those killed by the Greenville cavalry who had attacked the insurgents when they appeared at the plantation.³¹

Those who were not killed or captured scattered. Stephen and Curtis, two of the rebels who had joined at Ridley's, were captured later that day and testified that “the leader of the insurgents,” told them “to go to Newsoms and Allens quarter to get other negroes to join them.” This testimony, which was given by the man who captured Stephen and Curtis, has no other confirmation in any other source. Yet the story is believable in light of the rebels' actions on Tuesday. The three plantations that the rebels visited—Ridley, Blunt, and Harris's—were respectively the second, sixth and eighth largest in St. Luke's Parish. According to this story, Curtis and Allen were sent to recruit at Newsom and Allen's, the fourth and first largest slaveholdings in the county. Allen—an absentee plantation owner who lived in Surry County, along the James River, north of Southampton—alone owned 110 slaves over the age of twelve in St. Luke's Parish.³² The rebels hoped to save the revolt by recruiting in mass from among the largest slaveholdings in the county.

Stephen and Curtis were drunk when they were captured on Tuesday, but another detail from their testimony also makes their stories appear believable. After they confessed to their mission, John C. Turner—the owner of the rebel Joe—remembered asking Curtis “how he expected to get to Mr. Newsom's.” Curtis replied that Nat Turner “had told him the white people were too much alarmed to interrupt them.” (Evidently, Nat Turner was wrong: John Turner detained Stephen and Curtis when he realized that they were not on their “way home,”

³¹ Gray, 17; Drewry, 73.

³² Curtis's Trials, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 187; Southampton County Tax List, 1831.

but heading “in the opposite direction.”)³³ As Curtis’s answer suggested, the decisions of Nat Turner throughout the revolt—particularly when he had his men spend the night on Ridley’s plantation next to one of the whites’ strong houses—implied that he believed that the whites would be immobilized by confusion and terror in the hours and days that followed the news that the slaves had risen.

By the time Nat Turner escaped from the whites at Harris’s plantation, he found himself with only two other rebels: Jacob, who was recruited at Richard Porter’s plantation, and Nat, who emerged from out of the woods after the rebels had attacked Catherine Whitehead’s. After a day spent evading white patrols, Nat Turner told Jacob and Nat to find Henry, Sam, Nelson and Hark, and bring them and “all they could” rally to Cabin Pond, where Turner promised to meet them.³⁴ With his officers and new recruits, he hoped that he would be able to begin the revolt all over again. Sent to their deaths, Jacob and Nat left Nat Turner alone. The rebel army, which at one point had been as large as four- or five-dozen men, was Nat Turner. The revolt was over, but it left St. Luke’s Parish in chaos.

³³ Curtis’s Trial, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 187.

³⁴ Gray, 17.

CHAPTER 7

FLIGHT

Nat Turner and his followers never had a chance. Whites held too much power; blacks were too divided. The obvious imbalance of power made it hard for the rebels to enlist even sympathetic blacks. As a result, the rebels were few, never numbering much more than five-dozen men. Taking control of the county was out of the question for such a small force, but even this small force had killed dozens. The revolt demanded a vigorous white response. At first, the whites fled their homes, seeking sanctuary. But safety was not enough for the whites: they wanted the terror they felt to end; they wanted to restore an unquestioned white supremacy. There is no reason to think that any whites at the time disagreed with this goal, but the unanimity produced by this common goal did not last long. Within days of the revolt, conflicts emerged within the white community as people disagreed with each other about what exactly a white-dominated Southampton county should do in the wake of Nat Turner's Revolt.

The first white responses to the revolt occurred early on Monday, 23 August 1831, the first full day of the revolt. John "Choctaw" Williams was among the first slaveholders to notice that something was amiss. Hearing screams coming from the direction of Catherine Whitehead's, he left his house to investigate. Williams found the bloody remains of the Whitehead family and quickly—perhaps with the aid of Nathan, Hubbard, Wallace and the other slaves on the Whitehead plantation—pieced together what had happened: a band of rebel slaves had launched a war against the whites. Realizing the imminent danger facing his own wife and daughter, Williams rushed back to his own farm, but he did not return in time. As he approached

his own farm, his slave—according to the 1831 tax list, he owned one slave over twelve years old—told Williams that he was too late. While John Williams was at the Whitehead’s, the rebels had killed his wife and child.¹

No records described Williams’ immediate response after he had heard that his family had been killed. By Tuesday, Williams had left his farm and fled south to Murfreesboro, North Carolina. He was not the only one to run to the town. After the rebels left Levi Waller’s farm, Waller emerged from his orchard vantage. Although he found the remains of his wife and many of the children, Waller did not remain at his home long enough to find the child who had eluded the rebels by hiding in a chimney. Instead he made his escape. Abandoning his farm, Waller headed south, careful not to follow the rebels’ path as they made their way east toward Jerusalem. John Hill Wheeler, a Murfreesboro resident who wrote a history of the Tarheel State twenty years after the revolt, recalled Waller’s account of the events at his plantation: Waller described “with painful effort that his wife and ten children (one at the breast) were murdered, and that he only escaped to tell the dreadful tale.”²

Those whose homes were attacked were not the only ones to flee to Murfreesboro. A week after the revolt began, Robert Parker, from Enfield, North Carolina, estimated the number of refugees who fled to the town. Parker guessed that “There were about 1000 women ... in Murfreesboro” alone.³ (Parker did not explain why the men who fled to Murfreesboro, including John Williams and Levi Waller, were not included in his estimate.) The refugees poured into Murfreesboro, hoping to find a secure place, but at least the first who ran to the town were surprised by how few defenders the town had. The first news of the revolt trickled into town on

¹ Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 26 August 1831; Southampton County Tax List, 1831.

² F. M. Capehart to Benajah Nicholls, 23, 24, 25, 26 August 1831, Benajah Nicholls Papers, NCOAH; Wheeler, 210. Capehart does not name Williams as his source, but Williams can be identified from the story he related.

Monday, but the county court was meeting in Winton, leaving “the principal part of the citizens of this place [Murfreesboro] there . . . The few men who were in town immediately collected, and about 6 P.M. Capt. Camp” arrived and took charge of the assembled militia. According to a letter written three days later by John Wheeler, Murfreesboro’s postmaster, “it was late in the day” before most of the citizens, including those who had spent the day at Winton, realized what had happened.⁴

While a handful of white men who had remained in Murfreesboro scrambled to erect a makeshift defense, the town was inundated by refugees. The flood of people made it difficult for Murfreesboro’s residents to piece together a reasonable story about what was happening just across the Virginia state line. One Murfreesboro resident, F. M. Capehart, wrote his father a letter in which he recorded many of the stories that swirled around the town. He began the letter on Tuesday, 23 August, by noting the “awfull [sic] + alarming occurrence which took place within 20 or 25 miles of Murfreesboro in the county of Southampton Va. Yesterday morning.” Slave revolts were less common than rumors of slave revolts, but Capehart was confident that Virginia was in the midst of the genuine insurrection. He assured his father that “this is not to be disputed.”⁵

In his next line, however, Capehart repeated rumors that would soon be dismissed. According to his story, the revolt began with “2 negroes + 3 white men,” all nameless. More reliably, he recorded what John Williams had described having seen at his own and the Whitehead farms. Although Capehart incorrectly referred to the Whitehead’s as the rebel’s “first attempt” and he apparently had not heard about Harriet Whitehead’s narrow escape, he identified

³ Robert S. Parker to Rebecca Mannet, 29 August 1831, John Kimberly Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

⁴ Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 29 August 1831. John Hill Wheeler, the historian, was the son of John Wheeler the postmaster. See Drewry, 85, fn. 2.

six of the seven who were killed at the Whitehead's farm. He also provided the vivid description of Williams' return to his own home, where he found his dead wife and decapitated child. Except for the parts drawn from Williams' account, the first part of Capehart's epistle was vague and ill informed. He told his father that the rebels "have killed 2 or 3 families besides" the Whiteheads and Williamses. Capehart's estimate of the rebels' numbers seems inflated. According to the early account that they had heard in Murfreesboro, the number of rebels was "40," a number that the rebels did not achieve until Turner arrived at Newit Harris' plantation. Later, the grapevine in Murfreesboro had increased the number of black rebels to "150," an estimate that more than doubled the rebel army at its peak.⁶

By Wednesday or Thursday, the people of Murfreesboro were apparently better informed about both the path of the rebels and the scale of the revolt. In a letter to the editor of the Norfolk and Portsmouth *Herald*, postmaster John Wheeler reported that the revolt had begun at the Travis' house, not at the Whitehead's, as Capehart had reported on Tuesday. Capehart's information also improved as the week went on. For example, he added to the letter to his father a note, "we ... have ascertained the number of whites murdered is about 64 or 65."⁷ Capehart's estimate was still high, probably because some people who had escaped were still missing and presumed dead, but it was more accurate than the earlier estimate that he had made about the number of rebels.

At the same time that the whites were receiving better information, the people of Murfreesboro noticed that whites were reasserting their control over society. On Thursday, Capehart stated that he did "not apprehend any danger about Murfreesboro." Such confidence

⁵ F. M. Capehart to Benajah Nicholls, 23, 24, 25, 26 August 1831, Benajah Nicholls Papers.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 29 August 1831; F. M. Capehart to Benajah Nicholls, 23, 24, 25, 26 August 1831, Benajah Nicholls Papers.

was paid for with the blood of innocent blacks. Capehart reported that “we have killed a great many of the villains + have caused the rest to take to the woods.” John Wheeler, who wrote a letter on Thursday, also recognized that blacks paid dearly for the whites’ sense of safety. According to his sources, “exactly” thirty-one “negroes have been killed and the Gaol in Jerusalem is full to overflowing.” Wheeler may have been relating intelligence about the retribution in Southampton gathered first-hand. According to Drewry, Wheeler was the leader of the Murfreesboro troops who went to Southampton and captured and shot several suspected rebels.⁸

The murder of blacks was not something restricted to those in the neighborhood of the revolt or to the times of peak panic. On the same day that Wheeler “supposed them [the rebels] entirely suppressed” and wrote that those who had routed the rebels in Virginia needed no “further aid from us,” an unlucky black man crossed through Murfreesboro on his way north. The man, who was not named in any source, was from Ahosky Ridge, and the defenders of Murfreesboro guessed that he was “bending his course towards Southampton.” Murfreesboro’s guards decided to shoot, certain that they knew enough to act. Eight or ten shots rang out as the man walked through the middle of Murfreesboro. The whites then decapitated the dead man. They stuck his head “on a pole and planted the pole at the cross streets,” to serve as a warning to any blacks who did not have the sense to stay completely out of sight. His body was discarded, left to rot in some bottomland outside of town.⁹

The same day, another black man came to the attention of the defenders of Murfreesboro. In this case, the whites had no reason to think that the man wanted to join the revolt that had

⁸ Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 29 August 1831; F. M. Capehart to Benajah Nicholls, 23, 24, 25, 26 August 1831, Benajah Nicholls Papers. Drewry identifies John Wheeler as the leader of one of the militia forces who had killed some of the suspected insurrectionaries. See Drewry, 85.

⁹ Robert S. Parker to Rebecca Mannet, 29 August 1831, John Kimberly Papers.

ended two days earlier. Instead, he was guilty of a different crime: impudence. Apparently, he had been assigned to drive his mistress and her children to town, suggesting that even as whites inflicted violent retribution on many blacks, some people had begun to resume typical activities. Despite the signs of a return to normalcy, something the driver said or did set his mistress on edge, and when she arrived in town, she informed Murfreesboro's guards about her chauffeur. When she complained that she was scared "almost to death," her accusation doomed the man. The guard decided that the slave's behavior was unacceptable, and they executed him on the spot.¹⁰

One day after the white men in Murfreesboro had lynched these two men, Capehart assured his father that "we do not feel any danger." Capehart was not the only white whose confidence had been restored by the vigorous suppression of anything that could be remotely interpreted as insubordination. On Monday, a week after the revolt began, Robert Parker reported that "the excitement is somewhat over now, and the ladies are gone to their respective homes."¹¹

Everywhere in the region around Southampton, people tried to make sense of incredible stories that emerged in the days after the revolt. Amid the "excitement," the task was almost impossible because people had no way to distinguish between the tales told about the improbable revolt and other outlandish stories. Despite the confusion and the imperfect information, people had to act. The responses in Murfreesboro exemplified two typical reactions of the people near to the scene of the revolt: white flight and retribution. With few exceptions, whites fled when they heard the news that the slaves had risen. Although several commentators, including Parker, emphasized the place of women and children among those who ran for safety, men, including

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Waller and Williams, were among those who ran. Some of the men fled for the same reason as the women did—they hoped to find a safe place—although many banded together to fight against the rebels.

The first white person who survived a rebel raid, Harriet Whitehead, was also the first white person to flee from the rebels. After the rebels left the Whitehead plantation—unaware that Harriet Whitehead had eluded detection—the slaves on the Whitehead plantation shepherded their mistress into a nearby swamp. In the swamp, she tried to figure out what exactly was happening. The plantation's slaves seemed loyal—in fact, their quick thinking saved her life—but she decided that it was too risky to trust them more than necessary. She moved from the spot in the swamp where the family's slaves had left her. According to Drewry, Hubbard grew upset when he returned to the spot but could not find his mistress. He called to her, but she would not reveal herself to him. Hubbard concluded that the rebels had slain his mistress. Only after a unit of white men came to the Whitehead plantation the following day, Harriet emerged from the swamp, at which point she was taken to a temporary base that had been set up at Cross Keys.¹²

Harriet Whitehead was not the only person who had been saved by loyal slaves. Joshua Nicholson and his wife were in their thirties and had five children when the census taker came to their house in 1830. Their proximity to the starting point of the revolt is suggested by the census taker's route: after going to Salathiel Francis' home, the census taker visited Giles Reese's, Joseph Travis', Worrington Ellis' and then Joshua Nicholson's. Two houses from the starting point of the revolt, the Nicholsons were fortunate that the rebels headed toward Salathiel

¹¹ F. M. Capehart to Benajah Nicholls, 23, 24, 25, 26 August 1831, Benajah Nicholls Papers; Robert S. Parker to Rebecca Mannet, 29 August 1831, John Kimberly Papers.

Francis'. When the news came about the revolt, Mrs. Nicholson was in an especially vulnerable position, "too weak to move, having just recovered from bilious fever." To flee from her house, the weakened woman relied upon her slaves. She was "taken up in the arms of her slaves and hidden in the woods."¹³

Some slave owners relied on their slaves to help them escape, even though other slaves on the plantation had supported the revolt. For example, Lucy tried to detain Mary Barrow as she fled into the family's garden, but she failed when Easter helped Barrow make her escape to the woods where she "concealed herself." Likewise, according to Drewry's account, Lavana Francis was nearly killed by one of her own slaves when she emerged from her hiding place after the rebels had left her plantation. When she emerged, Charlotte exclaimed, "I thought you were dead." She then lunged at her mistress with a knife. Lavana Francis only escaped this attempt at murder when another slave also named Easter, deflected her mistress' attacker. After escaping from the threats within her own household, Lavana Francis worked her way through the woods to the Travis' farm where her husband had gone earlier. There, she found some men who took her to Pate's Hill, one of the safe havens where many people gathered.¹⁴

Most people who ran into the woods or swamp eventually made their way to a secure place, although there were exceptions. One unidentified family, whose escape was described in a letter published in the Richmond *Enquirer*, fled to a stand of pine. Monday night, they slept "out in a thick cluster of pines, with a blanket to each, and a pallet for the children." It is unclear from the letter whether this family also spent Tuesday night in the woods, but by Wednesday,

¹² Drewry, 43-44; Blackford, 27.

¹³ 1830 Census; Blackford, 28. The identification of the "Mrs. Nicholson" mentioned in Mary Blackford's account as the wife of Joshua Nicholson depends on her proximity to the start of the revolt. While the 1830 census counted four slaves in the Joshua Nicholson household, in 1831 he paid no property tax on those slaves. It is possible that Joshua Nicholson somehow disposed of the four slaves he held in 1830. If so, then it is unclear which Mrs. Nicholson the slaves saved. In 1830, there were five Nicholson families in Southampton County.

¹⁴ Gray, 20; Drewry, 48.

they had had enough. According to the correspondent, this family decided to return to their home, “trusting to Providence.” A few remained at their homes the entire time. At Levi Waller’s, three of the four people who survived the raid fled into the woods. Levi Waller eventually made it to Murfreesboro. His son, Thomas Waller, and the schoolmaster, William Crocker, also fled to the woods, although no record reports where they finally found sanctuary. Only a twelve-year-old girl remained on the plantation. She had hidden in the chimney, where even Waller did not find her when he investigated the scene after the rebels left. After she came out of her hiding place, she stayed on the plantation. The next day, when the troops went to investigate what had happened at Waller’s, they found the girl, who told them what had happened and how she had escaped.¹⁵

There were other exceptions to the pattern of fleeing from the rebels. One of the white men who had tracked the rebels on Monday remembered that the rebels failed to find any more victims because the families “throughout the country, were placed upon their guard.” Jacob Williams was among those who stayed put, at least at first. The rebels visited his plantation in the late morning on Monday, but he spent the day measuring timber, unaware of his family’s fate. After working most of the day, Jacob Williams returned home and found his family dead. Even after he had found his home ransacked and his family murdered, he recalled remaining at home “some time.” This decision was revisited after he saw the insurgents as they passed by his house a second time. He decided not to chance a third meeting, and he “made his escape.”¹⁶

John Hampden Pleasants, the editor of the Richmond *Whig*, who met with the Blunts after the revolt ended, described that family’s decision not to leave. According to Pleasants, Samuel Blunt was “Crippled with gout, and indisposed to leave” his home. Luckily for his

¹⁵ Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831; Richmond *Constitutional Whig* 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 97.

family, they had a reasonable cache of arms and ammunition, his own slaves remained loyal, and three other men came to help Samuel, his son Simon, and the overseer Shadrack Futrell defend the plantation. As it turned out, the men had turned the plantation house into a strong house, which would prove impossible for the rebels to breach. Nevertheless, in the middle of rumors of an enormous rebel army, the six men had no way to know that they could hold the house in the face of a rebel army. When the rebels actually arrived, at least one person in the house had second thoughts about the decision to stay put. Mrs. Blunt was willing to rely upon her husband and the five other men who defended the house, but she also told one of the family's slaves, Mary, to take her daughter and "make her escape with her." Mary took the unnamed child out of the house and told her to hide in the bushes during the battle.¹⁷

While several people fled when the rebel army first appeared at their homes, more fled upon hearing that there was a rebel army in the neighborhood. Peter Edwards and his family escaped, possibly informed by the same source that told his neighbor Nathaniel Francis about the revolt. According to the family tradition, "old Jeff," the plantation's driver, had led the family into the woods, where he and other loyal slaves took care of them. Later on Monday morning, "Captain [Newit] Harris and his family had escaped" before the vanguard of the rebels arrived at their plantation.¹⁸

Likewise, the Porters fled when a woman told them about the slave army in the area. Whites later told dramatic tales about the narrowness of the Porters' escape, although it seems likely that these stories exaggerated how close the Porters came to being caught. As the day progressed, families were more likely to have heard of the revolt before the rebels appeared. For

¹⁶ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle 96; Trial of Nelson, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 193

¹⁷ Richmond *Constitutional Whig* 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 67; Trial of Moses, Southampton Minutes, in Tragle, 183.

instance, James Parker and his family had ample time to leave the farm before the rebel army arrived. Not only did the family leave their farm, but the information that they had fled reached the rebels before the army reached Parker's gate. Despite the warning, Mrs. Parker was almost overtaken by the rebel army after she returned to her home to fetch a child left sleeping in a cradle.¹⁹

By Monday afternoon, the word of the revolt had spread widely throughout the region and had reached as far as Murfreesboro, North Carolina, more than twenty miles away from the scene of the revolt, giving whites plenty of opportunity to leave their farms. In the *Confessions*, Nat Turner recalled that after the battle at Parker's farm, the rebels found no one at the farms they visited. At "Mrs. Thomas', Mrs. Spencer's and several other places," all of the whites had fled for safety. "The white families having fled, we found no more victims to gratify our thirst for blood." The savage tone of this comment makes it fair to ask if Thomas Gray had recorded Nat Turner's actual words or if he had embellished the quotation for effect. While Gray may have tried to make Turner sound sinister, there is no reason to question the substance of the remarks. Consistent with the account in the *Confessions*, none of the white victims were killed after the battle at James Parker's. Other reports also suggest that the whites had suddenly abandoned their homes. Several days after the revolt ended, one of the men who had come from Norfolk to help suppress the revolt described the neighborhood: "The country we have passed through is completely deserted and the inhabitants have absolutely left their doors unbarred."²⁰ With the news of the revolt, whites abandoned the countryside, to which they did not return until they were sure that the final embers of revolt had been extinguished.

¹⁸ Drewry, 49; Gray, 14.

¹⁹ Blackford, 26-27; Drewry, 63.

²⁰ Gray 16; Norfolk *American Beacon*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 50. Despite the sinister sounding comment, I find the *Confessions* generally reliable. For further discussion, see Chapter 11.

While some stayed in the woods and a few decided to risk death for the comfort of their own homes, most whites decided to make their way to central places: towns, crossroads, and strong houses. Lavana Francis, among others, fled to Pate's Hill. Among the refugees at Pate's Hill, nerves were on edge as the stories of the horrifying revolt were recounted. As the panic built, the people at Pate's Hill mistook an approaching flock of sheep for the rebels. According to Drewry, the women and children panicked and ran back into the swamps. Drewry never explains how any men who had collected at Pate's Hill responded to the signs that a large rebel army was advancing on their position. According to Francis, who was Drewry's source, the women and children stayed in the woods for two days, surviving only on the provisions that some had brought with them as they left their homes. (One of the two things that Lavana Francis remembered doing as she left her home was bringing along a rack of homemade cheese.) Eventually, the tension of her flight proved too much for Francis. She decided that "she would rather die at the hands of the negroes than remain in such society." She made her way back to the road, where she saw her husband with some other men on horseback. Reunited, the Francis rode to Cross Keys, a crossroad that had become the military center for the whites in the neighborhood where the revolt began. Before the terror had subsided, Lavana Francis left that place as well, travelling to her mother's home in Seaboard, North Carolina, fifteen miles southwest of Cross Keys.²¹

At Thomas Ridley's home, the strong house near where the rebels camped Monday night, tensions also ran high. Many men, women, and children had gathered at Ridley's home, and the state of nervousness was exacerbated when the rumors were spread that the rebel army was quartered at the same plantation for the night. Among the refugees was Robert Nicholson's wife, children, and at least one female slave. According to Drewry, that unnamed woman drew the ire

²¹ Drewry, 48-49.

of the crowd assembled at Ridley's when she "remarked that she wished that they [the rebels] would come along as she wished to see the fight." The whites assembled took exception to the remark, and "it was all the ladies could do to save the nurse of Mrs. Nicholson from being thrown out the window."²²

The situation in Southampton's county seat, Jerusalem, was no more settled than anywhere else that whites gathered. On the first news of the revolt, many who lived close to Jerusalem, including James Parker and his family, fled to the town for protection. According to a newspaper account published a week later, by the time the rebels met whites in the first battle of the revolt at Parker's gate on Monday afternoon, "Some four hundred women and children had assembled in the town." Fewer men—thirty or forty, according to one account—defended the town.²³

The news of the rebel army at the Parker's made its way quickly into Jerusalem. With this information, most of the white men who were in the town went south to reinforce the militia. The battle was over by the time the reinforcements from Jerusalem reached Parker's farm. Meanwhile, in the town, "only a few men" remained to protect the numerous women and children. No record suggest the state of mind of the people in Jerusalem once the militiamen left, but the panic felt widely during the revolt may have reached a crescendo as the refugees in Jerusalem thought of the nearby rebel army breaking through the last line of defense in front of Jerusalem.

That night, the man who took charge of the forces assembled in Jerusalem, received the intelligence that two hundred rebels were spending the night at Ridley's slave quarters. In his account of Monday night, the leader described himself as intrepid: "my first impulse was to have

²² *Ibid.*, 71, footnote 1. On the company of white men at Thomas Ridley's, see Gray, 15.

attacked them with 30 or 40 men.” Less bold voices in Jerusalem questioned the foolhardy plan. Several of the men “who had family here” lobbied him not to attack. They feared that the militia might miss the rebels, leaving the refugees in Jerusalem undefended. The leader of the troops could not convince the men in Jerusalem to launch a middle of the night raid on a force five or six times larger than his own forces. On reflection a week later, he lamented that “Could I have been correctly informed of their numbers . . . we could in all probability destroyed or taken most of them.”²⁴

On Tuesday morning, the main rebel force had been defeated, but the influx of people into the Jerusalem continued. A letter written in Jerusalem on Wednesday afternoon described a town that had been overrun. “Every house, room and corner in this place is full of women and children, driven from home, who have had to take to the woods, until they could get to this place. We are worn out with fatigue.” Difficult living conditions contributed to the fatigue, as did the fear that filled the town. “The oldest inhabitants of our county have never experienced such a distressing time, as we have had since Sunday night last.”²⁵

On Thursday, the town was still teeming with refugees. One rumor that had reached Winton estimated that more than “15 hundred women and children” had taken refuge in Jerusalem. John Hampton Pleasants, who had left his newspaper in Richmond to help put down the revolt, had a more reasonable guess: on Thursday night, he estimated that “ladies from the adjacent country, to the number of 3 or 400, have sought refuge from the appalling dangers by which they were surrounded.” Since there were about two thousand white women over fifteen years old in the county in 1830, Pleasants’ estimate meant that nearly one fifth of the county’s

²³ Richmond *Compiler*, 29 August 1831, quoted in Johnson, *Nat Turner Story*, 121; Richmond *Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 61.

²⁴ Richmond *Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 61. For my discussion of the identity of the leader of the troops in Southampton, see Chapter 6.

white women had fled to the county seat. Even allowing for exaggeration in Pleasants' estimate, Jerusalem hosted a remarkable part of the county's population, especially when one remembers that it was not the only place full of refugees. Pleasants observed: "Jerusalem was never so crowded from its foundation [sic]." ²⁶

In the surviving descriptions of the white people in Jerusalem, there are repeated references to "ladies" and "women and children." One correspondent insisted, "The women are frightened all but to death." This was not something simply imagined by men. "Jerusalem is full of women," declared one female correspondent in an early letter, "most of them from the other side of the river." Men fled with their families, but they were received differently from their wives and children. While women and children were welcomed as refugees, when men arrived at the strongholds, they were welcomed as defenders. In most cases, Southampton's white men probably acted as was expected of them: they became part of the effort to suppress the revolt. On the other hand, at least one instance makes it clear that not all men behaved as had been expected. O. M. Smith, a tutor from New Hampshire working in Sussex County, noted, "One young Lady and two men to my knowledge, are frightened out of their senses, so that they have been perfectly deranged for four days." This was not simply hearsay: one of the two affected men was Smith's employer, William Harrison. It is possible that other men had other similar responses, but that these responses were not noted by those local sources who wrote about the whites in Southampton and made a concerted effort to make their subjects look good. Because

²⁵ Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 44.

²⁶ Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal*, 31 August 1831; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 51. According to the 1830 census, 1931 women over fifteen lived in Southampton County.

of a similar dynamic, if any women acted boldly, these actions have also failed to make it into the record.²⁷

Although Jerusalem was the single largest safe haven in Southampton County, other places filled once the news came of the rebel attacks. Smith, the tutor from New Hampshire, wrote to his parents that “about every Female in the two Counties of South-Hampton and Sussex are assembled at four different places and strong guards of soldiers set around them night and day!” Vicksville, eight miles north of Jerusalem, was one of the places to which people fled. After the Civil War, W. O. Denegre recalled the flight of his family to Vicksville. Upon hearing about the revolt, his aunt ran a mile to his family’s farm. Although Denegre described his aunt as distressed, she had the wits to remember to bring a bag of bank notes with her as she fled her home. At the side of a well on Denegre’s family’s farm, she “burst into tears” and told his mother the news. “[L]amentations by both and cries of distress were heard.” Denegre and his family joined his aunt on her trip to Vicksville. When they arrived in the town, Denegre saw that “[a]ll the families for some miles around assembled at Vicksville.” This memory is supported by the 23 August letter from an anonymous female correspondent, who noted that the women had fled to Jerusalem, estimated that “about 200 at Vix’s or Bivin’s.” Denegre recalled that some men stayed in the town to protect the women and children, but the majority of men left “in search of the negroes who had risen in revolt.” Denegre did not specify how long they stayed in town, but decades later two details from the stay remained sharp in his mind. He remembered sleeping on the floor, and he recalled “the firing of the shotguns was almost incessant.”²⁸

²⁷ Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831; *New Hampshire Post*, 14 September 1831. Thomas Ritchie, the editor of the *Enquirer*, identifies the letter as “written by a lady on Tuesday,” 23 August, from Jerusalem.

²⁸ *New Hampshire Post*, 14 September 1831; Drewry, 79; Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831. The number 200 in the Richmond *Enquirer* letter could refer either to total refugees or the number of women. The full quote: “Jerusalem is full of women, most of them from the other side of the river—about 200 at Vix’s or Bivin’s.”

Across Southampton County's western border, families also fled to the most secure places that they could find. General W. H. Broadnax, leader of the troops in Greensville County, wrote to the Governor Floyd about the response of those who lived to the west of the rebels' path. He reported, "I found every hovel at Hicks' Ford literally filled with women and children, with no way to lodge but in heaps on the floors, without an article of food or the means of procuring cooking provisions." Broadnax took charge of the part of his brigade that he found at Hicks Ford and the strength of the troops made it an attractive refuge. A week after the revolt began some Hicks Ford refugees had still yet to return to their homes, although Broadnax noted by Sunday, 28 August, most of the families "who had fled from the supposed danger" had "generally returned to their homes."²⁹

On Thursday, 25 August, John Hampden Pleasants reported from Jerusalem that "the insurrection may be considered as already suppressed." Pleasants was one of the earliest men to declare publicly the revolt over, but within a couple days it seems that most whites had come to the same conclusion. On Saturday—two days after Pleasants pronounced the revolt finished—a dispatch from Southampton reported that "[t]he panic in this section if the country has entirely subsided, confidence is reestablished." Perhaps most felt safe, but a few were still on the run. Two distinct dispatches composed on Saturday, 27 August, listed the whites killed during the revolt. Most on the lists had been killed, but the lists included some who had fled and were still missing. Mrs. Jonathan Vaughn and her three children, James Story and his wife, and two daughters of Francis Felts all apparently reappeared unscathed, but their late appearances give

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 55.

pause to the historian inclined to accept the pronouncements about the confidence having been reestablished.³⁰

On Sunday, 28 August, Brigadier General Richard Eppes, commander of the Virginia militia in Southampton County, announced that “there no longer exists any cause of apprehension for the public safety or the security of individuals.” By Sunday, most of the people who had fled had already returned to their homes, but Eppes explicitly reassured those who lived along the path of the rebels, “*particularly* to that portion of citizens residing in the neighborhood where the violence has been done,” that they were safe.³¹ The flight of those in the area of the revolt had ended, but the efforts to secure the region and reinstate white supremacy continued unabated.

³⁰ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 52-53; Norfolk *American Beacon*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 56. The lists of the dead composed on Saturday were published in these two newspaper articles. Differences between the lists, both in content and structure, suggest different sources.

³¹ Lynchburg *Virginian*, 8 September 1831, in Tragle, 73. Emphasis in Tragle.

CHAPTER 8

RETRIBUTION

After the rebels had been dispersed, whites focused their efforts on finding those men who took part in the revolt. There were few moments in American history when the balance between protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty had been as far skewed to vengeance as it was in Southampton, especially in the immediate aftermath of the revolt. Inspired by the murders that the rebels committed, many whites wanted revenge, even if that meant killing innocent blacks.

One story, which may be apocryphal, described the randomness of the danger that faced blacks. Thomas Wentworth Higginson described how troops from Richmond hoped to kill “every colored person they saw in Southampton County.” Nearing the scene of the revolt, some whites stop to ask “a free colored man, who was hoeing by his little field,” if they had reached Southampton. When he told them that they had just crossed the line, “They shot him dead and rode on.” No doubt some blacks were killed by men who did not care if they had been involved in the revolt. General Richard Eppes reported how “some had been shot at sight, without knowing who they were.”¹

Similarly, in a footnote proving that “some innocent negroes suffered,” William Sidney Drewry described how on the Tuesday morning that the rebels were finally dispersed, a startled Howell Harris shot “a negro servant, while [the servant was] getting the saddles to harness the horses.” A fuller version of a similar story appeared in a note that the future Confederate

General Robert E. Lee wrote to his mother-in-law, recounting the news from the officers who returned from Southampton to Fort Monroe. Lee described the events on Blunt's farm on Tuesday morning, including the role of Blunt's slaves in dispersing the rebels. After the rebels had left, three of Blunt's slaves who had helped the whites "ran in great haste for the horses for them to escape on." They were spotted by another group of whites drawn to the commotion, and one of the whites shot and killed one of the slaves.² Whether or not these are two versions of the same story, it is perfectly clear that some enraged whites acted barbarously, killing blacks indiscriminately. In Southampton County and the nearby area, for the days after the revolt, few blacks could feel confident that they were safe. At the height of the panic, a minor misstep could end in a lynching.

During the bloody reaction, even loyal slaves were in jeopardy. One nameless "poor innocent negro" was enlisted to help convey a message for the whites. He "was sent ... upon an errand to the next neighbor, and commanded to go quick." The slave did as he was told, but his obedience cost him his life. "[W]hile he was riding along rather fast, a company of soldiers, supposing him an enemy fleeing, let in a whole volley upon him, and killed both man and horse." Hubbard, who had helped save Catherine Whitehead, also found himself in a dangerous position when a unit of Greenville County militia arrived at the Whitehead plantation on Tuesday, 23 August. Slaves on the plantation told the white men what had happened, but the men—who arrived on the Whitehead plantation to find mangled bodies being eaten by vultures—were in no mood to accept the testimony of slaves who claimed to be loyal. When the

¹ Higginson, in Tragle, 333; Eppes quoted by James McDowell, Jr., Richmond *Constitutional Whig* 26 March 1832. The story Higginson told was also repeated in the Work Progress Administration's *The Negro in Virginia* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 180.

² Drewry, 85, fn. 1; Robert E. Lee to Mary Fitzhugh Custis, September 1831, Lee Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society. The similarities in these two stories include: (i) both suggest a killing on Tuesday morning, and (ii) both imply that the slave was killed getting horses ready. Another story of an innocent slave killed at Blunt's, which occurred on Wednesday will be discussed later in this chapter.

whites heard the story about how Hubbard and the other slaves saved Harriet Whitehead, the militiamen insisted that Hubbard “to go again to search for his mistress.”³ If she were alive, then they would spare Hubbard, but if he could not find her hiding in the swamp, they would accept that as proof that Hubbard’s story was a lie.

With his life on the line, Hubbard went again in search of the one white Whitehead who survived the revolt. At this point, the two surviving accounts about the discovery of Harriet Whitehead differ. According to Drewry’s account written decades later, Harriet still refused to reveal herself, although she condescended to write a note for Hubbard on a shingle. According to Mary Blackford’s account, written months after the revolt, Harriet Whitehead somehow “accidentally” heard about the retribution that the whites planned for a man who had helped save their mistress. Realizing Hubbard’s perilous position, Harriet Whitehead “ran out and saved him by relating the circumstances of his conduct in aiding to save her life.”⁴ Either way, once the militiamen realized that Hubbard and the others had told the truth and Harriet Whitehead had survived the revolt, they released Hubbard.

Another slave was killed directly as a result of his actions in defense of Samuel Blunt’s farm on Wednesday morning. On Tuesday, John Turner captured Stephen and Curtis, two slaves who had joined the revolt when the rebels stopped at Thomas Ridley’s slave quarters Monday night. At the time, they were drunk and John Turner’s later testimony implied that he considered releasing them. One lie, however, got Stephen and Curtis held for further questioning: they told John Turner that they were on their way home. Noting that “the place where he met prisoner was in the opposite direction from his home,” John Turner arrested the two and took them to Cross Keys, the headquarters of the whites in the neighborhood. At Cross Keys, the two slaves

³ New Hampshire Post, 14 September 1831; Drewry, 44. On the mangled bodies at Catherine Whitehead’s, see Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal*, 31 August 1831.

were interrogated. At this point, they admitted that they had been sent to recruit more slaves at Newsome's and Allen's. During the interrogation, they also admitted that the rebels planned to return to Dr. Samuel Blunt's and get revenge for the morning's ambush.⁵

Five months later, three petitions submitted to the Virginia General Assembly begging for reimbursement for dead slaves described the result of this intelligence gathered "from a negro boy the property of Maj. Thomas Ridley." The whites at Cross Keys "immediately" ordered Alexander Peete—the same man who led the first group of white militia to encounter the rebels—and about ten men to go "to Blunts home and defend it if it should be attacked."⁶ At this point, eleven men would bring the total number of men defending Blunt's plantation to sixteen, counting neither the rheumatic master of the plantation nor his slaves, who had helped the whites chase the rebels off of the plantation on Tuesday morning. Despite the reinforcements at Blunt's plantation, the whites on the plantation were terrified, unsure if they would be able to defend the plantation from the promised second assault.

Perhaps drawing on the experience from the morning, when the plantation's slaves helped drive the rebels from the farmhouse, the whites decided to arm the plantation's loyal black men. In retrospect, the decision to arm slaves in the middle of a slave revolt seems quixotic, but the whites at Blunt's plantation apparently considered the obvious danger. To make sure that the slaves did not simply join the rebels once they had guns, the whites took the precaution of keeping the slaves' "arms near the front door," implicitly under white supervision.⁷

⁴ *Ibid.*, 44; Blackford, 27.

⁵ Trial of Curtis, in Tragle, 187. Much of the Turner's testimony, including the comment on their heading, was repeated verbatim in the Trial of Stephen, in Tragle, 188. I identify Stephen and Curtis as the source of the intelligence that the rebels planned to return to the Blunt plantation based upon an affidavit from Alexander Peete sent to the General Assembly that explained that "a negro boy the property of Maj. Thomas Ridley" heard sometime "after they [the rebels] had been repulsed at Dr. Blunt's... that they would return there Tuesday next evening." See A. P. Peete, 18 January 1832, Southampton County Legislative Petitions.

⁶ A. P. Peete, 18 January 1832, Southampton County Legislative Petitions.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Almost anything could trigger an alarm. When the alarm was sounded, the slaves who had been assigned a weapon scrambled to get their guns and prepared to fight the rebels. Of course, nothing ever happened. Eventually, the whites recognized each false alarm and collected the weapons, restacking them near the front door. No one knows how many alarms were sounded that night, although one of the men who was at Blunt's house that night noted that the "alarms of this nature were frequent"⁸

Early Wednesday morning, just before light, the alarm was sounded again. This alarm may have been particularly frightening, since the rebels had arrived at the plantation just after dawn on Tuesday. Samuel Blunt's slaves and one slave belonging to J. Drew Fitzhugh grabbed their guns and got ready to defend the plantation. Amid the confusion and panic of the alarm, one of the white militiamen "a young man by the name of Harris" saw Fitzhugh's man carrying a gun. Forgetting that the slaves on the plantation had been armed, or more likely, not taking the time to determine if Fitzhugh's slave were a rebel, Harris shot and killed Fitzhugh's slave.⁹

The historical record does not preserve much information about the black man who died "while actually bearing arms in defense of the family of Doct.r Saml. Blunt." Even his name is a mystery. Only one tantalizing detail may provide a clue as to why he agreed to fight with his owner against the rebels. According to one of the petitions asking for compensation from the state for this slave's worth, this man's family lived on Blunt's plantation. According to this petition, he happened to be on the plantation on a visit to his wife.¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.* I describe this as a different killing than the one described by Drewry or Robert E. Lee, because (i) it happened on a different day; (ii) the slaves was presumed guilty of different reasons; and (iii) different owners of the dead slaves were identified. It is possible that these three all refer to the same killing, in which case I expect Peete's petition would be the most reliable source.

¹⁰ Petition of the executor widow and legatees of Thos. Fitzhugh, dec[ease]d, December 1831, Southampton County Legislative Petitions.

It seems unlikely that the man's visit was a typical visit to his family. Unless he had been given permission to take Monday off, the timing of the news of the revolt made it likely that he went to his wife's plantation only after word of the revolt had reached that neighborhood, probably sometime midday Monday. It is possible that when his master, Drew Fitzhugh, went to see the Blunts, his unnamed slave accompanied him. This would put Fitzhugh and his slave at Blunt's plantation by Monday night. The unnamed slave's actions on Tuesday morning must not have brought his loyalty into question, since the whites entrusted him with a gun on Tuesday night.

From a modern perspective, a slave fighting on the side of whites against slave rebels may seem problematic. One need not suggest that this man was motivated by a love of the whites or by a moral code that proscribed slave revolts. More likely, he may have hoped to protect his wife and the people on her plantation. He may have feared the estate sale that might break up his family if his wife's owner died. He may have been afraid of what would happen if the rebels got control of any plantation. He may have feared for the young black men, who would be drawn into the revolt and killed as it was put down. Or he may have been concerned that when the whites recaptured the plantation, they would take revenge on the slaves, regardless of how they acted during the revolt. For someone who wanted to reduce the number of blacks killed during and after the revolt, the decision to fight for the whites made a great deal of sense. Unfortunately for the unnamed man, this decision cost him his life.

Alfred, the blacksmith who belonged to Levi Waller, also suffered an awful death at the hand of vengeful whites. Like Fitzhugh's slave's death, his death seems to have happened more because of circumstance than because of evidence that he supported the revolt. According to Waller's own testimony, the rebels had chased Waller, who escaped only when others called off

his pursuers. The rebels had spied someone else running away, whom they mistook for Waller, and they set off on a chase. When they caught the person they had pursued, they realized their prey was not Waller but “his blacksmith.”¹¹

The rebels brought Alfred back to the plantation and he joined them in drinking. When the rebels finally left the plantation, they apparently brought Alfred along. Alfred did not stay long with the men Waller called his “misguided associates.” According to Drewry, a drunk Alfred had fallen from his horse and apparently decided to head home. The group of whites who would later encounter the rebels at Parker’s field captured Alfred. Despite the horrors that they had seen at Waller’s farm, the whites, led by Alexander Peete, did not summarily execute Alfred. Instead, they decided to keep him alive, Drewry suggests, because they wanted to give him the chance to prove that he was an unwilling rebel. Unable to take him with them as they chased the rebels, but not wanting him to rejoin the revolt, Sampson Reese maimed Alfred, cutting both of his Achilles tendons.¹² Alfred could not walk, let alone evade whites who wanted to recapture him. After the revolt, the whites hoped to sort out exactly what had happened. Then, they could mete out any punishment that they believed Alfred deserved.

Alfred’s unbelievably bad luck took a final turn for the worse. Having escaped from the rebels and survived the maiming, Alfred was immobilized. According to Drewry, Alfred’s owner, Levi Waller happened upon his wounded slave and was bandaging his legs when a contingent of Greenville cavalry, under the command of Dr. Scott appeared. According to a report written shortly after the cavalry left Belfield (now Emporia), Scott and “a strong party of horse” were determined to pursue the rebels “until every man of them was taken or destroyed.” At least in Alfred’s case, the options were not equal and the men who came across Alfred and his

¹¹ Trial of Nat [Turner], in Tragle, 222. For identification of Alfred as Waller’s blacksmith, see Thomas Porter Affidavit, 22 November 1831, Southampton County Legislative Petitions.

owner believed that Alfred should die. Even though Peete and those under his command had obviously gone to some trouble to spare Alfred's life—albeit as they maimed Alfred—the Greenville contingent decided the Southampton troops' actions were misguided. According to Waller, Scott and his men “deemed that his [Alfred's] immediate execution would operate as a beneficial example to the other Insurgents.” Drewry reported that “after a severe reprimand to the master, he [Scott] ordered the negro to be tied to the tree and shot.”¹³

In this case, two accounts of the event—Waller's petition to the legislature and Drewry's record of the oral history—both agree that Alfred was guilty of joining the revolt, but the stories that they tell suggests that Alfred had done little more than accompany the rebels until he had his first chance to escape. Waller was the most reliable witness of the events on his own plantation, remembering precise details about the events on his own plantation, such as his statement that he saw “Nelson knock one of the family's brain's out with the but [sic] of a musket,” and his testimony recalling that Daniel left the cabin where Waller's wife had been murdered carrying her scissors. Given his penchant for detail, Waller's vague petition, that accused Alfred of participating in the “dreadful atrocities” seems suspicious, especially since Waller may have calculated that he had a better chance for a large reimbursement from the state if he Waller could show that Alfred had been a willing rebel.¹⁴

Drewry's record is more suspect than Waller's biased petition, even to the extent that he mistakenly recorded Alfred's name as “Albert.” Yet one detail from Drewry's vignette provides an explanation for Waller's refusal to specify Alfred's actions in support of the rebels: if Waller had nursed his crippled slave, it seems reasonable to infer that Alfred did not take an active part

¹² Levi Waller Petition, 12 December 1831, Southampton County Legislative Petitions; Drewry, 64, fn. 2.

¹³ Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 26 August 1831, in Tragle, 40; Drewry, 64, fn. 2.

¹⁴ The logic behind the petitions to the legislature was that the slaves who died in the revolt would have been convicted in the courts. Since the state compensated owners for slaves who were convicted in the courts, the

in the massacre at Waller's farm. Waller's damning testimony against Alfred may have been written to increase Waller's chance of receiving a several hundred-dollar settlement from the state. If Drewry's account can be credited, the Greensboro troops executed a slave whose first flight from the rebels had unintentionally saved his master and who had left the rebels at his first opportunity.

Little protected blacks from the brutal reprisals of the white population. Even black women—only one of whom was reported to having joined the rebels—were subject to summary judgement. One white man, who himself had killed suspected rebels upon capture, told John Hampden Pleasants how he tried to “save a negro woman whom he thought innocent.” The crowd rejected the man's pleas to spare the woman. According to the story related by Pleasants, the man himself was nearly killed as the mob shot the black woman. Drewry has another account of a strikingly similar episode: two of the women from Francis' plantation, Charlotte and Easter, had been arrested and taken to Cross Keys where Nathaniel Francis found them. According to former slave Allan Crawford, Charlotte had been one of the two women arguing over her mistresses “clothes and things” while Lavana Francis hid. When Francis emerged from her hiding place, Charlotte was the one who, according to Drewry, tried to kill her mistress with a knife. Whatever versions of these stories Nathaniel Francis heard, he decided not to wait for a court to decide Charlotte's fate. He took her out of the makeshift jail and tied her to an oak tree. Francis' shot was followed by a volley from other whites seeking revenge. According to Drewry, the tree to which Charlotte was tied died as a result of the massive barrage it took during Charlotte's execution.¹⁵

petitioners hoped that the state would compensate those rebels who never made it to the courts. The logic of this petition required making Alfred seem as if he would have been convicted.

¹⁵ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle 69; Drewry, 48, and 85, fn 2. It is worth remembering that Lavana Francis was one of Drewry's oral sources. Thomas C. Parramore suggests that these

Other nameless people were “shown no quarters” when they were captured by angry whites. One report described summary execution as the norm for suspected rebels who had been captured. Since many of the known rebels survived and were tried, summary execution was clearly not ubiquitous, but no one doubts that it occurred. John Hampden Pleasants, who traveled to Southampton County with the Richmond troops, described a response “hardly inferior in barbarity to the atrocities of the insurgents.” He acknowledged of one or two instances when the “enraged inhabitants” murdered their captives forthwith. In later article, he recounted how one white man bragged that he had killed between ten and fifteen prisoners himself, something that was not entirely unbelievable to Pleasants as he reflected on the “sanguinary temper of the population who evinced a strong disposition to inflict immediate death on every prisoner.”¹⁶

In most cases of the blacks killed without trials, one cannot determine the identities of the victims, let alone their roles in the revolt. Their deaths were often as a result of being at the wrong place at the wrong time, and there is no consistent pattern for which rebels were slain as the whites tried to capture them, which rebels were lynched after they had been arrested, and which survived to face trials. Some who were killed before they were taken into custody included the fiercest rebel, Will. According to Drewry, he died when the rebels ran into the militia at Harris plantation on Tuesday morning.¹⁷

Others rebels whose roles in the revolt is unclear were also slain. One unfortunate man died at the hands of whites eager to kill Nelson, one of the rebel leaders. On Tuesday afternoon, a group of whites had gathered at Peter Edward’s place for a midday meal. While they were eating, the alarm was sounded that Nelson had been spotted. They set out after Nelson, but he

episodes may all be different versions of the same event. See Parramore’s “Covenant in Jerusalem,” in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 69.

escaped into an orchard. As the white men returned to Edward's place, they found Peter Edward's man Austin "standing in the yard by himself perfectly defenseless, when one of the party shot him down instantly." Whatever suspicion they had of Austin's involvement seems to have been confirmed when they examined the body and found "a powder guard in his pocket."¹⁸

Two days later, eighteen-year-old James, who also belonged to Peter Edwards, was killed before he could be apprehended. On Thursday morning, James and Nelson came across Joseph Joines and a company of Southampton militia. Spotting the armed whites, the black men retreated at which point Joines and others opened fire, killing James. Joines later swore that "he has no doubt but that the said James was guilty of insurrection as charged against him," although he did not explain how he knew that James was a rebel.¹⁹

At least one unnamed free black who whites believed to be involved in the revolt was also killed as the whites were trying to round up the rebels. According to one of the earliest reports from Jerusalem, whites had gone to this man's house. When the whites arrived at the house, the black man did not appear to be at home. Before they left, one of the whites spotted the accused man trying to hide. If the evidence of the man's involvement was not enough to kill him, the whites interpreted the decision to hide as a confession of guilt. They shot him on the spot. The possibility that the free black man hid only to escape being manhandled or killed by brutal whites was not considered, at least by the author of the only letter that noted the man's death.²⁰

¹⁶ Norfolk *American Beacon*, 26 August 1831, in Tragle, 42; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 52; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 69.

¹⁷ Drewry, 73.

¹⁸ John Womack Affidavit, 21 November 1831, and Peter Edwards Petition, 12 December 1831, Southampton County Legislative Petitions

¹⁹ Joseph Joines, no date, Southampton County Legislative Petitions.

²⁰ Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 45.

Others blacks were injured, but captured alive, including Nat Turner's right-hand man, Hark. Hark had been captured after he had been shot off his horse at Blunt's plantation. He survived his wounds long enough to be tried. Others prisoners died from their wounds. One of the earliest reports in the *Norfolk American Beacon*, perhaps brought by the marines returning to Norfolk and Fort Monroe, described a "Negro Tom," who "had made a general confession, being desperately wounded and about to die."²¹ The report apparently correctly predicted Tom's imminent death because the only slave named Tom who was tried for his role in the revolt was found not guilty.

On Thursday evening, 25 August, John Hampden Pleasants reported that there were "thirteen prisoners now at this place [Cross Keys], one or more of them severely wounded." Marmaduke, who killed Eliza Ann Vaughn, was among the wounded. Like Tom, Marmaduke also failed to live long enough to be tried. Although he "was said to be an atrocious offender," Pleasants commented that Marmaduke "might have been a hero, judging from the magnanimity with which he bears his suffering."²² To win such praise from Pleasants, Marmaduke must have endured the injuries that eventually led to his death with incredible aplomb.

Prisoners suffered greatly and not only from the wounds from battle. Torture was not unprecedented in Southampton County. Ten years before the revolt, a Southampton slave named Ben was arrested under suspicion of burglary. Investigators wanted a confession, so they took Ben out and "with small cords Suspended [him] by the thumbs for about one minute." When this failed to elicit Ben's confession, Ben was "then tied by the toes and drawn up but not entirely off the ground." Ben still refused to admit any crime. The court then put Ben in the custody of a young man who was able to elicit the desired confession, although the court records do not

²¹ *Norfolk American Beacon*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 49.

²² *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 52.

indicate how the man convinced Ben to confess. The Southampton court accepted the confession without comment and condemned Ben to execution, a sentence that they recommended the governor reduce to banishment from the state.²³ Given the tolerance of Southampton County's court for torture as a means to gather evidence against a suspected burglar, one should not be surprised that whites tortured those they believed responsible for a revolt that left nearly five-dozen whites dead.

Some whites hoped that their use of torture would expedite their investigation. One New England native wrote to his parents about the heavy-handed use of torture. Twelve suspected rebels, he reported, "have been tantalized to death, in try[ing] to make them disclose the plot..."²⁴ Southampton whites were willing to accept the consequences of torture as a means of acquiring information, especially since blacks bore the brunt of the suffering, but there is little evidence that the torture helped the investigations. The correspondent who noted that a dozen blacks had been killed in the course of the tortures noted "not one [shr]ed of information can be extorted from any [of] them, they will stand with a red hot iron [burn?]ing their flesh until they die!!" Likewise, shortly after the revolt Emma Mordecai, who lived near Richmond, related to her sister how she had heard stories that one unnamed black man had his foot "burnt off" before his interrogators "found at last that he was innocent."²⁵

Stories similar to the ones that made their way to Richmond also were preserved in Southampton's black community. Allen Crawford—who was born a slave on Peter Edwards' plantation a few years after the revolt—told an interviewer during the Great Depression what he had heard about the revolt as he was growing up. Crawford remembered: "every one dat was

²³ Trial of Ben, 1821, Southampton County Order Book, quoted in Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 241.

²⁴ New Hampshire *Post*, 14 September 1831.

²⁵ Emma Mordecai to Ellen Mordecai, 1 September 1831, Mordecai Family Collection, SHC.

Nat's man was taken bodily by two men who catch you and hold yer bare feet to dis blazing fire 'til you tole all you know'd 'bout dis killing."²⁶

While many whites saw torture as means to gather information, some whites simply wanted bloody revenge. Mordecai related to her sister one particularly grotesque episode described by the Richmond soldiers returning from Southampton. One slave, who was "guilty of murdering his master in a most barbarous manner," had his ears cut off. "[A]fter rubbing the wound with sand, they [the whites] tied him on [she crossed out: "under"] a horse, had the horse mounted and rode, + then turned loose into the woods." The Boston *Christian Herald* published a letter from a northerner travelling through tidewater Virginia who described the stories he heard from people who had been in Southampton. According to his source, the slaves' "noses and ears were cut off, the flesh of their cheeks cut off, their jaws broken asunder, and then set up as a mark to shoot at!" Another letter described a similar fate for a rebel who was thought to have killed his master. The whites "burned him with red hot irons—[cut] off his ears and nose—stabbed him, cut his [ham]strings, stuck him like a hog, and at last, [cut] off his head..."²⁷

In several instances, after the suspected rebels were killed, whites cut off the rebels' heads. In part, this was a continuation of the sadistic ritual of the execution, but it also served as a crude but effective form of social communication. Whites displayed the heads of the fallen blacks so that everyone would know exactly what had happened to those who had tried to rebel. Most importantly whites wanted the fate of the dead men to be a warning to other blacks. After the rebel who was thought to have killed his master was decapitated, whites took his head and "spiked it to the whipping [post] for a spectacle and a warning for other negroes!!!!!!" Other

²⁶ Allen Crawford Interview, in *Weevils in the Wheat*, 77.

²⁷ Emma Mordecai to Ellen Mordecai, 1 September 1831, Mordecai Family Collection; Boston *Christian Herald*, quoted in the New York *Constellation*, 8 October 1831; New Hampshire *Post*, 14 September 1831. This report is also quoted with three minor differences in the *Liberator*, 1 October 1831, in Tragle, 115.

rebels' heads were likewise put on display, and if Drewry is to be believed, left for weeks. Black Head Sign Post was an indelicate name that stuck to one place in the neighborhood of the revolt where whites displayed the heads of dead blacks. Other rebels' heads were paraded. According to Drewry, one of the marines heading through Vickville "bore on his sword the head of a rebel." Contemporary reports make such stories believable. One of the men who came from Norfolk to help suppress the revolt wrote that his company would be returning with an unusual prize, "the skull of Nelson, taken by us."²⁸

All of the names of those blacks killed as the revolt was suppressed will never be discovered; the number of dead in the black community will never be known exactly. Those keeping records were far less worried about dead blacks than dead whites. Nevertheless, the ultimate toll of white vengeance upon the black community has been the subject of much speculation among historians. William Sidney Drewry, an apologist for the slaveholding south writing in 1900, observes that, "There was far less of this indiscriminate murder than might have been expected." He also guesses that, "as many guilty negroes escaped as innocent ones perished." Drewry never quantifies the numbers involved in any of his guesses: how much indiscriminate murder should be expected? How many guilty people escaped? How many innocent blacks perished? Drewry's sense is that the whites were less barbaric than he expected, but this comment is only understandable when one realized that Drewry lived during a period when the lynching of black people was extraordinarily common, even for the most minor offenses against the racial order.²⁹

²⁸ Drewry, 85; Norfolk *American Beacon*, 29 august 1931, in Tragle, 50. For a reference to Black Head Sign Post by a Southampton resident more than a century after the revolt, see Frances Lawrence Webb, *Recollections of Franklin and Historical Sketches of Southampton County* (1963), in Tragle, 397.

²⁹ Drewry, 86. Although Drewry never guessed at exact numbers involved, he gave an example of a "guilty negro who escaped:" two slaves belonging to James Parker were apparently "discharged on his evidence that they had been of good character and if they were guilty it was due to evil persuasion. They were sent South." Apparently, to

Herbert Aptheker rightly takes Drewry to task for sugarcoating the white population's response to the slave insurrection. He asks, "How much 'indiscriminate murder' should be 'expected' is not known," but insists that Drewry's assertion that "as many guilty negroes escaped as innocent ones perished" is wrong. Aptheker, however, struggles to replace Drewry's estimates with his own. In his 1937 masters thesis written on the revolt, Aptheker recognized the wide range of the estimates of the numbers of blacks killed without trials—from "no more than forty" to "more than One Hundred"—and put forth what he considered a conservative estimate: "It appears safe to say that at least as many Negroes were killed without a trial as whites had perished due to the Revolt [a number that Aptheker had estimated as at least 55] and probably the number in the former case was considerably more than the latter." When he revisited this question six years later in his famous *American Negro Slave Revolts*, Aptheker's estimate was less timid. Citing a report published in Huntsville, Alabama that estimated the number of blacks killed in Southampton as over one hundred, Aptheker concluded, "It seems accurate to say that at least twice as many Negroes were indiscriminately slaughtered in that county, as the number of white people" who had died. Decades later, in a 1982 encyclopedia entry on Nat Turner, Aptheker had apparently decided that the caution in his early work misrepresented the amount of bloodshed. In this entry, Aptheker's only comments on the scale of the bloodshed is a guess that "perhaps as many as 200 Negroes were killed in Southampton."³⁰

Aptheker is not the only one to suggest that the bloodshed was far more widespread than Drewry imagined. In an 1861 account of the revolt, Thomas Wentworth Higginson cites a report

Drewry guilty meant any even tangential connection to the revolt, and "escaped" simply meant escaped Judge Lynch and the gallows.

³⁰ Herbert Aptheker's masters thesis was eventually published under the title of *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*, 60-62; Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts: Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel and Others* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943; New York: International Publishers, 1974), 301; Aptheker, "Nat Turner" in *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, ed. Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston (New York: Norton, 1982), 612.

that “‘one hundred and twenty negroes have been killed,’ this being little more than one day’s work.” This report seems to be the basis for several twentieth-century estimates of the number of blacks killed. In a 1920 article about the revolt, John Cromwell agrees with Higginson that, “In little more than one day 120 Negroes were killed.” Despite admitting that the number of blacks “killed is unknown,” Eric Foner insists that “the number certainly ranges into the hundreds.” In the 1975 *The Fires of Jubilee*, Stephen B. Oates estimates that “at least 120” innocent blacks “perished in the reign of terror,” although unlike the other estimates, his guess includes the entire country, not just those killed in the area of the revolt. Kenneth S. Greenberg also accepts Higginson’s number as “a minimum,” concluding as a result, “many more African Americans were killed than actually participated in the rebellion.” Most recently, Thomas C. Parramore estimates that “in the ten days of rebellion and retribution, at least 100 blacks, and possibly several times that figure were killed, though no more than a handful had taken any part in the uprising.”³¹

While not enough evidence exists to yield an exact number, evidence suggests a range for the number who died during the repression that followed the revolt. In law, slaves were property. As property, Virginian slaves over the age of twelve were subject to taxes, just as horses, gigs, and carriages were. In the spring of each year, tax collectors enumerated the

³¹ Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in Tragle, 337; John Cromwell, “The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” *Journal of Negro History* 5 (1920): 212.; Eric Foner, intro. *Nat Turner: Great Lives Observed* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 5; Oates, 100; Kenneth S. Greenberg, “*The Confessions of Nat Turner: Text and Context*,” in Greenberg, ed. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 1; and Thomas C. Parramore, “Covenant in Jerusalem,” in Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 70. Recent reference sources seem to have accepted one hundred as the lowest possible number of blacks who died in the response. In an encyclopedia entry on Nat Turner, Lou Turner notes that “over 200 black men, women, and children were killed in the white backlash,” although, like Oates’, this estimate was for the entire country, not just Southampton. A brief survey of introductory American history textbooks confirms the historiographic trend. Of those that made estimates for the number of blacks killed by whites, estimates range from “More than a hundred blacks” to “as many as two hundred African Americans...” See Lou Turner, “Nat Turner” in *Notable Black American Men*, ed. Jessie Carney Smith (Detroit: Gale, 1999), 1141; Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey*, 11th ed., v. 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 312; Mary Beth Norton,

property on each farm, dutifully counting the slaves over twelve and collecting the appropriate taxes. When John Gurley and George Gray counted the Southampton slaves in 1831, their tally was 4145. The following year, they completed the same assessment. They counted 3967 slaves over the age of twelve. This meant a net of 178 slaves who were counted on the 1831 tax list had died, moved, escaped, were sold away, or otherwise disappeared. Since the number of slaves in Southampton County had been steadily declining after reaching a highpoint of 4262 in 1827, presumably because of ordinary events, historians can reasonably use the number of 178 as a high-end estimate for the casualties among Southampton's slave population during and after the revolt.³² (See table 1.) How many of the 178 uncounted slaves were among the dead after the revolt? Nat Turner and twenty-nine others were found guilty by the white courts for their involvement in the revolt. They were all sentenced to die. Although some had their sentences reduced to transportation, all thirty convicted slaves were absent from the 1832 tax survey. As a result, it is likely that fewer than 148 Southampton slaves lost their lives during the extra-legal reaction to the revolt.

As confidently, one can show that at a minimum sixteen slaves were killed in the aftermath of the revolt. Primary sources, including Nat Turner's *Confessions*, newspaper articles and letters from Southampton, trial notes and petitions to the Virginia General Assembly identify between thirty-eight and forty slaves who were involved in the revolt. (I do not include in this tally people never seen with the insurgents themselves who were found guilty of being involved in the revolt at trial.) Of these, at least twenty-one survived long enough to be tried.³³ Among

et. al. *A People and A Nation* 6th ed., v. 1 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 353. See also James L. Roark, et. al. *The American Promise* 3rd ed. v. 1 (Boston: Bedford Martin, 2005), 437.

³² Southampton County Tax Lists, 1824-1839.

³³ Four on the list of the thirty-nine people may have been double counted, in which case there would only be thirty-seven; or they may have been two distinct people sharing the same name: Nat and Jacob were mentioned in the *Confessions* as being the last rebels Nat Turner saw. One Nat was tried and convicted on evidence provided by Mary Barrow, who identified Nat as "one of the negroes that came to her husband's home on the day that her

the rebels never tried, nine men certainly died: their owners and executors for their owners' estates sought compensation for the property they lost when their slaves were killed without trial. (In Virginia, slaveowners were compensated for slaves who were executed or transported by the state.) Two other rebels, who were mentioned in newspaper articles, almost certainly died in the aftermath of the revolt: Tom and Marmaduke, had been captured after the revolt and despite strong evidence against each of them, neither was tried. Each had been seriously wounded, and neither lived long enough to stand trial. Add to this list three prominent rebels—Henry, Will “the executioner,” and Austin, who killed Hartwell Peebles—whose lack of trials strongly suggests that they were killed as the revolt was put down, and the total number of identified rebels who died as the revolt was put down is fourteen. Include those killed who did not join the revolt—at least one slave who died in defense of Samuel Blunt's plantation and Nathaniel Francis's Charlotte—and the absolute minimum number of slaves who died without trial is sixteen.

Accepting 16 and 148 as the minimum and maximum possible for the number of Southampton slaves killed without trials, one must make some educated guesses to narrow the estimated range of the total number of dead. Looking at the high end of the range, it would be absolutely remarkable if the number of slave casualties after the revolt approached 148. The slaughter of blacks was only one of several ways that slaves might have disappeared from the tax lists. Some slaves may have been sold out of the county as several farms had to be dismantled when a larger than usual number of estates had to be settled after the revolt. These slaves may have been joined on their migration from Southampton by other slaves as some slaveholders may moved their household out of Southampton or sold slaves to traders eager to take their slaves to

husband was murdered.” One Jacob confessed about his involvement to John Edmunds before he was shot by troops from North Carolina. See Gray, 17; Trial of Nat, in Tragle, 196; John Edmunds Affidavit, 28 November

the deep south. In October, the New Orleans *Advertiser* printed a letter from a Virginian that noted that “many Southampton blacks were presently [sic] for sale in New Orleans and many more would be arriving in the city shortly.”³⁴

Other slaves left the county heading a different direction. Instead of selling to slave traders, some owners manumitted their slaves and sent them to Liberia. Shortly after the revolt, the American Colonization Society decided to charter the *James Perkins* to take emigrants to Liberia. John McPhail, the agent of the American Colonization Society based in Norfolk, traveled to Southampton in October 1831 to see if he could find people willing to go. On 28 October, he reported to the American Colonization Society headquarters in Washington that he had collected the names of 245 people, and he predicted that “300 [emigrants] will come from Southampton.” One does not need to read many of McPhail’s reports to realize that he often failed to deliver on his promises, but in this case his estimate was surprisingly accurate. In late November, a few days before the *James Perkins* was scheduled to leave, Southampton’s emigrants started to appear in Norfolk. On 25 November, the Norfolk and Portsmouth *Herald* reported, “At least eighty emigrants arrived [in Norfolk] yesterday from Southampton ... principally manumitted slaves.” By 9 December, John McPhail wrote to the Colonization Society of Virginia in Richmond that nearly three hundred passengers were aboard the ship and that “274 of these free people of color are from Southampton county.” In this letter, McPhail implied that most of the passengers aboard the *James Perkins* were children, a pattern that suited the American Colonization Society’s demographic purpose. If one guesses that 170 of the 274

1831, Southampton County Legislative Petitions.

³⁴ Quoted in Judith Kelleher Schaffer, “The Immediate Impact of Nat Turner’s Insurrection in New Orleans,” *Louisiana History* 21 (1980): 372-373. I have not found any direct corroborating evidence to support the assertions of the anonymous correspondent about the sale of slaves from Southampton, but evidence of such sales from people from the area near the revolt suggests that this type of transaction was happening. For example, Richard Blow of Portsmouth, Virginia, sold ten slaves to a man establishing a plantation in the Red River district of Louisiana. See Richard Blow to George Blow, 24 October 1831, Blow Family Papers, Virginia Historical Society.

Southampton emigrants were children or free blacks, the manifest still would include more than a hundred manumitted slaves over twelve. As a result, this one voyage could explain what happened to most of the 148 adult slaves who disappeared from the 1831 tax list. On the other hand, one would be hard pressed to see how even a third of those 148 adult slaves who disappeared after Southampton's 1831 survey were killed.³⁵

There are other reasons to think that the best estimates reduce the number of those killed towards the lower end of the range. The slaughter of known rebels was limited. Of the original five conspirators, three—Nat Turner, Hark and Sam—survived the white reaction. Looking at the rebels as a whole, a known death toll of fifteen out of the thirty-nine named rebels suggests that roughly thirty-eight percent of the rebels died as the revolt was suppressed. If that were the same proportion for all of the rebels and there were a total of sixty rebels—the maximum number Nat Turner estimated to be a part of his band—then that would suggest that about twenty-three rebels died as the revolt was crushed. If one estimates that over the course of the revolt as many as eighty different slaves had joined the rebels for at least part of the journey, the same casualty rate would produce an estimate that about thirty blacks died before the trials began. Another approach with a slightly different method yields a similar estimate: between twenty-eight and thirty-eight rebels died as the revolt was suppressed.³⁶

³⁵ See John McPhail to R. R. Gurley, 22, 23, 30 September 1831; 10, 28 (quote) October 1831; 23, 27 November 1831 American Colonization Society Papers, Reel 12; Norfolk and Portsmouth *Herald*, 25 November 1831. For McPhail's letter to the Colonization Society of Virginia, see Richmond *Enquirer*, 15 December 1831. McPhail made clear that the majority of the passengers were children when he noted in the letter to the Colonization Society of Virginia that the original three hundred emigrants were made up of "about 60 families and individuals." The *James Perkins* was delayed by a snowstorm and paperwork problems, which allowed about forty more people to board the ship. The final total of passengers was 339. See John McPhail to R. R. Gurley, 7 December 1831, American Colonization Society Papers, Reel 12. See also Douglas R. Egerton, *Charles Fenton Mercer and the Trial of National Conservatism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 241-242.

³⁶ The sources are not perfect indicators of the death rate among the rebels: everyone who was tried, by the nature of trials, must have survived the immediate revolt. On the other hand, every owner who petitioned for reimbursement owned a slave who did not live long enough to stand trial. To correct for this, one can look at the number of slaves whose death is known from a source that does not depend upon whether the rebel lived or died, in other words disregarding those rebels identified in their own trials and those identified by owners seeking

To accept a relatively large contemporary estimate for the number of blacks killed—such as the report in the *Edenton Gazette and Farmer's Palladium* that “there have been killed in South Hampton [sic] county upwards of one hundred negroes, consequent of the late insurrection”—one would have to believe that most of the victims of white retribution had not been involved in the revolt. Contemporary historians have accepted this, and some have even put the death toll of black uninvolved in the revolt in the hundreds. These historians do not explain why whites killed dozens of innocent blacks and, at the same time, spared dozens of those most deeply involved in the revolt. Obviously many whites were enraged—and one might hesitate to side with Drewry and not the observer who guessed that “those condemned to death and those actually shot, exceeded the number attributed to the insurgents”³⁷—but the idea that the death toll among the innocent blacks exceeded the death toll among those involved in the revolt is not self-evident.

Slavery, by its very nature, worked against the kind of almost unrestrained terrorism against blacks that the South would see after the Civil War. As slaves, black people were both human and property. No doubt, many whites wanted to punish those human impulses that led some slaves to rebel. Yet the white community's wrath was tempered by the economic reality of slavery. Whenever a slave was killed, his owner's wealth was significantly reduced. For those who did not know how the law worked, days after the revolt, General Richard Eppes reminded the citizens of Southampton County that every lynching “must be attended with a total loss to

compensation. Of those killed after the revolt, eight are mentioned in sources other than petitions. Disregarding the same types of sources would leave only seventeen rebels who could be identified. This suggests that just less than fifty percent, or—using estimates of sixty to eighty rebels—twenty-eight to thirty-eight rebels, died as the revolt was suppressed.

³⁷ *Edenton Gazette and Farmer's Palladium*, 7 September 1831. At the time of the comment that the number condemned to death and shot exceeded the attributed number of rebels, twenty-one people had been condemned to die, and the author estimated that the number of rebels was forty. See *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 98.

their neighbors, and friends, of the value of the property.”³⁸ The slaveholders of Southampton County and those who supported them had a vested interest in keeping slaves alive until they were tried. At that point, the slaveholders would be compensated for the value of the convicted slave.

The call to protect the investments of friends and neighbors apparently had less resonance to those outside of Southampton. People from outside of Southampton did not seem to worry about financial repercussion of their acts. Thus it is not surprising that some of the most ruthless murders were committed by whites who came from outside Southampton. Richmond troops, for example, were supposedly responsible for shooting a free black whose biggest crime was living on the wrong side of the Southampton border. Likewise, a letter from Winton reported on Thursday that the Governor’s Guards, a single company from Murfreesboro, “took prisoners and shot 8” on Wednesday. The wording of the report, moreover, suggests that these were not rebels killed in battle, but prisoners executed after their arrest.³⁹

A difference in response between those who lived in the neighborhood of the revolt and others cannot be quantified, but some examples suggest that the effect was not simply impressionistic. Twice, whites from Southampton spared rebels who were then killed by whites from outside the county. For example, Levi Waller’s Alfred, whose death has been discussed above, was hamstrung by Southampton troops under A. P. Peete. Injured in such a way, Alfred could not escape, but these injuries would not stand in the way of a trial, after which—assuming Alfred was found guilty—Waller would be compensated for the loss of his blacksmith. Troops from Greensville County—unconcerned about protecting a neighbor’s investment—decided to make Alfred an example for the blacks of the area. They shot the slave whom Southampton

³⁸ Lynchburg *Virginian*, 8 September 1831, quoted in Tragle, 74-75;

³⁹ Higginson, in Tragle, 333; 31 August 1831 Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal*;

troops had spared. The same happened to Richard Porter's slaves Jacob and Moses.

Southampton residents captured the two, and John Edmunds recalled that the captured men admitted their involvement. Despite the confessions, Southampton whites spared the two rebels. Later, the confessed rebels were "given up to a company of armed men from the State of North Carolina." The North Carolinians killed the two rebels.⁴⁰

Economic self-interest may have moderated the response of some whites, but if one looks at the black free black community in St. Luke's parish, one can see that economic self-interest was not the only thing that prevented a more widespread bloodbath. Unlike slaves, free blacks stood beyond the pale, unprotected by white owners. Nevertheless, according to the tax records, free blacks—even those free blacks who lived in St. Luke's Parish, the immediate neighborhood of the revolt—were unlikely to be killed in the aftermath of the revolt. In the 1830s, tax records from St. Luke's Parish recorded the number of free black men. Between 1831 and 1832, the number of free black men in St. Luke's Parish declined by two, from 193 to 191. Comparing the tax lists, more than eighty four percent of the parish's free black men can be identified on both tax lists, including Thomas Haithcock, Exum Artis, and Isham Turner, men whose cases were first heard in by the Court of Oyer and Terminer and whose cases were bound over to County Court. Most of those who cannot be traced after the revolt are lost because the remaining records are sloppy, identifying the enumerated black men as "Kircher Hicks son" or "free boy at Spratley Pope." These imperfections also prevent the identification of the free black Billy Artis, a notorious suicide who killed himself rather than face capture. (The difficulty identifying him is compounded because one fourth of the free blacks in St. Luke's Parish had "Artis" as a

⁴⁰ Levi Waller Petition, 12 December 1831; Thomas Porter Affidavit, 22 November 1831; A. P. Peete Affidavit, 22 November 1831; Richard Porter Petition, 12 December 1831; and John Edmunds Affidavit, 28 November 1831, Southampton County Legislative Petitions.

surname.)⁴¹ The general sloppiness of the records makes it most likely that the blacks who can not be traced from 1831 to 1832 were lost to the record keepers not to vengeful whites.

Assuming that the revolt was responsible for the death of the two or more people who disappeared from the 1831 St. Luke's tax list is problematic. After all, the decline between 1831 and 1832 matches exactly the decline from 195 in 1830 to 193 in 1831, and those men had not been killed in the aftermath of a slave revolt. In addition to the suicide Will Artis and one unnamed free black whose death as he hid from whites searching his house is discussed above, only one more free black's death can be definitively documented. Aaron Norfleet, a father of a nine (including eight daughters) who owned 181 acres and horse, was among the richest free blacks in the county. Although he lived in the immediate neighborhood of the revolt—the 1830 census taker visited him five doors after Elizabeth Turner, six after visiting Catherine Whitehead—he survived the immediate reaction. On 20 September 1831, four weeks after the revolt, the seventy-five-year-old man sat down to write his last will and testament. He began, “Know all men by these presents that I Aaron Norfleet of Southampton County and State of Virginia now sound in mind though infirm in body do make this my last will and testament.” He was dead within two months. A relative studying his family's history has found Norfleet's death so close the Southampton revolt “suspicious” and suggested that his ailments of the old man may have been triggered by “a ‘vigorous’ interrogation.” Perhaps. But it is possible that less malicious forces were at work. The seventy-five-year-old father of nine may have been struck by the same illness that only weeks earlier led another seventy-five-year-old, Thomas Gray—the

⁴¹ Benjamin Gurley began tracking the free black totals in St. Luke's Parish in 1830, a practice continued throughout the 1830s. Unfortunately total numbers for the entire county cannot be determined because the tax collectors in Nottoway Parish did not count free black men regularly. This inconsistency is doubly unfortunate as the tax collector failed to total the free black male population in 1831 and 1832, the two years most relevant to the revolt. Fortunately for us, it is hard to argue that free blacks in the neighborhood of the revolt were largely spared while those farther away were killed. Likewise, this list only enumerates the number of men. Again, it seems

father of the Southampton lawyer who would publish Nat Turner's *Confessions*—to compose his own deathbed will. Apparently the elderly in Southampton County were struck by some unknown pathogen in the weeks after the revolt. One letter from Southampton written a month after the revolt noted a “remarkable Occurrence: ... [W]ithin a period of a few weeks and in the compass of a few miles” eight whites between the ages of seventy-five and ninety-years old had died. “The instances of longevity which it presents are remarkable, but their occurring so nearly together, and within so small a space, make them worthy of particular notice.”⁴²

If vindictive whites killed few free blacks, then the argument that scores of innocent blacks were killed and the number of innocent blacks killed in the revolt easily outnumbered those who had been killed after the revolt seems weak. This is not necessarily surprising given their provenance. For example, an account the revolt written in New York, Samuel Warner estimated that “The number of blacks slain is supposed to amount to more than One Hundred.” The most commonly cited figure, 120—which is used by Higginson, Cromwell, Oates and Greenberg—came from the accounts of the revolt told by “passengers by the Fayetteville stage.” (Fayetteville, North Carolina is 170 miles from the scene of the revolt.) Other accounts that reached Fayetteville were also high: one estimated that “about 100 and another that 250 negroes have been put to death.” In Hillsborough, North Carolina, 120 miles from the scene of the revolt, another number had been bandied about. William Pettigrew told his father that 150 blacks had been killed, although that guess was better than his other information, that the rebels “have killed seventy white familys [sic].”⁴³

unlikely that the free black men were not killed, while free black women and children were murdered. See Southampton County Tax Lists, 1830-1839.

⁴² Southampton County Tax List, 1830-1832; Phil Norfleet, “Aaron Norfleet and the Nat Turner Revolt,” online at: <http://norfleet01.tripod.com/aaron.htm> [11 June 2003]; Fredericksburg *Virginia Herald*, 2 November 1831.

⁴³ Samuel Warner, *Authentic and Impartial Narrative of the Tragical Scene...* (1831), in Tragle, 288; Higginson, in Tragle, 337; Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal*, 31 August 1831; William Pettigrew to Ebenezer Pettigrew, 3 September 1831, Pettigrew Family Papers, SHC.

Even as close to the revolt as Tarboro, North Carolina, a mere sixty miles from Southampton, the whites were every bit as uncertain about what had happened. When the editor of the Tarboro *Free Press and Southerner* wrote how many blacks had been killed, he allowed himself enormous range, initially reporting that “from 40 to 270” blacks had been killed. Two weeks later, he corrected his earlier estimates: “About 30 negroes were killed...” This lower estimate coincides with the earliest reports from people closest to Southampton. On 25 August 1831, John Wheeler, the postmaster of Murfreesboro—the place where so many refugees from Southampton had fled—sent a letter to Norfolk that contained an estimate of the number of blacks killed during the revolt. “From the best information,” he wrote, “nearly 30 negroes have been killed.” Jesse H. Simmons, Colonel of the Roanoke Blues, reported that he had heard the same number when he traveled to Cross Keys. “We were informed that about 30 negroes had been killed.” Another letter dated Jerusalem guessed, “Something like thirty or forty negroes have been shot.” John Hampden Pleasants, the editor who traveled to Southampton as a member of the Richmond troops, phrased his estimate differently. He thought that “probably however some five and twenty and from that to 40” blacks died, although even he recognized that forty may have underestimated the total.⁴⁴

From those closest to the scene of the revolt, only one estimate of the fatalities produced a number greater than forty. O. M. Smith, the tutor from New Hampshire who lived in the Sussex County, wrote to his family about the stories he heard of the revolt. (He was the one who reported that twelve blacks had been “tantalized to death.”) Just after he explained to his parents the delay in him sending out this letter—he “had not an opportunity to send it, Postmaster has

⁴⁴ Tarboro *Free Press and Southerner*, 30 August 1831, 13 September 1831; Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 29 August 1831; Halifax (NC) *Roanoke Advocate*, 8 September 1831; Raleigh *Register*, 8 September 1831, Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 69. The first estimates from Tarboro were written by an author

been killing negroes...”—he assured his parents that that “not less [sic] than 95 and not over 100 lives have been taken here the past week.” Given the context, one might read this as a much higher estimate of black deaths, but that does not seem to be what Smith meant. When Smith said “lives,” he apparently people, whether white or black. Since his sources placed the number of white dead at “64,” this meant he felt confident estimating that between 31 and 36 blacks died as the revolt was put down.⁴⁵

The estimates of those closest to the scene of the revolt agree with four reports of those who tried to count the number of blacks who died. Ironically, in the report that reported “nearly 30 negroes” died, John Wheeler added in a footnote: “It is said 31 exactly.” The same day that Wheeler’s estimate was published in the Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, the rival paper, the *American Beacon* had a different number, thirty-eight, as counted by Commodore Elliot who had returned from Southampton with the marines. The next day, the Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal* printed report from troops returning to Winton that noted, “32 dead bodies [negroes] have been seen.” More than a week later, Jerusalem postmaster Theodore Trezvant had a lower count: “The scouting parties through the county have killed 22, without law or justice, as they were determined to shew [sic] no mercy.”⁴⁶

Systematic problems run through these enumerations. First, information that these people had was not always reliable. For example, Commander Elliot, whose high count suggests that his troops may have been the best job counting, seems less credible when one considers that

who admitted that he had no direct source on the revolt. Tarboro’s troops had only gone as far as Enfield, North Carolina, before they were told to return to Tarboro.

⁴⁵ New Hampshire *Post*, 14 September 1831. Smith’s letter was written over several days, so his total of whites killed in the revolt changed. At first, he estimated “54 whites” died. Then he heard about eleven more fatalities, bring his temporary total to “sixty five.” His estimate of “64” was at the end of the letter, several lines before his estimate that between 95 and “100 lives have been taken.”

⁴⁶ Portsmouth and Norfolk *Herald*, 29 August 1831; Norfolk *American Beacon*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 56; Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal*, 31 August 1831; Raleigh *Register*, 15 September 1831; 31 August 1831,

he overestimated the number of whites who had died—he said seventy-five—and he called Nat Turner “Ned.” Likewise, it is probable that some of the tallies compiled in the midst of such confusion included dead who had been counted more than once. Second, even reliable information was not always complete. The correspondent from Winton acknowledged that his guess did not include “a number [of blacks who] are supposed to have died in the woods of their wounds.” The tallies also failed to include any blacks killed after the reports were written. For instance, the Winton letter was written on 24 August. On the same day, General Richard Eppes boasted that, “I put an end to this inhumane butchery in two days.” But even Eppes had to admit that all blacks were not safe. Some were still being killed, notably “the rebels in arms who refused to surrender.” Other sources agree that the summary executions continued several days after the revolt ended. On 27 August 1831, a minister wrote that, “*many negroes are killed every day.*” The same day, John Hampden Pleasants reported that, “Since the accompanying letter [written on 25 August] . . . other prisoners have been taken and in one or two instances, put to death by enraged inhabitants.” Although the estimates and tallies of the people who had been in Southampton were imperfect, their range—from twenty-two to the low forties—sets the best range for an estimate of the number of blacks killed without trials.⁴⁷

Reducing the estimate of blacks killed without trials leads to reassessing what even contemporary whites admitted were atrocities. White excesses in suppressing the revolt can best be seen in the way that whites killed and tortured blacks, not in the death of hundreds of blacks. In the days after the revolt, whites established the parameters of what they would do: torture, kill innocent people, disfigure captives and desecrate bodies. The effect of these barbarities was

Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal*. The parenthetical assertion in the quote from the Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal* is in the newspaper.

two-fold.⁴⁸ First, they warned the black community of the response that could be expected if anyone followed in Nat Turner's footsteps. Second, these atrocities showed the extent of white domination. The ability of whites to do what they wanted to blacks proved that the revolt had failed. Slavery and racial hierarchy were secure in Southampton County.

Nat Turner did not lead America's slaves to a new promised land. But he did begin a revolt that changed the world dramatically. It had happened. What were people to make of it? How were they to respond? In the days and weeks that followed, whites and blacks in Southampton and throughout the South wondered how they could take advantage of the opportunities—and protect themselves from the dangers—of a world changed forever. At times, the struggles were petty; they also included the last great debate about ending slavery in the south. People realized that the revolt had changed the world, and they did their best to operate in the world Nat Turner made.

⁴⁷ Norfolk *American Beacon*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 56; Fayetteville *North Carolina Journal*, 31 August 1831; Eppes quoted in Drewry, 86; G. W. Powell quoted in Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*, 61 (emphasis in original); Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 52.

⁴⁸ General Eppes lamented that the whites committed even "a single atrocity." The use of the word barbarities also echoes a contemporary report. John Hampden Pleasants referred to "the slaughter of many blacks, without trial, and under circumstances of great barbarity." See Lynchburg *Virginian* 8 September 1831, in Tragle, 74; Richmond *Constitutional Whig* 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 69.

CHAPTER 9

A STRUGGLE FOR ORDER

Henry Vaughn was among those most deeply affected by the revolt. A major slaveholder in St. Luke's Parish, he survived when the rebels bypassed his farm. His sister-in-law and nephew, Rebecca and Arthur Vaughn, were not as lucky: the rebels killed them and one of Arthur's cousins at one of the last households where the rebel avengers found victims. As tragic as those deaths were, however, it did not take long for Henry Vaughn to find a way to capitalize on what white Virginians saw as one of the greatest tragedies that the Old Dominion had ever faced. On Thursday, 25 August, a company of Richmond Calvary arrived in the neighborhood to help capture and kill the last of the rebels. They used Henry Vaughn's farm as a base while they patrolled the neighborhood and investigated the revolt. Until the following Wednesday, Vaughn supplied the Richmond troops with feed for the horses and food for the troops. When the Richmond soldiers were ready to leave, Vaughn presented a bill for more than eight hundred dollars.¹

John Hampden Pleasants, the newspaperman and a member of the Richmond company, responded with outrage. Pleasants believed that Vaughn unjustly took advantage of the slave revolt. Within three days of returning to Richmond, Pleasants recounted this episode at the end of one of the most important articles about the revolt. According to Pleasants, Vaughn should have furnished the provisions for the company, "charging no more than would indemnify him." Pleasants thought that eight hundred dollars, which would have been enough to buy two slaves, excessive for a few days' rations, which he also cursed as "the commonest and stinking fare."

Because of the terrible fare, many of the Richmond company lived off the hospitality of others in the county. In person, Pleasants was even more vituperative than in print. At a Petersburg party celebrating the Richmond Light Dragoons, Pleasants offered the following toast: “Henry B. Vaughn—the Jerusalem publican, who speculated upon the bones of his kindred, which the dragoons went to bury and avenge.”²

Pleasants’ insults suggest the type of conflicts that followed the insurrection. The disputants did not disagree about the revolt itself; surely both Pleasants and Vaughn found the revolt abhorrent. Instead, they disagreed about what the revolt meant. How should people respond? Although Vaughn never explained himself in the public record, he apparently thought that there was nothing wrong with making some money in the aftermath of the revolt. Pleasants, on the other hand, argued that the revolt had created a crisis that changed the rules of white interaction. No one, he believed, should use this tragedy to enrich himself. (Pleasants never considered this principle with respect to his own actions, including filing stories from the scene of the revolt that made his newspaper the best source for someone who wanted to find out more about what had happened in Southampton in the weeks after the revolt.)

The disagreements about the rules of conduct after the revolt point to a larger issue: the fragility of authority following the revolt. At a time of peace and stability, Pleasants’ claim that Vaughn should have underwritten the housing of troops on his farm would have been seen as absurd, but the revolt brought the ordinary rules that governed society into question. Pleasants believed that the revolt had changed what was required of members of the white community (in this case about hospitality and money-making). In making this claim, Pleasants turned not to the law, but public opinion. Pleasants may have recognized that Vaughn had a legal right to charge

¹ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 72.

² *Ibid.*; [Baltimore] *Niles Register*, 10 September 1831, in Tragle, 76.

a steep price for housing the Richmond troops, but Pleasants also understood that his public pronouncements and articles worked to inflict upon Vaughn “the severest punishment—the indignation of the public.”³

Henry Vaughn’s response to Pleasants’ charges is unknown. Although Pleasants died fifteen years later on the field of honor, no evidence suggests that these insults escalated to a duel. One might guess that Vaughn, who lacked a printing press, might have struggled to answer the widely published charges. On the other hand, since the white oral tradition in Southampton remembered Vaughn’s nobly, perhaps Vaughn vindicated himself, at least among his neighbors.⁴ Whatever Vaughn did, others in Southampton and elsewhere defended their authority at it moment of weakness. In the months after the revolt, those whose authority seemed most vulnerable in the days after the revolt had emerged from the tumult with their authority intact and in many cases increased.

No matter the outcome of the Pleasants-Vaughn spat, the shift in power in the white community after the revolt is clear: from the moments when the rebels were first dispersed—and the white community had available any option it wanted to consider—the autonomy of most whites in Southampton had been quickly circumscribed. Those, like Pleasants, who rejected the traditional rules of white interaction, exchange, and deference lost power. By the time the trials began, a small coterie of Southampton’s most prominent men had put themselves in a position to decide the fate of Southampton’s accused rebels.

³ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 72.

⁴ Pleasants dueled Thomas Ritchie, Jr. after Ritchie accused Pleasants of being an abolitionist. For a description of the Pleasants – Ritchie duel, see F. N[ash] Boney, “Rivers of Ink, A Stream of Blood: The Tragic Career of John Hampden Pleasants,” *Virginia Cavalcade* 18 (Summer 1968): 33-39.; and more recently, David Grimstead,

While the revolt was underway, one of the first things that whites did was organize to fight the revolt. The arrangements that whites made among themselves were not arbitrary. Immediately, whites began to arrange themselves in groups, with the rich, the educated, and the slaveholders assuming the positions of greatest authority. For example, the first group of whites to come across the rebels was not simply a band of whites. They had organized with a leader, A. P. Peete. Having one of the larger plantations in St. Luke's Parish, the thirty-something-year old Peete lived in a household that included five other whites, two free black women, and thirty-one slaves, only two of whom were over thirty-five. Sampson Reese, one of Peete's men, was also a slaveholder, although he owned fewer slaves. The twenty-something-year old Reese held fourteen slaves, including five women between ten and twenty-four-years old. Drewry's account, written decades later, also placed James Bryant and Hartie Joyner, who each owned two slaves, in Peete's band.⁵

As the revolt was suppressed, Peete and the men that he had assembled came under the command of the Virginia militia. Peete recalled being "enrolled by the order of Col. Meahan." All adult white males were members of the militias, but the organization and discipline was usually loose, with men electing their own officers. The musters of militias were notoriously avoided, and officers frequently complained about the difficulty of getting people to take their duties seriously. Nevertheless, the structure of the militia quickly superceded the ad hoc

American Mobbing: 1828-1861 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89. Vaughn survived Pleasants. See above, chapter 5, for reports that describe Vaughn in a favorable light.

⁵ 1830 Census; David F. Allmindinger, Jr., "The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 17; Drewry, 64-65. Drewry described James Bryant, who at the time was less than twenty years old, as a leader of the group. Because of Bryant's youth and relative poverty, I discount this as an exaggeration the type that oral history is

arrangements of the first men to respond to news of the revolt. If the militia created a formal chain of command and a formal structure for discipline, initial changes had little practical effect on its commander. Peete later recalled the orders that he received from Colonel Meahan on the Tuesday that the rebels were dispersed. Meahan commanded Peete and his men to remain in Jerusalem, unless Peete decided to “defend Dr. Blunt’s house or pursue the insurgents in any direction I thou[g]ht proper.”⁶ Despite the flexible orders given to Peete, one thing had changed. While Peete retained his broad discretion, his soldiers’ autonomy had been limited. On Monday, Peete’s orders were really requests; on Tuesday, they were commands, at least theoretically supported by the discipline of the militia.

One can see the power that the ordinary people had during the confusion of the revolt in the decision not to attack the rebels when the news came to Jerusalem that the rebels were spending the night at Thomas Ridley’s slave quarters. This news was stunning, not least because it meant that the rebel army was on the same plantation where some whites had taken refuge. The leader of the forces in Jerusalem recalled that his first impulse was to lead a raid on the rebels. He proposed attacking the rebels. There were two obvious problems with the plan: first, since the reports described a rebel army that included two hundred soldiers, the idea was for a small untrained white force to attack an encamped enemy at least five times larger than his own in the middle of the night. Second, the plan required taking from Jerusalem more than half of the sixty defenders that it had. With good reason, then, the foolhardy proposal ran into immediate opposition from the men in Jerusalem. Those “who had families here were strongly opposed to

vulnerable to. As an old man, Bryant may have misstated his own importance. No contemporary account placed James Bryant at the head of a group suppressing rebels.

⁶ A. P. Peete, affidavit, 18 January 1832, Southampton County Legislative Petitions, Library of Virginia. For more on militias, see Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), esp. 42-47. For a satiric version of the ineptness of Georgia’s militia discipline, see [Oliver Hillhouse Prince,] “The Militia Company Drill,” in Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s *Georgia Scenes* (1835; Nashville: J. S. Sanders & Company, 1992): 145-151.

it,” fearing that the gamble was too great.⁷ They did not want to leave their families behind weakened defenses as they tried to land the knockout blow. On Monday night, the argument of the unnamed family men carried the day. This leader had to accept what he could not control.

After the revolt had ended, the leaders of the white community worked to replace informal arrangements with a more formal structure. William C. Parker, for an example, sought the authority to override the hesitant troops with a more formal arrangement. Just weeks after the revolt had ended, Parker wrote to Bernard Payton in Richmond. “Many of the most respectable citizens,” he explained, “have united themselves for the purpose of forming a volunteer corps + elected me Captain.” Parker wanted the state to legitimize the results. He wrote to Virginia Governor John Floyd requesting commissions, and he hoped that Peyton would urge the governor to accede to Parker’s request. Parker probably did not need Peyton’s aid: a request to organize a militia troop in the neighborhood of Virginia’s largest slave revolt was not one that Floyd was likely to reject. Parker got his commission as Captain of the “Southampton Greys,” a force of seventy-five men within weeks, even before Nat Turner was captured.⁸

Parker and the Southampton Grays acted quickly to reinforce their new leader’s authority. Like the rebels, the white’s militia immediately devised a uniform for themselves. Parker’s 14 September letter to Peyton included a description of the uniform: “a dark grey trimmed with black braid[,] gilt bullet button + Caps with *Black* horse hair.” Parker was also eager to get weapons for the troops. He asked Peyton to lobby the governor for “such arms as good soldiers would like to use. We want carbines, swords and pistols of the first order much as the Richmond troops bore.” Apparently, the governor agreed to send swords and pistols, but told

⁷ Richmond *Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 61.

⁸ William C. Parker to Barnard Peyton, 14 September 1831, Executive Papers, Library of Virginia. Parker’s letter to Governor John Floyd implied that he had received the commission that he had requested. See Parker to Governor John Floyd, 1 October 1831, Executive Papers.

the new captain that carbines were “not to be had.” On 1 October 1831, Parker sent a man and a wagon to pick up the promised arms. He also included yet another request: if the Southampton Grays could not have carbines, could they get two pistols for each man? Obviously arms would be useful if the Southampton Grays were called into action, but the arrival of good weapons also emphasized the authority of their new leader, Captain Parker, who mentioned in his letter to the governor that “I wish to distribute the arms” at the company’s next meeting.⁹

Parker was no less eager to drill his men. In January 1832, less than four months after he had received his commission, Parker received a notice from Governor John Floyd, which Parker misinterpreted as a command to mobilize the cavalry unit. Floyd had no idea what Parker was doing, and it took the governor a week to countermand the order and demobilize the unit. Parker half-heartedly apologized to Floyd for his costly mistake, explaining that Parker had made the best out of the error. “My regret at having misconceived the true impact of the Governor’s first order is considerably diminished by the manifest improvement of the Troops in soldiering exercise and appearance whilst they were in regular service. Regular guards were established and we drilled four or five hours every day.”¹⁰ A week of drilling for four or more hours a day indicates how much Parker expanded his authority in the five months since the revolt.

As early as Wednesday, 24 August, the leaders who emerged in the days after the revolt concluded that the rebels had “dispersed.” Virginia militia General Richard Eppes, who assumed command of the forces in Jerusalem on Tuesday or Wednesday, ordered those troops making their way to Southampton from Isle of Wight County return. “I have to request you will direct the troops to return—perfectly satisfied they cannot be wanting.” The same day, in a report to

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ William C. Parker to John Floyd, 14 January 1832, and 22 January 1832, Executive Papers. (At the time I referenced these letters the 14 January 1832 letter was misfiled in 16 April 1832- 30 April 1832 Folder, March – April 1832 Box.)

the governor, Eppes explained, “he was disbanding the military and had no doubt of restoring tranquility in a short time.” Two days later, on Friday, 25 August, a member of the troops from Norfolk and Portsmouth reported that the men in his company “have done their duty.” They arrived back in Norfolk on the following Monday. Meanwhile to the west of Jerusalem, William Henry Broadnax, the ranking militia officer in Greenville County, reported on his investigations of the western parts of Southampton County: “the scene of the murders is perfectly quiet.” He had also begun discharging his troops. By Monday, Governor John Floyd noted in his diary that Broadnax “disbanded those troops and returned home.” On Sunday morning, 27 August, Lt. Colonel W. J. Worth, commander of a battalion of artillery that traveled to Southampton at the request of Norfolk’s mayor, wrote to General Eppes that “there no longer exists occasion for our services.” Eppes agreed, and told Colonel Worth that “I will as early as possible, have a guard detailed to supply the place of yours at the jail.”¹¹

The troops that Eppes assigned to the jail were the last troops to be discharged from service. They remained on duty through the trials, guarding the forty-eight prisoners confined to Southampton’s jail by Sunday night, 28 August. (The number of prisoners fluctuated as some were executed or discharged and others arrested.) The guards at the prison had two roles. They were supposed to prevent a jailbreak. (Prisoners suspected of being involved in a slave revolt plot in neighboring Sussex engineered a jailbreak, during which one prisoner died and another escaped.) As important, they were ordered to prevent whites from attacking blacks. One soldier who traveled to Southampton alluded to the troops’ role defending the incarcerated blacks when he noted that of the large number of blacks who had been arrested, “the chief part” had been put

¹¹ Richmond *Compiler*, 27 August 1831, in Tragle 47, 48; Norfolk *Herald*, 31 August 1831; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 54; John Floyd Diary, 28 August 1831, in Tragle, 252; Norfolk *Herald*, 31 August 1831. (The last entry is also reprinted in Norfolk *American Beacon*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 65.)

into jail “only for safe keeping.” General Eppes himself understood this dual role explicitly. In a dispatch written on 28 August, he insisted that, “A sufficient force is now assembled ... to sustain and enforce the sentence of the Courts, as well as to cause be respected its judgements of dismissal.” Eppes promised that the force would remain “as long as there is the least appearance of the necessity for it.” Two weeks after the revolt, when a rumor spread that Eppes ready to discharge his forces, the court issued a request that Eppes detail “fifty men as a guard for the jail.” The court explained that a strong guard was “necessary to the safe keeping of the prisoners now in jail...”¹²

The importance of defending the jail from whites provides another angle to view the struggles for power within the white community. While Nat Turner and his army were still fighting together, the goal of whites was obvious: to suppress the revolt. Whites differed on tactics, but none disagreed about their ultimate purpose. Once the revolt faltered and most of the rebels were captured or killed, however, the goal that had unified the whites’ purpose disappeared. A new set of disputes appeared within the white community: How the whites who had regained control should treat blacks? Should whites kill any and all blacks who were suspected rebels? How should blacks not suspected of involvement be treated? What level of involvement deserved death? Could any factors mitigate guilt? Should whites demand evidence or some formal procedures as they captured more blacks? The disagreements within the white community about these questions led to the most important dispute within Southampton’s white community: who would decide these questions, those whites who wanted revenge or those who wanted a more temperate response?

¹² Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 54; Jesse H. Simmons, Halifax (NC) *Roanoke Advocate* 8 September 1831. The Raleigh *Register* and North Carolina *Gazette* also reported forty-eight prisoners, 8 September 1831. Lynchburg *Virginian*, 8 September 1831, in Tragle, 75. The request is mention on the Southampton County Order Book, in Tragle, 201.

Both commanders of militia forces in Southampton attested to the presence of many whites who wanted immediate revenge and complained about the difficulties in preventing a bloodbath. Months after the revolt, William Henry Broadnax described for the House of Delegates how “the public mind was excited, almost to a frenzy.” Many white were especially unwilling to accept officials who decided to spare blacks who some believed were involved in the revolt. For example, in a report written at the end of August, Richard Eppes described how one black man was examined and discharged by the proper authorities. Not willing to accept the judgement of those who released the suspected rebel, vigilantes shot the man after he was released from custody.¹³

The situation demanded a firm response if mass killings were to be avoided. Broadnax remembered how hard it had been to contain what one reporter called “a spirit of vindictive ferocity.” “[I]t was with the greatest difficulty, and the hazard of personal popularity and esteem,” Broadnax told the Virginia legislature, “that the coolest and most judicious among us could exert an influence sufficient to restrain an indiscriminate slaughter of the blacks who were suspected.” According to Drewry, one slaveholder risked even more than popularity and esteem. Pitt Thomas, owner of seven slaves, “prevented the murder of several prisoners at Cross Keys by stepping between the negroes and those about to shoot, and saying it was time for such things to stop, and that the prisoners should be treated well and have fair trials.” Drewry may have been engaging in a bit of hagiography, but contemporary reports describe similar efforts by other leaders. Eppes, for instance, acted vigorously to suppress those who took advantage of public opinion to override the judgement of the militia leaders and judicial officials. After guessing the number of blacks killed without trial, Richmond *Constitutional Whig* editor Pleasants praised the

¹³ Richmond *Enquirer*, 24 January 1832; Eppes’ report is quoted in James McDowell’s speech to the Virginia legislature, Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 March 1832.

vigilance of Eppes, who “used every precaution in his power . . . to put a stop to the disgraceful procedure.”¹⁴

Eppes’ vigilance is most clear in an order that he made on Sunday, 28 August 1831, a week after the revolt. In it, Eppes announced to “the troops under his command, and to the citizens of Southampton, and *particularly* to that portion of the citizens residing in the neighborhood where the violence has been done, that there no longer exists any cause of apprehension for the public safety or the security of individuals.” This was not simply a statement of fact, but Eppes’ way of justifying an end of what he and other leaders saw as a tendency to anarchism in Southampton County. Since safety had been restored, Eppes recommended “to all descriptions of persons to abstain in the future from any acts of violence to any personal property whatever”—in other words, slaves—“for any cause whatever.” Eppes granted one exception to this pronouncement: any slave who “refuses submission to the competent legally authorized and responsible individuals, under the authority of the commanding officer,” Eppes himself, “of the Justice of the Peace, or other persons appointed by law for such duty.” While Eppes called this a recommendation, he made clear that anyone who disobeyed these orders would be treated harshly. “[N]o excuse will be allowed to any other acts of violence after the promulgation of this order, and further declare in the most explicit terms that any who

¹⁴ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 52; Drewry, 87; Richmond *Enquirer*, 24 January 1832; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 69. For a description of a similar conflict between officials and the public in the wake of a different slave conspiracy, see Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Great New York Conspiracy of 1741: Slavery, Crime and Colonial Law* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 102-103. In New York, the effort by the elite to limit popular input failed. When two of the convicted rebels announced that they were ready to confess the full details of a poorly understood plot, the leaders of New York wanted to delay the executions. Popular protest, however, refused to countenance a delay. The sheriff told the lieutenant governor, as Peter Charles Hoffer recounted the message, that “without troops no one could rescue the convicts.” The crowd on the scene made sure that the executions went forward as scheduled.

may attempt the resumption of such acts shall be punished, if necessary, by the rigors of the articles of war.”¹⁵

No doubt many citizens of Southampton County were surprised to learn that the militia officers, whose presence had been welcomed less than a week before the announcement, were issuing standing orders to arrest those whites who saw themselves as simply suppressing a slave revolt. Despite the assurances from the Eppes and other leaders that all was safe, many whites were still worried that the blacks had not been completely vanquished and that they might rise again. Some whites thought that the attitude of Eppes and the other leaders was cavalier, too worried about the security of the property of the wealthy and not interested enough in the safety of the white community. When Eppes told the federal soldiers—marines and artillerymen—return to Norfolk and Fort Monroe, some in Southampton felt betrayed.

Still concerned about the whites’ safety, a group of citizens asked Eppes to rescind his order. He refused. They then appealed to the officers of the troops who leaving Southampton, hoping that they would override Eppes’ decision. This met with no more success than their appeal to Eppes, so “then the[y] petitioned the President of the U States,” Andrew Jackson, “for a Detachment of the U. States troops as a guard.” Jackson directed the Secretary of War to ask the Governor John Floyd if it were necessary to countermand Eppes’ order. At this point, the appeal of the Southampton County residents had come full circle. Floyd, who earlier had admitted to Eppes that “[i]n all these matter I rely with confidence upon your judgement and discretion,” was asked by federal authorities if he had any reason to overrule the decision that Eppes had made in Southampton. Eppes’ decision stood.¹⁶

¹⁵ Lynchburg *Virginian*, 8 September 1831, in Tragle, 73-74.

¹⁶ Anonymous note in James McDowell Papers, Series 3.1, Folder 75, SHC; letter to Jackson quoted in James McDowell’s speech to the Virginia legislature, in Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 March 1832; John Floyd to Richard Eppes, 25 August 1831, in Tragle, 266.

Although the appeal of some Southampton residents did not succeed in getting federal soldiers back, it was not ignored by those figures in Southampton who were trying to reassert authority. One correspondent, who, according to the editor of the *Richmond Compiler* “may every way be depended upon,” lashed out at this appeal at the end of a report about the revolt: “We are sorry to learn that a paper signed by a few names in Southampton, should have been addressed to the President of the United States requesting the continuance of some U. S. troops in that quarter.” Instead of overruling the authorities on the scene, the author heartily endorsed their decision. “[W]e had hoped that with a Governor as energetic as the present Chief Magistrate...; with a General so much on the alert; and with Citizens ready to stand by each other, as all of the Citizens of Virginia are, we might have been able to dispense with the future services of the regular troops.”¹⁷

Soldiers could stop the white population of Southampton from lynching suspected rebels, but—since Southampton could not sustain military law indefinitely—a permanent solution was needed. All whites agreed that several of the accused rebels had to be punished, but the leaders of the Southampton County wanted to figure out a way to spare some suspects without giving the more vindictive whites reason to repeat the lynchings that had been stopped in the days after the revolt.

Ancient English law had created a special institution, the court of oyer and terminer, which, according to the distinguished Virginian jurist St. George Tucker, was “occasionally constituted for the special purpose of trying persons accused of treason, or revolt, the judges of which, are frequently some of the great officers of state.” Unlike common law courts, in which a conviction required an indictment by a grand jury and the unanimous decision of twelve of the defendant’s peers, the judges in the court of oyer and terminer had remarkable leeway. They did

¹⁷ *Richmond Compiler*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 62.

not need to indict the accused; nor did they need to defer to a jury to answer questions of fact. In the court of oyer and terminer, a panel of judges decided the verdict without any input from others in the community. William Blackstone, the eighteenth-century British jurist whose legal commentaries were the touchstone for commentaries on common law, celebrated the rules that limited the use of courts of oyer and terminer, whose judges otherwise “might then, as in France or Turkey, imprison, dispatch, or exile any man that was obnoxious to the government, by an instant declaration, that such is their will and pleasure.” His Virginian editor agreed that such authority could be “dangerous to the lives and liberties of the people.”¹⁸

Despite the perils, American colonists imported the court of oyer and terminer to America in the colonial period. Most notoriously, a court of oyer and terminer in Salem, Massachusetts hanged nineteen suspected witches in response to a witchcraft scare that swept Salem Village. The same year, 1692, the Virginia legislature passed “An act for the more speedy prosecution of slaves committing Capitall [sic] Crimes.” Believing “the sollemnitie [sic] of jury” unnecessary in slave trials, the Virginia House of Burgesses created the courts of oyer and terminer. The legislature’s intent was clear: it wanted to expedite slave trials. “The expense and delay involved were . . . unnecessary to secure substantial justice, and . . . accordingly provided that the Governor should issue commissions of Oyer and Terminer for the trial of any slaves accused of capital offenses.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Blackstone, William, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (Oxford: 1765-1769) IV, 344, online at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/blackstone/bk4ch27.htm>, 25 June 2003; St. George Tucker, “Volume 1 Appendix, Note D, Section 9,” in *Blackstone's Commentaries: With Notes Of Reference, To The Constitution And Laws, Of The Federal Government Of The United States; And Of The Commonwealth Of Virginia. In Five Volumes. With An Appendix To Each Volume, Containing Short Tracts Upon Such Subjects As Appeared Necessary To Form A Connected View Of The Laws Of Virginia, As A Member Of The Federal Union*, (Philadelphia, 1803), online at <http://www.constitution.org/tb/t1d10000.htm>, 25 June 2003.

¹⁹ “An act for the more speedy prosecution of slaves committing Capitall Crimes,” quoted in A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr. and Anne F. Jacobs, “The “Law Only As an Enemy”: The Legitimization of Racial Powerlessness Through The Colonial and Antebellum Criminal Laws of Virginia,” *North Carolina Law Review* 70 (1992): 985; Thomas D. Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law, 1619-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of NC Press, 1996), 214. See also, Daniel J. Flanagan, “Criminal Procedures in Slave Trials in the Antebellum South,” *Journal of Southern History* 40

Ironically, a court that instituted in Virginia specifically to avoid bestowing on slaves the due process evolved into an institution accused of sheltering slaves. In 1772, Landon Carter of Sabine Hall, scion of Robert “King” Carter, complained about a reform to the court of oyer and terminer that required four magistrates, including one who was a lawyer. “[B]y the New law, a negro now cannot be hanged, for there must be 4 Judges to condemn him, and such a court I am persuaded will never be got.” Carter believed that the justices would be lenient because otherwise there would be “too many Slaves to be paid for.” Of course, Carter exaggerated the difficulties involved in convicting a slave, but he identified an important reason that judges were reluctant to convict slaves. Consistent with Carter’s observation, southern courts of oyer and terminer found frequently for the accused slave. Historian Philip Schwarz has found that in the thirty years prior to the revolt, the court of oyer and terminer in Southampton convicted roughly a third of those slaves who had been charged with attacking whites.²⁰

By the time the court assembled on 31 August 1831, the leaders of Southampton’s society had already won several major victories. They limited and eventually stopped the lynching of blacks thought to have taken part in the revolt. In doing this, they prevented a disaster and also saved thousands of dollars of slaveholders’ equity. At the same time, they increased their authority. The military, which came to Southampton, heeded the advice of the leaders of the county, not those whites who wanted a more vigorous response to the revolt. Finally, the using the courts of oyer and terminer, the leaders further limited popular input. The court of oyer and terminer met over two months. During that time, only twenty men—less than

(1974): 537-64. For a description of the court of oyer and terminer in the Salem, MA, see Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Devil’s Disciples: Makers of the Salem Witchcraft Trials* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), esp. 131-141.

²⁰ Carter quoted in Morris, 214; Philip J. Schwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 255. By attacking, Schwarz means any form of attack. Out of twenty-six cases, he found nine convictions, a rate of 34.6%.

the number who would have sat on two common law juries—decided the fate of the surviving accused rebels.²¹

At the end of the lists of the judges, James Rochelle, the Southampton clerk, succinctly categorized them as “Gent.” This easily overlooked honorific indicated something essential about the handful of men who were responsible for shaping the judicial response to the revolt: they were part of Southampton’s acknowledged elite. Records describe the holdings of all but one of the twenty men who served on the court of oyer and terminer. Of the nineteen, all were slaveholders. Seventeen of them held more than ten slaves, which put them among the richest quintile of households listed on the 1830 census. In other words, there was one judge for each fourteen of the wealthiest households; in contrast, the rest of the county had one judge per five hundred households.²² The numbers are starker when one looks at the holdings of the seven judges who sat on the greatest number of trials. Each of the seven held more than twenty slaves, the poorest among them still among the richest six percent of slaveholders in Southampton. In other words, the seven most important judges came from fewer than seven-dozen households; none came from the rest of the county. For a court that required unanimous verdicts for conviction, each accused rebel faced a bench that included at least one of these men; most faced a bench with three or more.

In addition to the twenty men who served as judges, only seven other men had any formal roles in the trials. The lawyers in the trials were younger, less experienced men who aspired to inclusion among the ranks of the leaders of society. Meriwether Broadnax, thirty-two-year-old

²¹ Unlike slaves, free blacks in Virginia enjoyed the right of a full trial, but only four were tried and those four cases were all referred to the regular court by the court of oyer and terminer. Three of the four free blacks referred for full trials were eventually acquitted.

²² All of the figures for this group come from the 1830 census, except the holding of James Trezvant, who was not listed on the census. Figures for James Trezvant come from the 1831 tax list. It is possible that the census taker did not include Trezvant because at the time of the census he was in Washington D.C. serving his third term in the House of Representatives.

son of Brigadier General William Henry Broadnax, prosecuted all the cases. Like his father, he did not live in Southampton. The defense cases were split among five lawyers, with three young lawyers handling all but two cases. The man who would receive his commission as colonel for the Southampton Grays during the trials, the thirty-nine-year-old William Parker, was the most experienced of the defense councils. Since he had relocated to Southampton County in 1826, Parker had worked as a lawyer. By the summer of 1831, he represented Virginia in cases before the Southampton County Circuit Superior Court. Thomas Ruffin Gray was a second important defense attorney. Like Meriwether Broadnax, the thirty-one-year old was the son of a prominent local figure. Captain Thomas Gray, the father of the lawyer, was a horse breeder who died as the trials were underway. Although Thomas Ruffin Gray was born to privilege—as a seven-year-old, he inherited his first slave, Hertwell, from his maternal grandfather—his attempt in the late 1820s to set up a plantation ended in failure. In 1830 he qualified as a lawyer; when the trials began Gray had less than a year of experience as a lawyer. As inexperienced was James French, a twenty-four-year-old attorney. In 1830, French was reading the law with a relative in Fayetteville, North Carolina.²³

The final man with a formal role during the trials was the clerk of courts, James Rochelle. Like the judges, Rochelle was firmly entrenched in Southampton society. While he was Southampton's clerk of courts, his brother, Clement Rochelle, was Southampton's sheriff. The Rochelles were also large slaveholders: sheriff Clement Rochelle owned thirty-three slaves;

²³ Southampton Tax List, 1831; Allmindinger, 27; Parramore, *Southampton County*, 106-107; Drewry, 97; Raleigh *Observer*, 3 November 1877; Southampton County Legislative Petitions, 16 September 1811. In contrast to this portrayal, Drewry described these lawyers as “the three most prominent and able lawyers available,” but the inexperience of the three primary lawyers makes this claim look like an exaggeration.

owning forty-seven slaves, James Rochelle, the county clerk was among the top two percent in slaveholdings in the county.²⁴

No one had as much work to do during the trials as the clerk. Although he did not record the statements of the judges or the lawyers—not even their questions—he assiduously recorded witnesses’ testimony. Surviving records suggest that Rochelle took his notes on little scraps of paper. After the trials, he assembled the scraps and composed a formal record. For those slaves who were found not guilty, that simply required a line or two. Similarly, all free blacks whether they were discharged or bound over to the Superior Court, only required a brief entry. For those slaves who were convicted, however, the transcription process was more involved: he compiled his notes into a more complete trial record, which was then sent to the governor, who was then faced with the question whether to commute the sentences imposed upon those found guilty.²⁵

Before the trials began, James Rochelle made a quick trip from Southampton. He took his wife and children to Portsmouth to stay with a friend, Richard Blow. According to Blow, Rochelle returned to Southampton shortly before the trials, leaving his family behind. “She and the children will remain with us till he comes,” Blow wrote to his brother. Blow did not know when to expect Rochelle to fetch his family, although the daily trials meant that Rochelle most likely did not make it to Portsmouth until sometime after 9 September.²⁶ The Rochelles’ decision to travel from Southampton was never explained in any historical record. The family may have simply left to visit some friends. Following on the heels of the South’s most famous

²⁴ Southampton County Tax List, 1831.

²⁵ For examples of Rochelle’s note taking style, see Southampton County, County Court Judgements, 1831, Library of Virginia. For a discussion emphasizing the incredible importance the style of note taking could have, see Michael P. Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 55 (October 2001): 915-976.

²⁶ Richard Blow to George Blow, 5 September 1831, Blow Family Papers, VHS. The Rochelles’ decision to flee from Southampton was not unique. Lavana Francis, according to Drewry, went to Seaboard, N.C. “for some weeks,” ostensibly to care for her mother. See Drewry, 49. Also Solomon Parker’s wife “went to Sussex upon the alarm of the late insurrection.” See Becky’s testimony in the Trial of Frank, in Tragle, 215.

slave revolt, the family's visit to the Blows seems not to simply coincide with the revolt, but to be a way to escape the neighborhood of the revolt. If so, this suggests that the assurances of leaders—such as General Eppes' insistence three days before the trials began that, “there no longer exists any cause of apprehension for the public safety or the security of individuals”—were not necessarily believed, even among their own families. Prominent figures such as Generals Broadnax and Eppes may have told people that everything was safe, but even in James Rochelle's house someone thought that it would be better for the family to visit George Blow than have the family remain alone all day while James Rochelle was at court.

Against the backdrop of insecurity that pervaded even the most well-connected households, one can appreciate the challenge to restore the confidence of the county facing the twenty-seven men who made up the court of oyer and terminer. If the trials succeeded—if they restored the confidence of white society—they would also vindicate centralization of power in the hands of only limited number of men. At the same time, if whites thought the trials fair, the measured response of Southampton's court of oyer and terminer could be seen in high relief against background of the indiscriminate response of the white community in the days after the revolt.

In the wake of a revolt that left dozens of whites dead, the boldest thing that the court could do was show mercy. By releasing—not by condemning—people involved in the revolt, the judges displayed their raw power, their ability, in the words of John Hampden Pleasants, to “oppose the popular passion” and ignore the calls to condemn the innocent and “to take suspicion for proof.”²⁷ Being merciful or even fair posed its own risk to the power of the court. If another revolt ensued, many believed that the white populace would blame the measured response of the richest slaveholders who had tried to protect their own slaves. In the face of

another revolt, whites would refuse to defer to those leaders who had encouraged restraint. The population would follow those whites who had encouraged the most aggressive response from the start.

Contemporaries thought that the result of a second revolt would be catastrophic. At that point, nothing would stop the indiscriminate massacre of blacks. More than a century after the revolt, people coined the word “genocide” to describe the Holocaust. Although the word had yet to be invented, several people in Virginia described how a future revolt would lead to genocide. In a letter from Petersburg published in Richmond, New York, and Boston, one correspondent told the nation that, “another such enterprise will end in the total extermination of their race in the southern country.” This anonymous correspondent thought such a blood bath would be justified. “[B]loody as the remedy may be, it will be better thus to rid ourselves of, than longer endure[,] the evil.” On the floor of the legislature, General William Henry Broadnax, one of the key figures in limiting the bloodshed in Southampton, agreed that after a few more insurrections, “the whole [black] race will be swept from among us. Who would willingly behold such a spectacle?” Slaveholding petitioners from Hanover County asked the legislature a similar rhetorical question: “Will you wait until the land shall be deluged in blood and look alone to the fatal catastrophe, the extinction of the black races by force as the only remedy?”²⁸

John Hampden Pleasants deplored the murders of innocent blacks in Southampton, but he acknowledged that the leaders who limited the retaliation would be impotent in the face of another revolt: “Let the fact not be doubted by those whom it concerns, that another such

²⁷ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 70.

²⁸ Boston’s Universalist *Christian Register*, 1 October 1831. Richmond *Enquirer*, 24 January 1832; Hanover County Petition, 14 December 1831, in J. H. Johnson, “Antislavery Petitions Presented to the Virginia Legislature by Citizens of Various Counties,” *Journal of Negro History* 12 (1927): 678-79. The letter in the *Christian Register* was published by the New York *Courier* and the Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 8 September 1831. See also Parramore, 245, footnote 4. Similar comments also appeared in the Nashville *Banner*. See Boston *Recorder*, 26 October 1831.

insurrection will be the signal for the extermination of the whole black population in the quarter of the state where it occurs.” Responding to this remarkable comment, the Norfolk and Portsmouth *Herald* said that Pleasants wrote something that the editors of the Norfolk paper had already been thinking: “[A]ny future outrage of the blacks of a similar character, would be retaliated by their indiscriminate destruction. The arm of the law would be inadequate to protect even the innocent from the general flood of vengeance and extermination.” In October, Ellen Lewis heard much the same: “I have been assured by several gentlemen[,] who have visited the devoted district [Southampton], that should the blacks attempt to rise there again, they will be exterminated; the excitement is so great.” In February 1832, Benjamin Watkins Leigh, writing in the Richmond *Enquirer* under the pseudonym “Appomattox,” concurred: “[T]he only serious apprehension was, and is, that repetitions of servile rebellion may result (in what all good men would lament) such a destruction of the slave race as may exceed the just measure of punishment and the necessity of example.” With these discussions of large-scale murder taking place throughout Virginia, the court of oyer and terminer met on 31 August to consider the fate of the rebels, beginning with “Daniel a negro man the property of Richard Porter.”²⁹

²⁹ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 September 1831, in Tragle, 69; Norfolk and Portsmouth *Herald*, 7 September 1831; Ellen P. Lewis to Harrison Gray Otis, 17 October 1831, in Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis, Federalist, 1765-1848* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 270; Appomattox, Richmond *Enquirer*, 4 February 1832; Daniel’s Trial, Southampton County Court Records, in Tragle, 177. Elizabeth R. Varon identifies Benjamin Watkins Leigh as Appomattox in *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 52; Patricia Hinkin attributed pieces by “Appomattox” to William Mayo Atkinson. “Anti-Slavery in Virginia” (Ph.D. University of Virginia, 1968), 263. A week after the “Appomattox” article appeared in the Richmond newspaper, James McDowell explained to his wife that this letter was really written by Leigh. See James McDowell to Sara McDowell, 12 February 1832, James McDowell Papers, SHC.

CHAPTER 10

THE TRIALS

On Wednesday, 31 August 1831, a court of oyer and terminer met in Jerusalem to determine the fates of those accused of participating in the recent revolt. James Trezvant, a congressman who had recently finished his third and final term in Congress, and Alexander P. Peete, the leader of the first troops to encounter the rebels, were among the five magistrates. The remaining judges—Jeremiah Cobb, James Massenburg and Orris Brown—were no less prominent. Each of these five men was among the seven judges who heard the largest number of cases. They were also all large slaveholders; James Massenburg's twenty-six slaves made him the one with the fewest slaves.¹

Once the court was assembled, the commonwealth's attorney, Meriwether Broadnax presented the charges against nine prisoners. They were each, according to James Rochelle's notes, "charged with feloniously counselling, advising and conspiring with each other and divers[e] other slaves to rebel and make insurrection and making insurrection and taking the lives of divers[e] free white persons of the Commonwealth." The formalism of charging the prisoners helped distinguish the court proceedings from the informal hearings that had resulted in summary executions in the days after the revolt. Formalism also implied that the trials were the domain of the lawyers; others who did not know the proper form were reduced to spectators in the keenly followed trials. Throughout the trials the judges insisted on proper charges—in October a court that

¹ Trial of Daniel, in Tragle, 177; Southampton County Tax list, 1831

included James Massenburg dismissed the cases against two slaves who were improperly charged.²

After charging the nine, the court then turned to the question of representation for the accused. The law required that accused slaves have defense councilors, who were to be paid ten dollars by the defendants' owners. In the first case, the court appointed William Parker—who before the trials had ended would be commissioned as the captain of the newly organized Southampton Grays—to represent Daniel, the first accused prisoner. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Parker and the other defense lawyers tried to find ways to save the accused slaves. The defense attorneys called witnesses to the stand, trying to find any factor that might help their clients elude the gallows. They also made “long and elaborate arguments” to the point that one observer commented upon the court’s “unwearied patience.”³ The mistakes that the three main defense attorneys made can be attributed to the rushed trials and the young lawyers’ inexperience. Parker’s five years of experience made him the most experienced; with that amount of experience, none could be expected to lead a panel five or more judges to find not guilty someone whom they believed guilty. In the end, the defense attorneys played a supporting role—giving the trials the proper form—even as the more prominent judges decided who would be condemned and who would be reprieved.

With the players cast in their roles, the first trial began. Daniel, who was owned by Richard Porter, was brought before the bar. Like all of the defendants, Daniel pled, “Not Guilty.” Meriwether Broadnax would have to make a case. He called his best witness. Levi Waller—who had barely escaped from the farm where the rebels killed

² Trial of Daniel and Trial of Jack and Shadrack, in Tragle, 177, 217.

³ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 98.

Waller's family and the children who attended a nearby school—testified about the essentials of the case: on Monday, 22 August 1831, “a number of negroes, say between 40 and 50, came to the house of the witness,” James Rochelle always recorded the testimony in the third person, “mounted on horseback and armed...” Waller described his narrow escape, and then explained how he returned and “hid himself in sight of the house where he could nearly see all the things that transpired at the house.” After he explained how he witnessed the revolt, Waller addressed Daniel's involvement in the revolt. Waller swore that he had seen “the prisoner Daniel and two other negroes” go into the log cabin where Waller's wife and a child were hiding. Later the three emerged, Daniel carrying the scissors that belonged to Levi Waller's wife. Waller concluded his testimony describing how after the rebels had left, Waller “returned to the house and found his wife and the small girl were murdered.”

Waller's testimony was absolutely damning. Daniel had been spotted with the rebels. He had been identified as one of the rebels who had been involved in one of the most ghastly murders. Even Daniel's carrying the scissors was a significant detail, because it suggested to the court that he was an active participant. After all, who but the most eager rebel would pick up something so trivial after seeing a woman and child killed? Also troubling for Daniel's defense, this testimony came from a white man, exactly the type of witness the court was prepared to find most reliable. According to southern law, blacks were so unreliable that they could not testify against whites. None of Waller's testimony in the trials would be challenged by the defense.⁴

⁴ Trial of Daniel, in Tragle, 177-178. For a discussion of the evidentiary rules with respect to black testimony, see Thomas Morris, *Southern Slavery and the Law*, 229-48.

Upon the completion of Waller's testimony, Meriwether Broadnax called Nathaniel Francis, whose home the rebels visited. Francis testified that on Sunday night and Monday morning "a number, say between 50 and 60 free white persons were murdered ... by a number of negroes and it was generally believed that there was insurrection among the negroes of the country." After Waller's gripping testimony, Francis's testimony was anticlimactic. No doubt, anyone in the courtroom could have said as much, and most—including Francis—could have said much more. In fact, many unnamed people apparently testified that there was a revolt. According to Rochelle's rough draft trial notes for Daniel's trial, "Several witnesses prove that several witnesses [sic] were killed by the insurgents acting in a body." Apparently, Rochelle simply decided to use Francis's testimony that "it was generally believed that there was an insurrection among the negroes of the county," as a way to get the fact that there had been a revolt into the record.⁵ Francis and the unnamed witnesses clearly satisfied the court that the prosecution had proved that there had been a revolt in Southampton County. In ensuing trials, Broadnax did not bother to establish that there had been a revolt.

Having established that there had been a revolt and having linked Daniel to the murders of Mrs. Waller and a child, Broadnax could have rested his case confident that he would win. Instead, he called one more witness, Sampson Reese. Reese had been one of the whites who had joined Alexander P. Peete in pursuit of the rebels on Monday morning. He was with Peete—formerly his commander, at the moment among the five judges that listened to his testimony—when the whites arrived at James Parker's farm.

⁵ Trial of Daniel, in Tragle, 178; "Nat Turner Insurrection" Folder, Southampton County Court Judgments, LV.

According to Reese's testimony, Daniel was "the first negro he saw after getting to Mr. Parker['s] gate." The prisoner was on horseback, although—perhaps under cross-examination—Reese admitted that Daniel appeared to be unarmed. Taken as a whole, Reese's evidence established one salient fact: Daniel remained with the rebels long after they left Waller's house. Unlike others, Daniel had not tried to escape from the rebel army. Broadnax rested his case, confident that the court would find that there had been an insurrection and that Daniel had been an active rebel for most of the day on Monday.

At this point, Daniel, his council William Parker, and everyone in the courtroom understood that Daniel would be convicted of "making insurrection." Nevertheless, Parker still tried to make a defense. Parker called Richard Porter, Daniel's owner, to the stand. Parker hoped Porter would show that Daniel was not among the core of most committed rebels. Porter said that Daniel was among those who quickly accepted that the revolt had been quashed. Porter testified that he was told not only that Daniel "had surrendered himself," but that he gave himself up as he "was going to his[,] the witness['s,] house." (Prosecutor Meriwether Broadnax made no objection to the defense introducing hearsay.) Porter's testimony also implied that Daniel was a last-second recruit, among those who did not know about the revolt until it had started. When asked about how Daniel behaved shortly before the revolt, Porter answered that "he saw nothing uncommon about the prisoner." Following Porter's testimony and closing statements from the lawyers, the judges adjourned to consider the evidence. When court reconvened, the judges announced their verdict: that they were "unanimously of opinion that the prisoner is guilty in manner and form as in the information against him." Given the chance to speak before sentencing, the defense said nothing and the court sentenced

the first of the rebels to “be hanged by the neck until he be dead” six days later, on 5 September. Some obvious problem reduced Daniel’s value as a slave since the court valued him at \$100, by far the lowest valuation set by the court.⁶

Between the trials and even more so between sessions, judges came and went. Nevertheless, Carr Bowers and James Parker, whose farm was the site of the first battle of the insurrection, plus the five judges who heard Daniel’s case made up the core of the court throughout the trials. At least one of these seven justices served on every case, and they constituted a majority of the bench in more than three quarters of the cases, including Nat Turner’s trial. They were all large slaveholders; none held fewer than two-dozen slaves.⁷ After the first case, Alexander Peete and Jeremiah Cobb left the court, replaced by James Parker and Robert Goodwyn whose brother was the tenth largest slaveholder in Southampton and who owned thirteen slaves himself. The next case brought before the reassembled court was that of Moses, who belonged to the estate of Thomas Barrow. The court assigned William Parker as his council, and then the defendant was brought before the bar. Moses pled not guilty to the charges. Parker moved to suspend the trial until the following day. The court granted Parker’s motion, and Moses’ case was held over for the following day.⁸

Following a recess, the court reassembled, with Alexander Peete returning, and turned to the case of Tom, who fled from the farm of Catherine Whitehead the morning that the rebels appeared. The youngest of the defense attorneys, twenty-four-year-old James French, was assigned to defend Tom. Despite French’s inexperience—the year

⁶ Trial of Daniel, in Tragle, 178-179.

⁷ Thirty-nine of fifty defendants (78%) faced a panel of judges upon which these most active judges made a majority. Or, because some rebels were tried together, thirty-seven out of forty-five cases (82%) had a majority made up of the most active judges.

before, he had read law at an uncle's law office in Fayetteville, North Carolina—French won the first acquittal. According to the transcripts, “the Court after hearing the testimony are of the opinion and doth accordingly order that the said Tom be discharged from further prosecution for this said offense.” It seems unlikely that the prosecution was able to prove to the court that Tom had ever joined the insurgents. As has been discussed above, the prosecution's best evidence probably focused on the fact that Tom was away from his plantation, maybe even carrying a hatchet. Once the prosecution rested, French attacked the prosecution's case. He probably called white witnesses who could testify that while Tom was away from his home, he spread the alarm. French only needed the testimony of one of the whites grateful to Tom for sounding the alarm. Or—given the laxity of the court towards hearsay—perhaps French found someone who could repeat the story that Mary Blackford heard the following year: Tom's flight saved “many lives.”⁹ Since James Rochelle did not record the evidence in acquittals, no one will ever know who French called, only that the defense worked. Tom was discharged.

The court then brought Catherine Whitehead's Jack to the bar and arraigned him. Like the others, Jack pled not guilty, at which point, the court decided to adjourn for the day. Jack's case would be the first one that they would take when court reconvened at 8 A.M. the following day. The next day, Jack's trial began with one change in the court's makeup: Carr Bowers joined the court—the last of the seven most active judges to appear—filling a seat vacated by Alexander Peete. Meriwether Broadnax called to the stand Venus, a slave who lived on Richard Porter's plantation. She testified that on the

⁸ Southampton County Tax list, 1831, Trial of Moses, in Tragle, 179. One could interpret Parker's motion to suspend the trial as evidence that he planned to mount some sort of defense.

⁹ Raleigh *Observer*, 3 November 1877; Trial of Tom, in Tragle, 179; Blackford, 27. For my discussion of Tom's flight, see Chapter 3.

day of the revolt, Jack and Andrew had come to Richard Porter's farm at about 9 A.M. They asked if the rebels had killed the white people on Richard Porter's farm. Venus told the two that the Porters had escaped. Jack and Andrew then asked Venus where the rebels were. She replied that they had gone. Jack and Andrew then remarked that "they were going on after them that the negroes had left word for them to go on after them and they did not know what else to do." Venus told the court that she believed the two were "going to join the insurgents." Broadnax also called Hubbard, the slave who almost died during the reaction despite helping Harriet Whitehead escape. Hubbard swore that on the day of the revolt Jack, Andrew and Tom had left the plantation. Later, Jack and Andrew returned. The two corralled a horse, and Hubbard told the court that he "thought they went to join the insurgents." Broadnax rested his case.

The prosecution's case had several weaknesses that James French, the defense council, tried to exploit. First, Broadnax had not shown that Jack had been a rebel, let alone an active participant in the murders. If Jack had seen the rebels, it was only as he ran away when they appeared at Catherine Whitehead's plantation. Second, since Jack had not been a participant in the revolt, the state's case depended upon convincing the court that Jack desired to join a party of insurgents and that the desire to join the revolt somehow met the standard that he had conspired "to rebel and make insurrection." Finally, the state's case relied heavily on the judgement of two black witnesses. Venus and Hubbard had each surmised that Jack and Andrew had left with the hope of joining the revolt, but what if the prosecution's witnesses were wrong? Even they had to admit that Jack and Andrew seemed confused and "much disturbed."¹⁰

¹⁰ Trial of Jack, in Tragle, 180. See also the Trial of Andrew, in Tragle, 181-182.

French called at least five witnesses to make the defense. Although the testimony did not make the official records, Tom—who had just been acquitted—described how the three who fled from Catherine Whitehead’s “separated without any understanding.” He also testified that Jack and Andrew “seemed alarmed.” French also called Thomas Haithcock, a free black man who would later stand trial himself. Haithcock remembered that Jack and Andrew came to his house. Haithcock recalled that they were “much grieved.” He said that they went with him to several houses, but he did not mention their purpose. With the hope of casting doubt upon the testimony of Hubbard, French called Wallace. Wallace corroborated parts of the testimony of Hubbard and Catherine Whitehead’s Tom, who emphasized that Jack and Andrew “ran off before any murder was committed.” While Jack and Andrew were away, they went to the house of George Booth. When the slaves returned to the Whitehead plantation about an hour later, Wallace testified that they “appeared much disturbed [and] greatly grieved.” He also questioned Thomas Haithcock’s chronology: according to rough draft notes, Wallace said that “they were at home ... about the same time Haithcock says they were at his house.” Following their return to the devastated plantation, Wallace confirmed Hubbard’s testimony that they took a horse and rode off, but—unlike Hubbard—Wallace did not speculate about their purpose.

Finally, French brought two white witnesses to the court. According to the official records, George Booth said that Jack and Andrew came to his house, “told him of the massacre and said ‘Lord have mercy upon them for they know not what they do,’” although the rough draft notes include a comment that “Tom and Andrew came to his house and told him that the negroes had ... killed the white people but he did not see

Jack.” James Powell testified that he found Jack and Andrew at his house. “[T]hey came when called very humble /and/ much grieved.” That ended Jack and Andrew’s trip through Southampton, because Powell testified that he brought the two to Cross Keys where they were placed in custody.¹¹

Once French finished making his case, the judges had to interpret this confusing and at times contradictory evidence. On the one hand, the judges heard that Jack and Andrew had followed and hoped to join the rebels. While the defense made clear that two whites interpreted Jack and Andrew’s demeanor differently, the defense had not done anything to refute the judgement of the prosecution’s witnesses. On the other hand, the judges probably recognized that the prosecution had not proven its main charge: that Jack and Andrew had conspired to rebel. Reasonable people could disagree about whether Jack and Andrew hoped to join the revolt, but the prosecution had offered no evidence that they had been involved in the revolt. Instead, the judges had seen evidence that Jack and Andrew’s first impulse was to flee from the rebels. Moreover, Andrew (if not Jack) had even spread word of the revolt to at least one white, George Booth.

After considering the evidence, the court ruled unanimously that Jack was guilty. The court proceeded through the formalities, sentencing Jack to be hanged on 12 September and valuing him at \$450, more than four times Daniel’s value. Finally, the court asked the governor to set aside the death sentence. In the words of the trial record, “the Court for sufficient reasons appearing doth recommend to the Governor to commute punishment of the prisoner.” Given the intensity of white sentiment against the accused

¹¹ Trial of Jack, in Tragle, 180-181; for the rough draft of Wallace and George Booth’s testimony and for a more complete version of Tom’s testimony, see “Nat Turner Insurrection” Folder, Southampton County Court Judgments, Library of Virginia. The “and” in James Powell’s testimony was added later, perhaps by Rochelle as he reviewed the official record.

rebels, French took this recommendation as a victory. Immediately after Jack's trial ended, the court turned to the case of his friend, Andrew. Broadnax dutifully called Venus and Hubbard to repeat their testimony. After the defense rested its case, it seems that French decided not to introduce any of his four witnesses again. Instead, he made a statement, probably insisting that justice and equity required that the court pass the same judgement upon Andrew that it had passed upon Jack. The court accepted French's argument. It found Andrew guilty, sentenced Andrew to be hanged, and valued him at \$400; but then the court recommended that the Governor commute the sentence.¹²

After the court had reached the Solomonic decision in the cases of Jack and Andrew, the state turned to the case against Moses, who belonged to the estate of Thomas Barrow. Prosecutor Broadnax called Shadrach Futrell to the stand. Futrell was among the whites who had surprised the rebels at Samuel Blunt's. On the morning of the attack, he saw Moses at the head of the rebels as they approached the house. He then recalled that Moses had chased the Blunt's child, who had tried to escape the house. When Futrell was asked if he were sure that it was Moses he saw in the dim morning light, Futrell insisted that he was "positive that the prisoner is the man." The next witness, Frank, a slave, told the story from there. He said that he had captured Moses in the garden, where Futrell had said that Moses had gone. Frank delivered Moses to the whites. Having heard this story, defense council William Parker questioned Frank. In particular, he wanted to know how Frank could be sure that Moses was the one Futrell had seen run into the garden. Frank insisted that "the prisoner was the only negro who went into the garden." Parker then asked Frank how about Moses' condition when he was captured. Frank admitted that he caught Moses because he "was lame and could not run." If

¹² Trial of Jack, in Tragle, 180-181; Trial of Andrew, in Tragle, 181.

Moses were lame, Parker suggested, maybe Hark, who was also captured at the farm, was the one who “charged ... into the garden.” Despite the apparent discrepancy, Frank stood by his testimony. He insisted that it was “impossible that the person who jumped into the garden” was Hark.

Broadnax called Mary, the slave who had been assigned to shepherd the Blunts’ daughter away from the home. She described what happened in the garden, testifying that she met “a negro man, who asked her who she was.” She never identified the man as Moses, but she described him as “a small man with a light colored cap on.” Broadnax then recalled Frank, who had been effectively cross-examined by the defense, back to the stand. Frank added detail that made it seem likely that the man he captured was the same man that Mary encountered. Frank found Moses in the garden only “fifteen or twenty minutes” after the rebels first appeared at the Blunt’s farm. He also remembered noticing that when the rebels rode up he saw someone with breeches that were a different color than the other rebels. They matched the ones that Moses was wearing when Frank found him. He also recalled a hat, like the one Mary described, and added a story about how he remembered Moses shot a gun and threatened Mary. Frank told the court what the prisoner had told him once he had been arrested, that Newit Drew had sent Moses “to Mrs. Vaughn’s to see what the news was.” Moses said that he found the rebels at the Vaughn farm, and that they forced him to join the rebels. Broadnax rested the case.

Parker realized that the state had made a strong case against Moses, but he hoped that he could build on the story that Moses told Frank: Moses joined the rebels late and only under duress. The first defense witness, however, did not help the case. Hark recalled that Moses “was one of the insurgents [and] that the prisoner joined them

voluntarily.” Hark helped some when he remembered that Moses had been in the front of the rebel army—as Futrell had testified—but that he had not seen him since then. Delsy, a slave who was at the Vaughn’s house, was more helpful to the defense. She swore that Moses had arrived at the Vaughn’s house forty-five minutes before the rebels arrived. He did not flee upon first sight of the army, but when the rebels “required” Moses to go with them, he objected. When asked whether she thought that Moses could have escaped, Delsy said that she thought he could “while the insurgents were coming up.”

According to the trial record, Newit Drew was the last witness. If the court record listed the witnesses in the proper order—no sure thing—then Drew appeared in a position usually reserved for the defense’s final witness. But Drew made only one point, which did not help Moses’ case at all. If Drew did appear at the end of the trial, either Parker made his second major miscalculation of the trial, or the judges themselves may have called Drew to the stand. Drew was the only witness in this trial who was not identified as a witness for the defense or the prosecution. In at least one other point in the record, the judges interrupted a trial to ask their own questions. If the judges were trying to decide if Moses’ story that he was an unlucky bystander swept into the revolt were true, Drew was the one person to ask. Drew testified “that he gave no such orders to the prisoner as he [Moses] spoke of but on the contrary that he the witness met with the prisoner shortly before he [Moses] was at Mrs. Vaughn[’]s and ordered him to go home [to Thomas Barrow’s].” At this point, the case was simple for the court to decide. Moses was guilty, probably of being an eager participant of the battle at Samuel Blunts’, certainly of taking the initiative and putting himself in a place that he could have been conscripted into the rebel army. He was sentenced to be hanged four days later, on 5

September. The court valued Moses at \$400, an amount to be paid to the Thomas Barrow's estate. The day had gotten late and the court rushed through its last business: four of the men charged on the first day were brought before the bar and their trials continued.¹³ In addition six more men were brought before the bar. They were charged—although Rochelle did not record the charges with the same level of detail as he had originally—then the trials were suspended. Court adjourned until 9 A.M. the following morning, Friday, 2 September.

The judges' work for the day was done, but the others involved in the trials still had much to do. The lawyers needed to prepare for the next day's trials. At a minimum, they had to figure out who they would want to call as witnesses in each case. Clerk James Rochelle also had plenty of work: first, he had to compose an official record based upon his notes. Once he had a record of the trials—the records for the first two days required roughly 3500 words—he then had to send a copy of the records of the trials of those who had been found guilty to the governor, who had the ultimate authority to spare the convicts. Rochelle's finished draft of the trial records through 1 September arrived in Richmond on 3 September, only hours after John Floyd first heard that the trials were being held.

Like most people who had not been to Southampton, Floyd spent much of the two weeks following the revolt, catching glimpses in the rumors, the brief official dispatches, and a few sketchy newspaper articles. He had little concrete information about what was happening seventy-five miles away in Southampton. On 3 September, with the arrival of the first trial records and the return of the Richmond cavalry, Floyd's information

¹³ Trial of Moses, in Tragle, 182-184. For an example of the judges asking their own question, see Trial of Nathan, Tom and Davy, in Tragle, 201.

improved markedly. With the return to Richmond of its cavalry, word-of-mouth stories were now brought by people who had been at the scene. Moreover, two important newspaper articles by people who had been at the scene of the revolt were printed in Richmond on 3 September. Floyd's diary revealed how the newly-learned details affected him. He was shocked at the reports of "the most inhuman butcheries the mind can conceive of, men women and infants, their heads chopped off, their bowels ripped out, ears, noses, hands and legs cut off, no instance of mercy shown." On the other hand, he was impressed with those slaves who "defend[ed] their masters" and warned the whites about the approaching army.

Floyd had little time to digest these stories before he had to decide which of the convictions to commute. In these early cases, Floyd did the easiest thing: he followed the court's recommendations. Daniel and Moses would die on Monday. At the same time, Floyd reduced the sentence of Jack and Andrew to transportation. Fortunately for Andrew and Jack, the court scheduled their hangings for 12 September, which allowed enough time for the notice of the governor's commutations to arrive in Southampton.¹⁴

On Friday, 2 September, the court reassembled with several notable new participants. The court had two new judges, one of whom, Thomas Pretlow was notable. His six slaves made his holdings the second smallest among the judges whose holding can be traced, but this was not because he was poor. The Pretlows had been Quakers and Thomas Pretlow retained the family's opposition to slavery. Although he still held slaves, Pretlow depended on the twelve free blacks who lived on his plantation. At the

¹⁴ Charles Ambler, *The Life and Diary of John Floyd: Governor of Virginia, An Apostle of Secession, and the Father of the Oregon County* (Richmond: Richmond Press, Inc, 1918), 157-158, and in Tragle, 253. Although it was technically within Governor Floyd's power to commute death sentences, it is unclear if Governor Floyd could have stayed or commuted the executions of Daniel or Moses. It would have been

same time he had become an ardent supporter of colonization. In the year before the revolt, Thomas Pretlow sent three manumitted slaves to Liberia. Pretlow would sit in judgement on eleven slaves, including Nat Turner, making it clear that his deep dislike of slavery did not disqualify him from serving on the court's most important cases. At the same time, if Pretlow's dislike of slavery had any effect on his judgement, it is not apparent in his decisions: all Pretlow's cases were decided by unanimous courts, with six guilty verdicts, only one of which carried a recommendation for a commutation.¹⁵

For Davy's council, the court appointed a new defense attorney, Thomas R. Gray, a thirty-one-year-old failed planter, who turned his hand to the law less than a year before the revolt. Broadnax presented a simple case against Davy: Hubbard, who already had been a witness for the state, identified Davy as one of the rebels who "came to his [Hubbard's] Mistresses [sic] and murdered her and family." Hubbard then explained that he could not have been mistaken about his identification, telling the court that "he had known him [Davy] well for several years." The state rested its case, hoping that one witness who saw Davy with the rebels would be enough to secure a conviction.

Gray was clearly concerned that even this weak case would be enough to convince the judges to sentence Davy to death. In Davy's defense, Gray called Moses to the stand. Moses would emerge in the trials as one of the best witnesses of the revolt. He was the young slave who had accompanied the rebels from the beginning—when they arrived at the Travis's farm—at least until the rebels met the resistance at James Parker's. Moreover, he was willing to talk. He appeared repeatedly, as a witness for both the

hard for him to get a properly executed commutation back to Southampton before the scheduled executions.

prosecution and the accused slaves. His testimony would be some of the most detailed and concrete that has survived. His testimony also appeared even-handed, several times offering strong, exculpatory evidence, even when he testified for the prosecution. In recognition of his importance as a witness, the court delayed Moses' trial until it had tried all the suspects held in the county's jail.

After Moses was sworn in, he described when Davy was forced to join the rebels. Davy "was told by the insurgents that if he did not join them he should die there." Moses also attacked Hubbard's testimony, explaining that Davy was not even at Catherine Whitehead's at the time of the murders, but was with a different group of rebels. Gray should have wrapped his case up at this point, hoping that the doubts Moses' testimony suggested would have been enough to get the court to recommend a commutation. But Gray did not stop. He called Nathan to the stand. Nathan's testimony supported Moses' contention, *contra* Hubbard, that Davy had not been at the Whitehead's during the murders. While Nathan had not been present when Davy had joined the rebel army, Nathan did note that he had heard Davy tell another slave that "he had been forced to join." Unfortunately for Davy, Nathan's story about when he heard Davy say he had been forced to join was in the middle of a conversation in which Davy was trying to recruit another rebel. Although "he had been forced to join," Davy told Joe that he "should join also." Until that bombshell, Gray's defense had been excellent, attacking the only evidence presented by the prosecution, and providing the best excuse possible for Davy's joining the revolt. All that effort was undone in the eyes of the court when Nathan revealed that Davy had taken an active role recruiting more rebels. The court

¹⁵ John MacPhail to R. R. Gurley, 22 September 1831, American Colonization Society Papers, microfilm reel 12; 1830 Census; Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-*

sentenced Davy to be hanged on 12 September; Elizabeth Turner's estate would receive \$450 in compensation.¹⁶

A freshly shuffled court turned to the case of Curtis, who belonged to Thomas Ridley. Broadnax called John Turner, who had captured Curtis and Stephen on Tuesday morning. Turner testified that Curtis admitted that he had been on Ridley's farm on Monday night when the rebels arrived. Curtis also admitted that he had been with the rebels on Tuesday morning. He stayed with the rebels until they were dispersed at Newit Harris's on Tuesday, but by the time that John Turner saw him, Curtis claimed to be on his way home. John Turner, however, realized that the place that he found Curtis and Stephen was not along the way to their master's home. That lie led John Turner to take the two to Cross Keys, one of the whites' strongholds. There Curtis admitted that Nat Turner had sent him "to go to Newsom[']s and Allen[']s quarter to get other negroes to join" the rebels. John Turner also noted that Curtis seemed to be drunk. Nevertheless, John Turner believed Curtis's story, since Stephen made "the same confession."¹⁷

At this point it seems likely that defense council William Parker questioned John Turner. How had the whites at Cross Keys managed to get Curtis and Stephen to change their stories? Everyone in the courtroom knew about the barbarities done by whites. Perhaps Curtis and Stephen had been changed their stories simply to avoid being tortured. Turner insisted that no one had made any "promises or threats." Asked if Curtis and Stephen tried to escape, the witness admitted that they had not but noted that "they could

1869 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 189.

¹⁶ Trial of Davy, in Tragle, 185-186.

¹⁷ Trials of Curtis and Stephen, in Tragle, 186-188. Nowhere in the accounts of Southampton did the whites say that they interrogated suspects separately, but elsewhere in the South investigators did take this precaution to improve the quality of the interrogations. See Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 58 (2001): 950; Michael Wayne, *Death of an*

easily have been shot” by the whites in the area. Finally, Parker asked if the story told by Curtis really was reasonable. After all, could two drunken slaves riding on a mule escape the notice of whites? John Turner had wondered the same thing, but Curtis explained that Nat Turner had assured him that “the white people were too much alarmed to interrupt them.” The prosecution rested its case.

The defense had yet to get the court to recommend a commutation for anyone who had been seen with the rebels, but William Parker called a witness to establish that Curtis had not willingly joined the rebels. Scipio, who had been at Ridley’s when Curtis joined the rebels, testified that Curtis “did not appear to go willingly.” Even if he had wanted to escape, Scipio thought it impossible. The defense’s case was not better than Davy’s case had been, but Parker may have hoped that the pathetic image of two slaves dragooned into joining a failed revolt would have inclined the court to recommend commutation. It did not. The court sentenced Curtis to hang on 12 September. His owner, Thomas Ridley, was awarded \$400 in compensation.

The court turned immediately to the case of Stephen. The prosecution presented exactly the same case. Unlike the case of Andrew—in which defense attorney James French, who was happy with the court’s recommendation for Andrew’s friend Jack, did not bother to present any evidence—in the case of Stephen, Parker dutifully called Scipio back to the stand. Why did Parker, who knew that this defense would not work, call Scipio? Maybe he wondered how Governor Floyd would react to these trials. After all, at this point, Floyd did not even know that there were trials going on. If Floyd chose to be more lenient than the court’s recommendation, he would have the same evidence for

Overseer: Reopening a Murder Investigation From the Antebellum South (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 10. Johnson argues that the efforts of the whites in Charleston to keep witnesses apart failed.

Stephen that he had for Curtis. Whatever Parker's calculation, nothing Scipio or Parker said had any effect on the court. Curtis was sentenced to die on 12 September, and his master was granted \$450 in compensation for his condemned slave property.¹⁸ Having heard three trials that morning, the court took care of some outstanding business. They ordered the payment of ten dollars per slave defended to the defense attorneys Parker and Gray—French must have been absent—and then recessed.

Following the midday recess, a new court assembled to consider the case of Isaac, who belonged to George Charlton.¹⁹ After Isaac was charged, Meriwether Broadnax called a white woman, Nancy Parsons, to the stand. Parsons had been travelling through the far side of the county towards Belfield on the day of the revolt. Along the way, she saw some slaves milling about and Isaac lying down. Having heard rumors of a British invasion—it had been two decades since the last time the British were in Virginia—Parsons asked Isaac if he were afraid. Apparently Isaac's intelligence was better than Parsons'. He was not afraid. He claimed that he was prepared to join the revolt, and would "assist in killing all the white people." He explained that as a successful rebel, "he would have as much money as his master." The prosecution rested its case.

James French decided not to challenge Parsons' testimony. Instead, he built off Parsons' description of Isaac, characterizing him as a discontented slave. He called another slave from George Charlton's plantation, who testified that Isaac had spoken as Parsons claimed, but explained that Isaac was simply bitter. Apparently, he had expected to be freed in court, but for some unmentioned reason this had not happened. The

¹⁸ Trials of Curtis and Stephen, in Tragle, 186-188.

¹⁹ The court records describe another defendant, Jacob, who was indicted with Isaac. Although indicted, Jacob was never tried. At the end of the *Confessions*, Thomas R. Gray listed Jacob as someone released without a formal trial. See Gray, 22.

witness also mentioned that Isaac had promised to raise Parsons' child, a not-so-subtle threat that Parsons apparently ignored. According to the unnamed witness, Isaac was "very headstrong." At this point, the court faced a new question: what would they do with the slave who cheered the rebels on, and promised to join them, but actually had done nothing to further the revolt? Jack and Andrew, who had much more mixed emotions about the revolt, attempted to join the revolt. For that, the court sentenced them to death, a sentence it recommended that the governor commute. After considering Isaac's case, the court decided to act as it had in the cases of Jack and Andrew. Hoping to join the revolt was grounds enough for conviction. On the other hand, the court decided that Isaac's threatening words did not rule out commutation. Isaac was sentenced to be hanged upon on 20 September, a date which allowed plenty of time for the governor to grant a commutation, as the court recommended. Perhaps because he was a particularly troublesome slave, the court also valued Isaac at \$300, less than most of the other convicts.²⁰ All the business before the court then was suspended until Tuesday. The Saturday session of the court was reserved for the most prominent rebels, including Nat Turner's right-hand man, Hark.

At 9 A.M. Saturday, 3 September, a court, including three of the most active judges and the Goodwyne brothers, began with the case of Sam. Meriwether Broadnax called his best witness, Levi Waller, who testified that Sam was among the rebels at Waller's house on the day of the revolt. Waller also swore that he was positive in the identification, because he known Sam "well for several years." The testimony described the exact same incident that Waller had described in Daniel's trial on the first day. The

²⁰ Trial of Isaac, in Tragle, 189-90. If the court's belief that Isaac was a troublesome slave was the reason for the lower valuation, then this would suggest that the defense attorneys saw their job to defend the

record, however, had less detail, either because the court did not demand it or because an overworked Rochelle was writing shorter notes. In one way, Waller's testimony was even more damning than his earlier testimony. Waller insisted that could not have mistaken someone else for Sam because he had known Sam "well for several years." Broadnax rested the state's case. For the first time in the trials, the defense could make no defense. Sam had been one of the original conspirators, so Gray saw no way that he could convince the court to recommend that the governor commute the certain sentence. Sam, valued at \$400, was sentenced to be hanged on Friday, 9 September.

After a recess, which ended when two more prisoners were charged, the court began the trial of Hark. Like the trial of Sam, the actual proceedings were anticlimactic, as everyone knew before the trial began what the result would be. For Hark, Broadnax called once again upon Levi Waller, who identified Hark as one of the "insurgents" who had been in Waller's yard. According to Waller's testimony, the other rebels called Hark "Captain Moore," although no one at the trial made anything of the pseudonym. Once Waller finished, Broadnax called Thomas Ridley, one of the people who investigated Hark after he had been captured at Samuel Blunt's. He added that Hark confessed that he had been with the rebels who attacked Blunt's. Furthermore, Ridley noted that Hark had a pocketbook belonging to one of the men killed during the revolt. Finally, Hark also had "powder, and shot and some silver in his pockets." Broadnax could have called more witnesses—including Moses or one of the white men at Blunt's home—but he realized that there was no need. Defense council William Parker must have come to the same conclusion. He called no witness. The court sentenced Hark to be hanged on 9

accused slaves, not maximize the compensation to the convicted slave's owner.

September, and valued him at \$450, payable to the estate of the revolt's first casualty, Joseph Travis.²¹

Following Hark's trial, the court brought Nelson to the bar. Nelson was a peculiar figure, and the trial record tells a strange story about him. Meriwether Broadnax clearly wanted the court to believe that Nelson knew that the revolt had been planned. Nelson's overseer, Caswell Worrell, testified that days before the revolt Nelson told his overseer to "look out and take care of themselves—that something would happen before long." This enigmatic comment coincided with strange behavior the day of the revolt: Nelson changed into his best clothes at least once, maybe twice, and he was (or pretended) to be sick. Jacob Williams, Nelson's owner, found his slave's behavior so bizarre that he suspected that Nelson "had some intention of attacking him." The overseer, Worrell, also testified that Nelson had tried to lead him to the slave quarters so that "he might be killed." As strange as Nelson's behavior was, Broadnax did not want to rest his case on such flimsy evidence. At the end of Williams' testimony he told the court how later in the day, the rebels passed by his plantation, and he "distinctly saw the prisoner among the foremost." The court record did not specify who called the next witness, but the testimony of Williams' slave Cynthia helped the prosecution. She confirmed the chronology of the morning, describing how Nelson had come back from the fields sick and "dressed himself very clean." When the rebels arrived at the house, Nelson walked into the kitchen, cut off a piece of meat from the pot and told Cynthia "you do not know me. I do not know when you will see me again." She also added that he did not seem to be upset at the sight of his master's dead family.

²¹ Trial of Sam and Trial of Hark, in Tragle, 191-93

Defense council James French called Stephen, a slave who happened to be on Jacob Williams' plantation when the rebels arrived. He testified that the rebels "told Nelson to go with him." Stephen noted that that Nelson "seemed unwilling to go" and that he "was forced to go." Stephen recalled that Nelson "lagged behind when he was guarded." At the Vaughn's plantation, he "did not participate in any of the murders," but Nelson drank with the rebels and that he "had his tickler filled by his own request." With this evidence of Nelson's lack of enthusiasm for the revolt, French hoped he had given the court reason enough to recommend mercy. The court rejected the defense. Perhaps influenced as much by the Nelson's peculiar behavior as by the evidence that Nelson had been an active rebel, the court sentenced Nelson to be hanged on the following Friday, six days later. Jacob Williams, the state's best witness in this case, would receive \$400 compensation for his condemned slave.²²

Because of the speed of the morning's trials, the court began one more trial before a recess. Levi Waller's slave Davy was brought before the court. Broadnax called Waller to the stand. Waller testified that Davy was "not at the house" when the rebels arrived. Davy appeared after the murders. While Broadnax offered no direct evidence that Davy had participated in the revolt, Waller believed that Davy's response to rebels implied that he supported their cause. When they left Waller's farm, Davy "left there in great glee." Broadnax also called Jarell Judkins, a white man who had heard Davy's "voluntary confession" on the Friday following the revolt. According to that confession, Davy had been with the rebels after they left Waller's farm and he remained with them until at least Mrs. Vaughn's. During the confession, Davy suggested that Nat Turner had passed up the opportunity to attack a house of poor whites because "they thought no

²² Trial of Nelson, in Tragle, 193-94.

better of themselves than they did of the negroes.” Broadnax then called a slave to confirm at least one detail from Davy’s second-hand confession: Davy had been at William Williams’. Broadnax rested his case. The defense attorney, William D. Boyle, in his only appearance before the court, rose to Davy’s defense. Boyle did not call anyone to the stand, but James Rochelle noted that “the prisoner was fully heard by William D. Boyle.” Whatever arguments Boyle made were unsuccessful. Davy was sentenced to die. His owner, who testified for the prosecution, was awarded \$300 compensation.²³ After one last piece of business—the case of the key witness Moses was postponed—the court adjourned for a second recess.

The court returned for its last session of Saturday 3 September. Two of the morning’s judges were replaced as the court turned its attention to the trial of Hark’s brother-in-law Jack. Broadnax typically called his best witness first. In Jack’s trial, he called Moses to testify. Moses told the court that Jack was at the Travis’s house on Sunday evening, before the revolt began. Although he protested that he was “sick and wanted to go home ... Hark would not let him go.” Then Moses told the court what he knew about the start of the revolt. On the night the revolt began, Moses himself had gone to sleep. When he woke up, he saw Jack, sick. Moses admitted that Jack had gone along with the rebels, but he testified that the rebels “made the prisoner [Jack] go with them.” Thomas Jones, a white man who had heard Jack’s “voluntary confession,” repeated the essentials to the court. Hark had brought Jack along to the feast prepared on Sunday afternoon. When told about the plan, Jack immediately objected: “their numbers were

²³ Trial of Davy, in Tragle, 194-95. Contrast Rochelle’s note that the defense council “was *fully* heard” with the comments in several other trials that the defense was heard. See for examples, Trial of Jack, Trial of Andrew; Trial of Moses; and Trial of Dred; all in Tragle, 181, 182, 184, 198. In later trials, Rochelle

too few.” Hark assured his doubting relative that the revolt could be successful. At this point, the trials stopped because it was “necessary for the prisoner[’]s defense that the witness should be in attendance.”²⁴ Thomas R. Gray wanted the man who had hired Jack’s services for the year to come to court. The trial was suspended until the following Monday.

In the last case of Saturday afternoon, the court took up the case of Nat, who belonged to the estate of Edwin Turner. Meriwether Broadnax called Mary Barrow. She recounted that Nat was among the rebels who “had come to her husband’s [i.e. Tom Barrow’s] home on the day her husband was murdered.” Having established that Nat was there, Mary Barrow added that Nat was an active participant, “that the prisoner fired off a gun in the yard.” Finally, to cinch the case, she asserted that her identification was unquestionable: Nat had lived at the Barrow farm the preceding year, and she was fewer than thirty steps away from Nat “when he fired off the gun.” The state’s case was strong. Parker called no witnesses for the defense. The court quickly found Nat guilty and sentenced him to hang. Edwin Turner’s estate would get \$450.²⁵ Court was adjourned until Monday, 5 September.

After a day of rest, the court resumed Jack’s trial on Monday 5 September. Although four of the justices continued on the court from Saturday night, one justice, Benjamin Drewry, did not return. He was replaced by Carr Bowers, one of the most active judges. Although Bowers had not been on the court when most of the evidence against Jack had been presented, he sat as an equal when it came time for judgement.

would repeat the adverb “fully.” See Trial of Jim and Isaac; Trial of Frank; Trial of Sam; and Examination of Isham, in Tragle, 218, and 220.

²⁴ Trial of Jack, in Tragle, 195-96.

²⁵ Trial of Nat, in Tragle, 196-97.

Apparently, no one worried about the propriety of this, although it should be noted that Bowers might have been in the courtroom, listening to the evidence on Saturday evening. (He had been at court for most of the day on Saturday.) That Bowers joined a half completed case also suggests something about the court's concern for formalism. The court was willing to turn a blind eye at legal improprieties that did not reduce the power of the leaders of the county.

Although the court had adjourned for the benefit of a defense witness, the prosecution's witness Sampson Reese was the first witness called on Monday. Reese confirmed the testimony of Thomas Jones. Then he added one pertinent detail: Jack "had on a pair of shoes and socks which the witness believed to be William Reese's." The prosecution rested its case, hoping that the court would not recommend mercy for someone seen with the rebels who may have looted his dead owner's home. Despite Reese's testimony, Thomas R. Gray, the defense attorney, also understood that the picture Moses painted of the most reluctant rebel might be enough to get the court to recommend mercy, if not win an outright acquittal. To support the portrait of Jack as an unwilling rebel, Gray called one witness, Jordan Barnes, the person who had hired Jack's services for the year. Barnes acknowledged that he had given permission to Jack to return to his owner's home for several days. As important for the defense's case, Barnes recalled that Jack had returned to Barnes's farm in the middle of the day Monday, well before the rebels had met resistance at James Parker's farm and scattered.

Since Jack had been part of the revolt, the judges unanimously agreed that Jack was guilty. He was sentenced to be hanged a week later, on September 12, and he was valued at \$350. But the court split on the question of mercy. Two judges thought Jack

had done too much—such as taking his dead owner’s clothes—to get mercy; but the majority, three, recommended clemency. Jack had clearly been a reluctant rebel. He had also escaped before the rebels had been defeated. His actions made his case the first in which a court—albeit a split court—recommended a commutation for a person seen with the rebels. The defense’s victory was short-lived. Governor John Floyd did not follow the court’s recommendation to commute a sentence. On December 3, 1831, the state’s auditor listed a payment of \$350 for the execution of Jack from Southampton.²⁶

After a short recess, a court with two judges who had not sat in judgement of Jack, conveyed to hear the case of Dred, a slave belonging to Nathaniel Francis. Broadnax called his star witness, Levi Waller, who testified that he saw Dred with the rebels. Although Waller acerbically noted that he did “not know which witness cannot be mistaken,” he stood by his identification of Dred. Waller claimed to be “near him [Dred] and knew him well.” Waller did not see Dred involved in any violence, but he saw enough to suggest that Dred was an eager rebel: Dred was armed and on horseback; he searched for Waller when Waller fled into the swamp; Dred drank with the others. Broadnax must have understood that a court which had split on the question of mercy for Jack would find the testimony against Dred damning. Unable to find any evidence that would exculpate Dred, James French called no witness. Dred, assessed at \$400, was sentenced to be hanged in a week.²⁷

Following a recess in which James Parker replaced Orris Browne on the bench, the court of oyer and terminer returned to a different kind of hearing. Free blacks

²⁶ Trial of Jack, continued, in Tragle, 197-98. For evidence that Jack died, see James Heath, “A Statement Shewing the Amount Paid for the Public Treasury, Annually, Since 1819, for Slaves Executed, Transported, and Escaped,” *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia*...

charged with a crime were subject to Virginia's usual judicial system, not the less formal proceedings of the court of oyer and terminer. Nevertheless, the courts of oyer and terminer took it upon itself to examine the free blacks accused of participation in the revolt. James Rochelle took his usual notes at these hearings, but he recorded no details about the evidence that the court heard in the official court records. Since the court could not condemn those believed to be guilty, the only significant thing that the court could do was discharge the innocent. Like the trials, which began in part to reduce extralegal bloodshed, these examinations helped clear free blacks whom some in the white community might have thought part of the revolt. Arnold Artis was the first free black examined. After hearing the case against him, the court decided that Artis "ought to be discharged from further prosecution," and "ordered that the prisoner be discharged from custody."²⁸ Then the court adjourned for the day.

The next day, Tuesday, 6 September, the court of oyer and terminer, convened to try Nathan, whose trial had begun the preceding week. Meriwether Broadnax called Daniel, a slave who had been arrested and confined in Greenville. Daniel testified that Nathan had pretended to be a runaway when he was captured. According to Daniel's testimony, Nathan admitted that "he had been present when the murders were committed by the insurgents." Nathan even bragged to the other prisoners that he had outfoxed his captors; he explained to Daniel that he had told the whites that the blood on his breeches was really cider. Broadnax rested his case. Defense attorney James French called Moses, whose testimony had been so important in saving Jack's life. Moses admitted

(Richmond, 1831); Thomas R. Gray also lists Jack as a convicted slave, not one who was transported in his list at the end of the *Confessions*. Gray, 22.

²⁷ Trial of Dred, in Tragle, 198-199.

²⁸ Examination of Arnold Artis, in Tragle, 199.

that Nathan had been with the rebels, but he had shown none of the bravado that Daniel's testimony suggested. During the revolt, Nathan "went unwillingly... [H]e committed no murder." Moses did not believe that Nathan had any chance to escape. French clearly hoped that Moses' testimony would portray Nathan as another reluctant rebel, but it lacked the clarity and compelling detail that he offered in Jack's case. The court judged Nathan guilty. He was sentenced to be hanged six days later. The court set the compensation to the estate of Nathan's late owner, Benjamin Blunt, at \$375.²⁹

Before the recess on Tuesday, the court turned to the case of Nathan, Tom and Davy, all of whom belonged to Nathaniel Francis. The court bound the three cases together for one trial, an example of how the court changed as the trials were about to enter their second week. (In the first three days, two different pairs of rebels were tried separately on essentially the same evidence.) The trial of Nathan, Tom, and Davy marked the first of three multiple-defendant trials in which a total of eight slaves were tried. Almost certainly, this was done for the benefit of a court swamped by work, but in this case it may have worked to the benefit of the defendants. Broadnax called Moses to the stand. He remembered that the accused were forced to join the rebels. The three were "constantly guarded by negroes with guns who were ordered to shoot them if they attempted to escape." Once Broadnax had rested, one of the judges intervened before any of the three defense attorneys could launch into his defense. (Each of the accused was assigned his own attorney.) One of the judges asked how old the three boys were. According to the record, "it appeared that the oldest was not more than 15 years, the other two much younger, the oldest very badly grown." Grouped together the court saw them as children, not as dangerous rebels. Without allowing for a defense, the court found the

²⁹ Trial of Nathan, in Tragle, 200.

three guilty, but recommended that the governor commute their death sentences. To allow time for the governor to issue the commutations, the court set the execution date to 20 September, two weeks away. Because of their youth and the eldest's small stature, the court valued the three at a modest \$300 each. After this trial, the court turned its attention to the situation of the prisoners in the jails. Rumor had it that General Eppes was ready to disband the last guards. The court requested Eppes to keep fifty men on guard at the jail.³⁰ The court then recessed for its midday break.

The court reassembled on Tuesday afternoon with one new member, but that court did nothing that made it into the record. Hardy was brought to trial, but as soon as the preliminaries were over, the court suspended the case. After charging one more slave, the court adjourned until 9 A.M. on the following day, Wednesday, 7 September. On Wednesday a new court, with only one member who served Tuesday afternoon, convened to hear the case of Hardy, who belonged to Benjamin Edwards. Meriwether Broadnax called Henry, who testified that Isham—the defendant in the next trial—told him that “Genl Nat was going to rise and murder all the whites.” Isham demanded that Henry “must join them or that if he did not they would kill him if they caught him.” Henry also described running into Hardy and Berry Newsome, a free black who worked on Benjamin Edwards’ farm, who were discussing killing their own master. Later, after Henry told Hardy and Berry about the rumors that the revolt had been undertaken, the two rejoiced. Hardy “made light of it and said it was nothing and ought to have been done long ago—that the negroes had been punished long enough.” Henry could not say what Hardy did on Monday night, but by Tuesday, Hardy was with a crew of four slaves who had been dispatched to Levi Waller’s to bury the dead. Meanwhile, one of the small

³⁰ Trial of Nathan, Tom and Davy, in Tragle, 200-01.

groups trying to rally rebels came to Benjamin Edwards' plantation. The recruiters had four potential recruits in mind, and they asked Henry to ask the four—including Hardy, who was burying corpses at Waller's farm—to be ready to join the revolt. When the gravediggers returned, Henry dutifully relayed the recruiting party's notice. Hardy and Isham and two others "said they would join." Broadnax called Harry, another slave, who made the same point: when Henry, the first witness, told the potential recruits that the rebels had left word that Nat Turner would be in the neighborhood the following week, they, the recruits, said "they would join" the revolt.

In making this case and the next one, Broadnax had prosecuted slaves who had been removed by several steps from the actual revolt. Indeed if he wanted to pursue someone who had done more to further the revolt, Broadnax's first witness, Henry—who passed along rebel messages—would have been a better target. Nothing in the evidence suggested that Hardy even saw a rebel. But in the days after the insurrection, the court was not simply interested in finding those who had rebelled. The court also sought to neutralize those most eager to rebel. Those who were most enthusiastic to join—including Jack, Andrew and Isaac—were also found guilty, more for their dispositions than their actions. In defending Hardy, James French accepted the prosecution's portrayal of Hardy, then—as French had done in defense of Isaac—used the prosecution's evidence to portray Hardy as a discontented slave. The defense had accepted that Hardy had said what the prosecution had suggested: defense witness Eliza Crathenton, a free black woman, testified that Hardy had been among those who "told her that they meant to join Genl. Nat." Even before Hardy had been arrested, however, Crathenton had "dissuaded them from it." French suggested that Hardy was all talk, and that his words

did not merit death. The court found Hardy guilty—apparently just saying one would join was enough to be convicted—and Hardy was sentenced to be hanged on 20 September. But the judges accepted French’s argument and recommended that the governor commute the sentence levied against Hardy. Hardy’s owner Benjamin Edwards was awarded \$450 in compensation.³¹

Following Hardy’s trial, Isham was brought before the bar. Meriwether Broadnax called the same two witnesses who had testified against Hardy to present evidence against Isham. Confident that he would win another conviction, Broadnax then rested his case. According to the court records, Isham’s defense attorney, William Parker, did not call Eliza Crathenton to the stand. He may have believed that a recommendation for a commutation was the most lenient sentence that he could hope for his client. As Parker hoped, the court sentenced Isham exactly as it sentenced Hardy, except it valued Isham at a more modest \$350.³²

After its midday recess, three of the morning’s judges returned and were joined by two new judges to try Sam, Ferry, Archer and Jim. The first three belonged to James Parker. They may have been among the potential recruits whose presence on James Parker’s farm convinced Nat Turner to halt his advance on Jerusalem. In the first trial, the court found Sam not guilty, so the testimony of the witnesses against Sam was never recorded in the official records. Since there were plenty of witnesses who had appeared before the court who could describe what happened at Parker’s farm—including Moses, Sampson Reese, and even the judge A. P. Peete—Broadnax would have had several sources to tap to make his case. That the court found Sam innocent suggests that his

³¹ Trail of Hardy, in Tragle, 201-03.

³² Trial of Isham, in Tragle, 203-04.

involvement with the revolt was minimal, at most, and that he was not seen as a rebellious slave. Once the court refused to accept the prosecution's case against Sam, the cases against Ferry and Archer were dropped without a trial. The court also released Jim, who had belonged to the late William Vaughn. After a recess, a court with one new judge dispatched some business, and then began a joint trial of three slaves.³³

In the days after the revolt, little seemed more important to whites than determining if the revolt was an isolated occurrence or part of a bigger plan. For the most part, the searches in Southampton turned up little evidence that the revolt had reached beyond Nat Turner's immediate neighborhood, but there was one exception: Solomon Parker's wife was among the people who fled Southampton County when the news came of the revolt. She went to Sussex, where she asked "if her negroes were concerned." Her personal slave, Beck—sometimes called Becky—told her mistress that they were. On the day of the revolt, Beck had heard that at least four of them say that they would join the revolt and "help kill the white people." A little more than a week later, this report made its way to the officials in Southampton. On 2 September, Bob, Davy, and Daniel were arrested. The three were charged at the end of the court session on 7 September, and their trial began on the morning 8 September. At the joint trial, Meriwether Broadnax called Beck, who made another startling accusation: Bob, Davy, and Daniel were privy to a plot hatched at Raccoon Meeting House in May, in which many blacks had agreed to "murder the white people." The court must have been shocked by the charge. If Beck's story were true, then the whites had found their best evidence either (i) that the revolt was

³³ Trial of Sam and Trial of Jim, in Tragle, 205. In his list of slaves tried at the end of the *Confessions*, Gray noted that Ferry and Archer, belonging to James Parker, were released without a trial. This entry follows immediately after his mention of Sam's Trial and immediately before his mention of Jim's trial. William Vaughn's relationship to the other Vaughns caught up in the revolt is unclear.

more widespread than anyone imagined or, perhaps even more frightening, (ii) that there was another contemporaneous plot independent of Nat Turner's inspiration. Unable to find any evidence that supported Beck's charges, the court found the three defendants not guilty. According to a newspaper article written at the time, the court "disregarded [Beck's testimony], and all who were arraigned upon it were acquitted."³⁴ After finding the three men not guilty, they continued the case of Moses—the court wanted to keep its best black witness around—and then adjourned for their first extended recess.

The trial of Bob, Davy, and Daniel ended seven days of trials held over eight days. Twenty-seven slaves and one free black had been prosecuted for involvement in the plot. The free black was discharged; among the slaves, twenty-one had been found guilty. The court recommended mercy for nine convicts, including four reluctant rebels and five rebellious slaves who never actually joined the rebel army. These recommendations were sent by express to Governor John Floyd. On 5 September, two days after he received the first express from Southampton, Floyd received a second express, with the cases against the eight slaves who had been sentenced on the third and fourth days of the trials. Floyd noted in his diary his decision: "I will not in these cases interfere with the operations of the law." Five days later he was less inclined to interfere. On 10 September, when John Floyd received the next batch of trial records, he noted in his diary that "I am so unwell that I have to go to bed." Still he issued commutations in

³⁴ Beck's charges are culled from the Trial of Jim, Isaac, and Preston, in Tragle, 214, 215 and, for the quote, "murder the white people," George Blow Petition, February 1835, Blow Family Papers, Swem Library, College of William and Mary; Norfolk and Portsmouth *Herald*, 5 October 1831. The arrest date comes from "Nat Turner Insurrection," Southampton County Court Judgments, LV. Beck dated the discussions of trying to kill the white people to 15 August 1831, a week before the revolt actually happened. In Frank's trial she said that assertion was "on the 15th day of August last the day on which the insurrection broke out in the county." I follow her assertion that it was the same day as the revolt, supposing it easier to mistake a calendar date than the day of the revolt. Thomas R. Gray noted that only

all but one of the cases that the court recommended. As a result, of the twenty-seven slaves tried over the first eight days, six were released, eight had their death sentences commuted, and thirteen were hanged.³⁵

Following ten full days without a trial—on 12 September the court put Thomas Haithcock in jail to await a full hearing—the court reconvened on 19 September, turning first to the case of John Turner’s Joe. Broadnax called Hubbard—who testified against Andrew, Jack and Davy—to testify against Joe. Hubbard said that Joe had arrived on the Whitehead plantation with Nat, who had already been hanged for his role in the revolt. Joe joined the rebels, although Hubbard admitted that Joe seemed hesitant to go with the rebels. Broadnax then called Christian, who described how Joe and two other rebels arrived at Elisha Atkins’ house on Monday morning. Joe had a gun. The three rebels asked if Atkins was home, but he was not. One of the rebels asked if there were guns or ammunition in the house, but Joe said, “we have enough ammunition to do without.” They headed away, bringing with them only one recruit, who fled from the rebels at the first opportunity. James French, the defense council, called no witnesses but made his defense “fully,” probably drawing on the two comments by the prosecution’s own witnesses that suggested that Joe had not been a committed rebel. The defense failed. Joe, valued at \$450, was sentenced to be hanged a week later on 26 September.³⁶

After Orris Browne replaced William Goodwyne on the bench, Lucy, the only woman tried during the revolt, was brought before the bar of judgment. Only one woman—Will Artis’ wife—was described by contemporary sources as having joined any

Bob and Davy were tried. Once Beck had been discredited, Daniel was actually “Disch’d without a trial.” See Gray, 22.

³⁵ Floyd in Ambler, 158-159; also in Tragle, 254.

³⁶ Trial of Joe, in Tragle, 207-08.

group of rebels. For some reason, the rebels did not see women as soldiers. Women's lack of active involvement did not protect them from retribution: Nat Turner's wife was whipped and at least one woman was reportedly killed during the response. Once the militia and the court sessions ended the lynchings, however, black women were not tried, at least not until a case was put together against Lucy.³⁷

Broadnax began his case against Lucy by calling Mary Barrow, Lucy's mistress. Barrow described how while she was making her escape, Lucy "seized her and held her about one minute." Mary Barrow only made her escape from the house where her husband died when another slave helped take her away. When asked why she thought Lucy had grabbed her, Barrow replied that "she does not know certainly what her intentions were, but thought it was to detain her." At this point, one might think that Broadnax had cinched the case. No other rebel was accused of trying to kill his owner by his owner. Still the prosecutor Broadnax called more witnesses: he called Bird, a slave, who testified that "several weeks after the murder of Mr. Barrow," they found "four pieces of money in a bag of feathers and covered with a handkerchief" in the room shared by Lucy and a convicted rebel. Moses, the eyes of the court, said he saw Lucy "at the door" with the insurgents. Robert Musgrave, who examined Lucy after the revolt, told how she claimed to have fled the kitchen when the rebels arrived at her mistress's plantation.

The most surprising thing about the trial was the amount of evidence that Broadnax introduced to get Lucy convicted. For some reason, he was concerned that Mary Barrow's testimony was not enough by itself to get Lucy convicted, even though

³⁷ For a fuller discussion of women's involvement in the revolt, see Mary Kemp Davis, "'What Happened in This Place,' In Search of the Female Slave in the Nat Turner Slave Insurrection," in Greenberg, *Nat*

several slaves had been convicted on a single person's testimony, including Edwin Turner's Nat, who was hanged on Mary Barrow's testimony alone. (Others who could have testified against Nat, including Hubbard and Moses, were not called in his trial.) Not only was Mary Barrow's testimony seen as not enough to secure a conviction, it is an open question if her testimony even secured the trial. The timing of Lucy's trial may indicate that Broadnax held off a prosecution based upon Barrow's account of her narrow escape—Broadnax would have heard that sometime before 3 September, when he called on Barrow to testify against Nat—and then decided to prosecute only “several weeks later,” when Bird found the corroborating evidence that suggested that Lucy hoped to benefit from the revolt. With the strong evidence presented by the state, the court sentenced Lucy to hang on 26 September and Tom Barrow's estate was awarded \$375 in compensation.³⁸

As James Rochelle did in all the capital cases, he copied the records of Joe and Lucy's trials and sent them to the governor in Richmond. By the end of the week and maybe by Wednesday, the records had made their way to Richmond and John Floyd had reviewed the trials. Up to this point, John Floyd followed the recommendations of the court in every case except one. (Agreeing with the minority of the split court, Floyd did not commute the sentence of the reluctant rebel Jack.) Something about Joe and Lucy's cases inclined the governor to consider commuting the sentences of the two, who he accepted “were of the insurgents.” But granting a commutation was not automatic. As early as 29 June 1776, the Virginia Constitution had limited the power of the governor, who, during the colonial period, represented royal authority. The revolutionaries who

Turner: Slave Rebellion in History and Memory, 162-176.

³⁸ Trial of Lucy, in Tragle, 208-09.

wrote the Virginia Constitution wanted the governor to have the power to pardon, but they wanted to put a check on this power. The constitution required that before the governor could pardon anyone he needed “the advice of the Council of State.” Nothing in the Virginia constitution required that the governor followed the advice of his councilors; this requirement worked simply as a procedural check to limit the governor from making an unpopular pardon without considering the consequences. Fifty-five years later, this requirement had not been changed. According to Governor Floyd, he had to get the advice of the Council, “then I do as I please.”³⁹

This procedural check put Lucy and Joe’s lives in jeopardy. The commutation needed to be sent by Sunday in order to reach Southampton’s sheriff before Joe and Lucy’s execution. On Wednesday, John Floyd went to the state capitol “to transact business which required a Council,” possibly a reference to this commutation. Floyd waited ‘until I was tired,” but no councilors appeared. By Friday, time was getting short to issue a commutation, but there were “no councillors now in Richmond.” In his diary, Floyd lashed out at what he saw as a stupid constitutional requirement. “This endangers the lives of these negroes,” who Floyd was “disposed to reprieve for transportation.” On Monday, 26 September, Lucy and Joe were hanged, unable to be saved by the one man vested with the power to save their lives.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, the court that had sentenced Joe and Lucy to death had not stopped its work. After Joe and Lucy’s trials on September 19, the court raced through three more hearings. They tried two slaves from plantations visited by the rebels: Thomas Ridley’s

³⁹ Floyd in Ambler, 161; also in Tragle, 255. Virginia Constitution, available online at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/states/va05.htm> [21 July 2003]

Matt, and Richard Porter's Jim. In each case they found the defendant not guilty and discharged the defendants.⁴¹ The remaining case heard on 19 September was the evidentiary hearing for Thomas Haithcock, the free black who testified on behalf of Jack and Andrew. On 1 September, Haithcock testified in court that Jack and Andrew came to his house and asked him whether they should try to join the rebels. He went with them "to several houses." The next day, 2 September, whites went to Thomas Haithcock's house and searched it. They found two of Catherine Whitehead's blankets. Mrs. Haithcock explained that Jack and Andrew had ridden on the blankets and then "asked Haithcock to take care of them." Five days later, on 7 September, at the trial of Hardy, it became clear to the court that Thomas Haithcock was involved with the rebels. At Hardy's trial, Henry testified that "Thomas Haithcock /&/ four boys came to Mr. Edwards and said that Genl. Nat would be there Wednesday or Thursday." Haithcock was arrested and, on 12 September, charged with conspiracy to rebel. He was confined to jail until the hearing of 19 September.

At Haithcock's hearing, his own daughter Martha testified about what happened when Jack and Andrew came to the Haithcock's house. The two boys asked Thomas Haithcock what they should do, and he said "that if the insurgents told them to go with them they must do so," and then he added that "after he got something to eat he would go with them to see which way the insurgents were gone." Haithcock's wife begged him not to go, but Haithcock "told his wife to make haste + get him something to eat as he might go with them + after eating [he] went off with these two Boys of Mrs. Whitehead's."

⁴⁰ Floyd in Ambler, 161; also in Tragle, 255. For evidence that the commutation Floyd wanted to send did not arrive in time, Thomas R. Gray lists Lucy and Joe as convicted slaves, not one who was transported in his list at the end of the *Confessions*. Gray, 23.

⁴¹ Trial of Matt and Trial of Jim, in Tragle, 209.

With this evidence, the court bound Haithcock over for trial, although Haithcock survived the superior court. Thomas Haithcock appears on the 1832 tax list, although he no longer lived on the same farm, nor apparently did he live with his wife and daughter.⁴²

The following day, 20 September, the court began some of the usual business of the county court, including some related to Catherine Whitehead's estate, before it turned to the examination of another free black, Berry Newsom. Newsom had been implicated in the trial of Hardy. On the morning of the revolt, Henry found Hardy and Berry Newsom together at one of Peter Edwards' fields. According to Henry, Berry had stated that "the damned Rascal, meaning the witness' master [Peter Edwards], had been there, [and] that they would get him before night." At the examination of Berry Newsom, Henry repeated his account. At about 7 A.M., Henry went to one of Peter Edwards' new fields, where he "found the prisoner there sitting on a log." Henry asked if they had seen Edwards that morning. Newsom "replied yes he had seen the d_____ Rascal + would have him before night." Two days later, Thomas Haithcock, Nathan, Jack, and Andrew came to Peter Edward's plantation. Nathan asked if Newsom and the others would be ready to join Nat Turner. Newsom responded that "he would join him [Nat Turner] and be a revered soldier." Harry, who also testified against Hardy and Isham, corroborated Henry's description of the interchange between Nathan and Berry Newsom. The court decided that there was enough evidence to refer Newsom for trial. In the spring, Berry Newsom was convicted by the Superior Court. On 11 May 1832, Berry Newsom was

⁴² Trial of Jack, in Tragle, 180; Examination of Thomas Haithcock, in Tragle, 209. All quotes from the examination of Thomas Haithcock come from the court notes found in "Nat Turner Insurrection," Southampton County Court Judgements, LV. See also Southampton Tax list, 1831, 1832.

hanged, the only free black executed for his participation in the revolt.⁴³ In an act of inexplicable inconsistency, Southampton County's Superior Court executed Newsom for promising to join the revolt, while Thomas Haithcock, who was among the party that recruited him, escaped with his life. Such were the vagaries of Southampton's justice after the revolt.

The same day Berry Newson was referred to the superior court, the court of oyer and terminer examined Exum Artis, another free black formally accused of participating in the revolt. William Vick's slave Burwell described an encounter with Artis on Tuesday, the day after the revolt. Bolling Barret had sent Burwell to ask three white men, including his owner, to evacuate themselves and their families and "to go to Mrs. Gurley's to keep guard." Exum Artis lived on Vick's plantation, and when Burwell arrived to deliver the message, "Exum Artist [sic] came up and interrupted him." Burwell then asked Artis to mind his own business, which upset Artis. According to Burwell, Artis "appeared to be very mad." Burwell left the tense scene, heading to Mrs. Gurley's, but Exum Artis seethed. He got a gun and followed Burwell to Gurley's where Artis "made considerable noise." Blacks at Mrs. Gurley's were worried that the racket would draw the white's attention at the worst moment. They begged Artis to quiet down, lest the "white people would come + shoot them or carry them to jail." Artis did not care. He said that "he would kill three," perhaps the three who had been asked to come and guard Mrs. Gurley's, "or at least one out of three." Another slave Ben corroborated Burley's account and then added that Exum Artis then stormed off, "muttering." Ben also said that Artis loaded his gun and took a flint.

⁴³ Examination of Berry Newsom, in Tragle, 211. All details of the examination of Berry Newsome come from "Nat Turner Insurrection," Southampton County Court Judgements, LV. On the execution of

Although Artis survived the violent initial response, the court was not going to let this episode pass without a trial. They made Vick issue a surety and promise to bring Ben and Burwell to Artis's trial at the next Superior Court. They also issued summons for Bolling Barret, who could verify at least part of Burwell's story, and Suzanne Artis. Fortunately for Exum Artis, by the time the superior court heard the case, they treated Artis's behavior as internecine dispute, not something indicative of his participation in the revolt. He survived the Superior Court trial and even remained on William Vick's plantation in 1832.⁴⁴

Following ordinary county court business, the court brought to trial Everett Bryant's Jack. Jack had been one of the first slaves to be indicted in court, suggesting that he had been in Southampton's overcrowded jail for at least three weeks. The extra time, however, had not helped Broadnax develop his case against Jack. William Parker's defense worked, and Jack was released from jail. The court finished the day with some more county court business—some connected to the estate of another casualty of the revolt, Piety Reese—and then adjourned until 9 A.M. the following day.⁴⁵

On 21 September, the court brought Stephen to trial. Stephen had encountered the rebels when he and Edward Drewry were at Jacob Williams' farm. While they were debating who should fetch something to measure the corn, the rebels arrived, killing Drewry and drafting Stephen into their service. Stephen must have been with the rebels as they went to Rebecca Vaughn's because he testified that Nelson, who also joined at Jacob Williams', had not been involved in the Vaughn murders. Nelson paid with his life

Newsom, see Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia*, 116.

⁴⁴ Examination of Exum Artis, in Tragle, 212. All the details of the examination of Exum Artis come from "Nat Turner Insurrection," Southampton County Court Judgements, LV. Southampton County Tax list, 1832.

for his decision to join the rebels for a short while, but Stephen—who was with the rebels as long—was spared. Other reluctant rebels had been allowed to live, granted commutations by the governor, but Stephen was truly exceptional: even though he traveled with the rebels, he was judged not guilty.⁴⁶

Even as the court showed leniency to a man who admitted that he was with the rebels, the court reopened the investigations of those charged by Beck of a plot hatched at Raccoon Meeting House. Actions outside of Southampton gave Beck's charges a new momentum; Sussex County convened its own court of oyer and terminer to investigate her story that a conspiracy had extended into their county. Unlike Southampton's court, Sussex's found Beck credible. Her assertion that there had been a meeting in May discussing a revolt led to the conviction of nine slaves. Others, including at least one slave who would then appear before Southampton's court, were discharged. Governor Floyd received the trial records from Sussex, on the sixteenth of September. He pardoned one, leaving five or six sentenced to be hanged and the other two or three to be banished from the state. (Two prisoners—one sentenced to death and one with an unknown sentence—died in an attempt to escape from the Sussex jail.)⁴⁷

After the Sussex court accepted Beck's testimony, the Southampton county court felt pressure increased for it to reopen its investigation into Beck's charges. Little more than a week after the trials ended in Sussex, Broadnax levied charges against Jim, Isaac and Frank. (Interestingly, Bob, Davy, and Daniel, who had been released when the Southampton judges refused to believe Beck's story, were not subject to double

⁴⁵ Trial of Jack, in Tragle, 211.

⁴⁶ Trial of Nelson and Trial of Stephen, in Tragle, 194 and 212-13. For my earlier discussion of Stephen, see chapter 4.

jeopardy.) The court began with a joint trial of Jim and Isaac, both of whom belonged to Samuel Champion. Beck testified that on the day of the revolt, she was at the slave quarters at Solomon Parker's. (Parker had twenty-four slaves.) She remembered Isaac and Jim saying "that if the black people came they would join and help kill the white people." Frank, who was tried later the same day, remarked that "his master crop[p]ed him and he [the master] would be crop[p]ed before the end of the year." Adding to the significance of this remark, she also said that she "had heard three other slaves make use of the same declaration some time previously." She also said that some of the plotters threatened her, say that their plans were "a secret and if she told the white persons [they] would shoot her." Broadnax hoped that these last comments would show that the vocal support for the rebels among the slaves at Solomon Parker's was not simply a rash response to the latest rumors, but part of a longstanding plot.

In the cross-examination of Beck, the defense attorney James French tried to undermine Beck's credibility. According to her own testimony, she heard insurrectionary plans hatched before the revolt. Why did she wait for the news of the revolt to tell the whites? Beck answered, "the reason of her not telling before was that she did not understand it." French also asked how Beck could explain that, when Jim was examined by the Sussex magistrates, he denied even knowing who Beck was. How could Beck know so much about Jim, while Jim did not even know who Beck was? Rejecting the possibility that Jim lied, Beck explained that it was possible that Jim did not know her. "[S]he is a house servant and is seldom in the outhouses."

⁴⁷ Floyd in Ambler, 160; also in Tragle, 254. On the jailbreak, see Norfolk and Portsmouth *Herald* 31 October 1831.

Knowing that the trial would depend upon establishing Beck's credibility to a court that had already once dismissed her testimony, Broadnax tried to corroborate her story. The only witness he could find to support any part of her account was Bob, who testified that on the night of the revolt, Jim left Samuel Champion's. When Jim returned the next day, he said that he had been to Solomon Parker's, where the events Beck described took place. With Beck's testimony as the only incriminating evidence against the defendants, Broadnax rested the state's case against Jim and Isaac. While French did not call any witnesses, he pointed out to the court the weaknesses in Beck's testimony and reminded the court of the reasons that it had "disregarded" her testimony in an earlier trial. French's argument was not enough to convince the court. It found Isaac and Jim guilty. Unaware of the problems that prevented the governor from commuting the sentences of Joe and Lucy, the court recommended that the governor commute the death sentences. Isaac and Jim were valued at a combined \$700.⁴⁸

While the court was willing to accept that it was possible a plot extended to Solomon Parker's, it was unwilling to accept that the revolt had extended another tendril to the farm of Hannah Williamson. On 22 September, the same day that the court had heard Beck's testimony against Isaac and Jim, it refused to convict Preston, a slave from a plantation with no known connection to the revolt. After Preston's trial, the court recessed.

The court reassembled for the trial of Frank, another slave implicated by Beck. Broadnax called Beck to the stand and she recounted how on "the day on which the rebellion broke out," she heard Frank say that "if the black people came that way he

⁴⁸ Trial of Isaac and Jim, in Tragle, 214; Floyd in Ambler, 161; also in Tragle, 255. For evidence that Isaac and Jim were transported, see Heath; Thomas R. Gray also lists Isaac and Jim among those who were

would join them and help them kill all the white people.” Frank resembled Virginia’s second most famous slave rebel. Like the man who plotted in 1800 to lead a rebel army into Richmond, Frank was a blacksmith who had apparently run afoul of those in power. While Gabriel was branded for a fight in which he bit off part of a white man’s ear, Frank’s owner cut off part of his ear the year of the Southampton revolt. Frank wanted revenge, and when he heard news of the revolt, he thought he might have a chance to return the favor. French made a full defense, but this time he was facing a court that had already accepted Beck’s testimony. He could not have been surprised when the court sentenced Frank to die, or when it recommended the governor grant him clemency. As a skilled slave, Frank was given the highest valuation of any slave during the revolt. The court valued him at \$600. Before adjourning for six days, the court ordered its records sent to the governor.⁴⁹

John Floyd received the records for the trials of Isaac, Jim and Frank on Tuesday 27 September. In each case, the court recommended mercy, but if Floyd did not issue the commutations, they would be hanged on Friday, 30 September. Floyd received the court’s recommendation angrily, still upset at his inability to save Lucy and Joe the preceding weekend. Floyd complained to his diary about “our infamous Constitution,” which hindered his ability to pardon freely. He feared Jim, Isaac, and Frank would die just as Joe and Lucy did. “[B]ecause there is not one member of the Council of State in Richmond, wherefore the poor wretch must lose his life by their absence from their official duties.” As it turned out, Isaac, Jim and Frank had better luck than Lucy and Joe.

transported in his list at the end of the *Confessions*. Gray, 23.

⁴⁹ Trial of Preston and Trial of Frank, in Tragle, 215-16. On Gabriel, see Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina

Floyd was able to meet with a councilor, perhaps the detested P. V. Daniel, of whom Floyd noted “I will not do business unless of the necessity where it cannot be delayed.” He issued the commutations, and they were among the convicted rebels listed by the state auditor as transported from the state.⁵⁰

Even as the sheriff was waiting to hear word about the commutations, the court of oyer and terminer in Southampton reconvened on 28 September to consider the fate of three more slaves. At first, Broadnax charged Jack and Shadrack “with treason against the Commonwealth.” The charge itself was extraordinary and perhaps contributed to the court’s decision to postpone the trial. Meanwhile the court took up the case of Nelson. Unlike the recent convictions, which had been based on Beck’s testimony and involved people clearly were not in the neighborhood of the revolt, Nelson belonged to Benjamin Blunt. Two weeks had passed since Nathan, another slave from Benjamin Blunt’s farm, had been hung for his role in the revolt. Now it was Nelson’s turn to stand trial. The court judged Nelson not guilty and released him.⁵¹

Nearly two months after the revolt, on 17 October, the court returned to the case of Jack and Shadrack. During the three week hiatus, the court had considered the charges carefully. At first glance, treason seemed a fitting charge. William Blackstone, the English commentator on the common laws, called treason, “the highest civil crime, which (considered as a member of the community) any man can possibly commit.” Specifically Blackstone said treason happened “whenever a superior reposes a confidence in a subject or inferior...; and inferior so abuses that confidence, so forgets the obligations of duty,

Press, and James Sidbury, *Plowshares into Swords: Race Rebellion and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

⁵⁰ Floyd in Ambler, 161-62; also in Tragle, 255.

⁵¹ Trial of Jack and Shadrach, and Trial of Nelson, in Tragle, 216.

subjection, and allegiance, as to destroy the life of any such his superior or lord.” In a revolt that killed dozens of masters and mistresses, slave rebels seemed to be a perfect example of traitors. With this sense in mind, Governor John Floyd used the word “treason” as the term to describe the charges against those who had tried to rebel. Nevertheless, some southern lawyers and jurists were hesitant to find that slaves could be guilty of treason. After all, southern slave law often treated slaves as chattel or property. As property, slaves could no more owe allegiance to their masters or the state than could a barn, a plow or a horse. Moreover, accepting that slaves could be tried for treason implied that slaves were “a member of the community.” While Jack and Shadrack’s case was suspended, the judges brushed up on the finer points of this legal debate. When the trial resumed, the court immediately decided that “a slave cannot be tried in this court for Treason.” The court then discharged Jack and Shadrack from further prosecution.⁵²

Following the dismissal of the treason charges, the court tried Sam, who belonged to Peter Edwards. Meriwther Broadnax called on Ben, who said that he saw Sam with the insurgents at Newit Harris’s plantation. According to Ben, Sam had a stick or a gun. Ben could not say if Sam could have escaped. Broadnax then called Nathaniel Francis, who was part of a posse that went to Peter Edward’s farm on Tuesday, the day after the revolt. The posse had been told that “some of the negroes were there.” They found Sam hiding under the house. Broadnax wanted the court to believe that Sam had returned to his house and hid after riding with the rebels for most of the day Monday. In the cross-examination, James French—implying that Sam may have been hiding from vindictive

⁵² Blackstone 4: 6. In Blackstone, I have silently changed the “f” character to the modern “s” in the appropriate cases. Available on-line at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/blackstone/bk4ch6.htm> [25 July 2003]; Floyd in Ambler, 161; also in Tragle, 255; Trial of Jack and Shadrach, continued, in Tragle, 217. For a fuller discussion of slavery and treason, see Morris, 265-66.

whites and not because he was guilty—asked Nathaniel Francis when Sam had gone under the house. Francis admitted that he did not know.

Unlike other cases, where French accepted that the accused was a discontented slave, the defense council tried to establish that Sam was a loyal slave and if he were with the rebels it was unwillingly. French called Sam's owner, Peter Edwards, to the stand. He testified that Sam "was a negro of good character." Edwards claimed that his overseer noted that "the prisoner got home Two hours by sun Monday morning." Since the revolt did not begin until Monday morning, this testimony would have exonerated Sam, who then could not have been at Newit Harris's at 10 A.M. that day. Most likely, the witness meant and the court understood Edwards to mean that Sam arrived home late Monday night or early Tuesday morning. When cross-examined by Broadnax, Edwards had to acknowledge that it was possible that Sam was among those who had fled from Parker's field. He could have walked the eight or nine miles after the battle and been home by the time his overseer saw him.

French called Levi Waller, who had served in several cases as the state's best witness. French asked the witness if he had seen Sam during the murders at his farm. Waller said that he had. He described Sam as "not engaged" in the murders. In fact, Sam was "at some distance wiping his eyes." When Nat Turner arrived and told the troops to head off, Sam "seemed not disposed to get up, but did get up and go off." French understood the power of Waller's testimony. If the man who lost as much in the revolt as anyone could see that Sam was not a willing rebel, surely the court could discharge him—as they did Stephen—or recommend commutation, as they had done for other unwilling rebels. French may have been hopeful, but the defense failed. The court

returned a verdict of guilty, sentencing Sam to be hanged. His owner, Peter Edwards, who had testified on Sam's behalf, would receive \$425 compensation.⁵³

Following a trial that was continued—but never actually resumed, according to the trial records—the court adjourned until the following day. On 18 October, the court finished the remaining cases in the docket. After some county court business, the court of oyer and terminer considered the case of Archer, who was owned by Arthur Reese. James French the defense council was able to convince the court to discharge the defendant. French was not as successful in his advocacy on behalf of Isham Turner, the last free black examined by the court. Turner may have been brought under suspicion during the investigation of Thomas Haithcock, the person who encouraged Jack and Andrew to follow the rebels. At the time of the revolt, Isham Turner lived on the same plantation as Thomas Haithcock. When Turner's trial occurred, the Superior Court released him.⁵⁴

After finishing the examinations and trials of all the accused slaves, the court decided it could bring Moses, the court's best black witness, to stand trial. Broadnax dutifully indicted Moses. The state's case had been made easy because of everything that Moses had already told the court. Broadnax called at least a couple of white men, who told the court about what Moses had said. The witnesses also told the court that Moses's testimony "was freely given & that nothing which he said would be of any advantage to him." In other words, Moses had not worked out a deal with the prosecutor when he testified in the earlier cases. Of course, lacking a formal deal did not mean that the court would look less mercifully upon the young slave whose testimony had been the key to the

⁵³ Trial of Sam, in Tragle, 217-18.

⁵⁴ Trial of Archer and Examination of Isham Turner, in Tragle, 219-20

whites uncovering what had happened during the revolt. Moreover, the state's witnesses agreed that Moses had always insisted that he "had been compelled to go with the insurgents." Based entirely upon his own testimony recounted second-hand, the court found Moses guilty. Valued at \$300 and sentenced to death, Moses was recommended clemency. The date of execution was scheduled for 17 November, allowing the Governor nearly a month to commute the sentence of the rebel who had done the most to help the white community learn what the rebels had done on the day of the revolt.⁵⁵

After the trial of Moses, the investigations continued. Most did not lead to trials although one led to the conviction and execution of Ben, who belonged to Benjamin Blunt. Ben was the brother of one of the rebels, Nathan. According to testimony given during a trial in November 1831, on the morning of the revolt, Ben told another slave named Sam that "there was going to be a war." An hour later, Sam heard about the revolt. Prosecutor Meriwether Broadnax used this evidence to suggest that Ben was privy to the plot, although Ben's defense attorney, Robert Birchett, who was appearing in his only case, may have argued that Sam's statement only proved that Ben had heard of the revolt shortly before Sam had. Broadnax called on Luke, a slave, to testify. Luke told the court that on Tuesday, the day after the revolt, Billy Artis and his wife appeared on Benjamin Blunt's plantation and recruited. Luke refused to go, but noted that Ben joined without being asked. It is possible that he joined because his brother, Nathan, was already with Billy Artis. The four—Ben, Nathan, Billy Artis, and Billy Artis's wife—went to Nathaniel Francis's. While the others looted Francis' house, Ben waited outside. Nevertheless, he agreed to carry some booty that the others had taken from the house. The four then went to Peter Edwards', where one slave overheard Nathan telling Ben

⁵⁵ Trial of Moses, in Tragle, 220-21.

where he had hidden the money that he had gotten during the revolt. The evidence was overwhelming; Birchett offered no witness for the defense. The court sentenced Ben to be hanged. He was valued at \$400 dollars.⁵⁶

Five examinations of free blacks and forty-four trials of slaves—in addition to other court-led investigations that did not rise to the standard of trials—did much to reassure the white community that the leaders of society, acting through the courts, could restore order and the system of racial hierarchy in Southampton. The execution of seventeen people, including one free black, and the expulsion from Virginia of another thirteen reluctant rebels and sympathizers showed that the court could respond vigorously to the rebels. The trials also calmed the fears of those concerned about a general insurrection. Little evidence had emerged of a broad conspiracy, and the willingness of blacks to help the white investigations—amply exemplified in the trials—showed one of the most important obstacles that future revolutionaries faced in trying to revolt against the system of racial slavery. But the trials did not provide answers to all questions that rose after the revolt. People still wanted answers to some of their earliest questions: “Who is this Nat Turner?”⁵⁷ Where was he? How did he escape? Why did he lead the revolt? How was the revolt planned? Turner’s capture was critical for those who wanted to understand what had happened.

⁵⁶ Trial of Ben, in Tragle, 223, 227. It is possible that the attention to booty in the trial may suggest how Ben was caught. Since Ben’s trial was well after all the others, something must have brought him under suspicion. It could have been Nat Turner’s testimony, but no evidence from Nat Turner was introduced in the trial. Given that, I would guess that Ben was found later with stolen property. This would explain why so much effort at the trial was spent connecting the property that I am guessing Ben had to the revolt.

⁵⁷ This question appeared in *The Richmond Compiler*, 27 August 1831, quoted in *Richmond Enquirer*, 30 August 1831 and also Tragle, 49.

CHAPTER 11

CONFESSIONS

According to *The Confessions*, Nat Turner last saw any of the other rebels Tuesday night, 23 August 1831, when he dispatched Jacob and Nat. He told them to find and tell the four original conspirators—Henry, Sam, Nelson and Hark—that Turner would meet them at Cabin Pond. After Jacob and Nat left with these orders, Turner returned under the cover of the night to the neighborhood where the revolt began. He spent Wednesday hiding in the woods around Cabin Pond, hoping that some of the rebels would join him. They never did. The only people Turner recalled seeing were “white men riding around as though they were looking for some one.” Turner surmised that Nat and Jacob had been caught “and compelled to betray me.” Since the whites apparently had the information about the rendezvous, Turner fled. On Thursday night, he returned his home on the Travis’ plantation, collected some food, and headed out to a hiding place that he described as “a hole [scratched] under a pile of fence rails in a field.”¹

It was too late for Nat Turner to reassemble the original rebel force, but at least two blacks who had been inspired by Turner’s bold fight were not ready to give up. According to one newspaper article, Will Artis “wept like a child” when he first joined the revolt. His attitude toward the revolt, like that of Elizabeth Turner’s Davy, soon changed. The same report that described Artis weeping “like a child,” noted that “once [Artis] tasted blood, he was like a wolf let into the fold.” When the rebels were finally dispersed on Tuesday morning, Artis was among those who escaped. Unlike those who tried to return to their homes hoping to escape the notice of whites, Artis looked to resume the revolt. Accompanied by his wife—the only woman to have

¹ Gray, 17.

been recorded traveling with any insurgent group—Artis tried to find recruits. At Benjamin Blunt’s farm on Tuesday morning, they had no luck recruiting Luke, but Ben, who had been following the revolt eagerly, joined up.²

Meanwhile, Thomas Haithcock, Nathan, and three boys—possibly including Catherine Whitehead’s Jack and Andrew or Turner’s emissaries Jacob and Nat—were also trying to recruit. They traveled through the neighborhood where the revolt began announcing that “Genl. Nat would be there Wednesday or Thursday.” According to trial records, this band was unable to get any recruits, but it did get promises from at least three slaves who “said they would join them.” At some point on Tuesday, Ben and Artis—but apparently not Artis’ wife—united with Haithcock’s force. Apparently, Artis assumed command. On Wednesday, General Eppes wrote to the governor describing how the rebels who had not been killed or captured were trying to make off “with General Nat Turner ... and Will Artis, a free man of color, at their head.” Eppes’ intelligence about Nat Turner being with Will Artis was wrong, but he was not the only white to think Artis was a leader of the revolt: a different report described Artis as “one of the principals.”³

On Wednesday afternoon, at about three or four o’clock, Artis and his crew returned to Benjamin Blunt’s farm. At the farm, Artis was intrepid, boldly vowing that “he would cut his way, he would kill and cripple as he went.” Perhaps Artis believed that bold words would inspire the slaves on Blunt’s farm to rise and join the insurgents, who “were, according to the best intelligence, reduced to six.” If so, he was mistaken: instead of growing, his small crew began to melt away. If Jack and Andrew had been with the force, they soon surrendered to

² Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 97; Trial of Ben, in Tragle, 227.

³ Trial of Hardy, in Tragle, 202-03; Richmond *Compiler*, 27 August 1831, in Tragle, 48; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 6 September 1831, in Tragle, 72-73; Trial of Ben, in Tragle, 227, and Norfolk *American Beacon*, 9 September 1831, in Tragle, 75.

James Powell, who took them to Cross Keys. Thomas Haithcock left the rebels quickly enough that whites did not immediately arrest him for his actions following the revolt. Even though he testified on 1 September in Jack and Andrew's trials, Haithcock was charged only on 12 September, after the first session of trials had ended. Benjamin Blunt's Ben also escaped detection for several months. Not until 21 November was he tried and convicted for his actions after the revolt. All alone, unable to resurrect the revolt, Artis despaired. A couple of weeks after the revolt, Artis' body was discovered with "a pistol lying at his side and a ball discovered in his body."⁴

As relieved as the whites were to discover Artis' suicide, they still worried about Nat Turner. They wanted to know what had happened to "the ring leader, *Nat*. All are at a loss to know where he has dropped to."⁵ Initially, there was too much intelligence of Nat Turner's whereabouts. One rumor made its way to Norfolk, where the newspapers reported, "*Ned*, the preacher or prophet, had been taken." This report was wrong both about the prophet's capture and his name. Another early rumor, reported by an officer with the troops in Belfield, described how the revolt's unnamed leader "was shot in the attempt to force the bridge at Jerusalem." The same day a letter from Jerusalem discredited that rumor: "The story of his having been killed at the bridge, and of two engagements there, is ungrounded."⁶ If Turner's inference about the white search party at Cabin Pond were correct, then the whites had also heard that Turner had returned to the place the revolt began. When the whites' search at Cabin Pond failed to turn up Turner,

⁴ Trial of Ben, in Tragle, 227; Richmond *Compiler* 27 August 1831, in Tragle, 48; Trials of Jack and Andrew, in Tragle, 181-82; Examination of Thomas Haithcock, in Tragle, 209; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 6 September 1831, in Tragle, 72-73; Norfolk *American Beacon*, 9 September 1831, in Tragle, 75; Lynchburg *Virginia*, 15 September 1831, in Tragle, 80.

⁵ Norfolk *American Beacon*, 9 September 1831, in Tragle, 75. (Emphasis in Tragle.)

⁶ Norfolk *American Beacon*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 49; Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 26 August 1831, in Tragle, 40; Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 45. The report in the *American Beacon* may have been sent by Jason S. Garrison, who was a source for later reports. See 31 August 1831 *American Beacon*, quoted in Richmond *Enquirer* 6 September 1831.

the whites had no way to know that their best intelligence was not simply another baseless rumor.

While investigating these rumors, the whites were initially optimistic that the intelligence would lead to the capture or death of Turner. The officer from Belfield guessed that the rebels “are now effectually hemmed in and all must perish within a few days.” In Jerusalem, they agreed. “It is believed he cannot escape.” As late as Saturday, 27 August, Pleasants was certain that all the at-large rebels would “be slain or made captive.” The next day, General Eppes himself repeated a rumor that “*Nat*, the fanatical desperado who led the band, is arrested.”⁷ That rumor was false, but Eppes’ willingness to discharge the troops before anyone could confirm that Turner had been found clearly indicates that that Eppes was confident that Turner would not be able to revive the shattered revolt.

The failure of any significant unrest to follow the dismissal of the troops confirmed Eppes’ judgment about the safety of whites in Southampton, but the evacuation of most troops made the capture of Nat Turner seem even more important. Within a week of the revolt, an anonymous correspondent sent a letter to Virginia’s Governor John Floyd, suggesting “a large reward for him [Nat Turner] if caught by a white or free man, or manumission to any slave who will bring him in dead or alive.” Because Floyd still held out that hope that there was some “probability of his falling into the hands of some of our troops,” he did not act on this recommendation. By 13 September 1831, Floyd’s hope for a military capture had faded, and he wrote to Southampton requesting “a full description of his [Nat Turner’s] person.” The next day,

⁷ Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 26 August 1831, in Tragle, 40; Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 45; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 29 August 1831, in Tragle, 52; Lynchburg *Virginian*, 8 September 1831, in Tragle, 74.

William Parker provided the description that would become the basis for the reward notice that Governor Floyd issued on 17 September 1831.⁸

None of the actions of the military commanders or the Governor did anything to restrain the pursuit of Nat Turner by the people from Southampton. Sometime before the end of August, it was reported that a map drawn by Nat Turner was discovered. The idea that there may have been more material evidence secreted somewhere else led investigators to Nat Turner's wife. At first she may have claimed to know nothing of this revolt, but when the questioning was conducted "under the lash," whites were able to get from her an assortment of odd papers written in "blood:" "on each paper, a crucifix and the sun, is distinctly visible; with the figures 6,000, 30,000, 80,000, &c." No doubt the whites had an easier time interpreting a list of fewer than twenty names, "which, all agree, is a list of his men."⁹ Although she was a recalcitrant source of important intelligence, Turner's wife was never formally charged for abetting the revolt. Because Turner's wife produced the materials that she had only after she was whipped, it is reasonable to suppose that she sympathized with her husband's cause. Once she came to the attention of the whites, however, it seems doubtful that she could have been any help to her

⁸ Anonymous, 28 August 1831, Executive Papers, Library of Virginia; John Floyd to Richard Eppes, 13 September 1831, in Tragle, 274; William Parker to John Floyd, 14 September 1831, in Tragle, 420-421; Governor's Proclamation for the Capture of Nat Turner, 17 September 1831, in Tragle, 421-422; also in Richmond *Enquirer*, 20 September 1831. The anonymous letter was written in a nearly illegible scrawl, suggesting either a poorly educated correspondent, or one who did not want to be identified, perhaps to remain eligible for the reward. Thomas Ritchie, publisher of the Richmond *Enquirer*, was the first who noted that Floyd abridged Parker's description, omitting any mention of the mule that kicked Turner in the head. See Richmond *Enquirer*, 21 October 1831, in Tragle, 128. Scot French and Kenneth S. Greenberg both comment on this distinction. See Greenberg, "Name, Face, Body," in Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 14-15; and French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory*, 43. Parker's description:

He is between 30 & 35 years old—5 feet six or 8 inches high—weighs between 150 & 160 rather bright complexion but not a mulatto—broad-shouldered—large flat nose—large eyes—broad flat feet rather knock kneed—walk brisk and active—hair on the top of the head very thin—no beard except on the up-per lip and the tip of the chin. A scar on one of his temples produced by the kick of a mule—also one on the back of his neck by a bite—a large knot on one of the bones of his right arm near the wrist produced by a blow.

⁹ Richmond *Enquirer*, 2 September 1831, in Tragle, 58. Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 92. Interestingly, there is no evidence that this list of names was used in any of the trials.

husband. If the whites were thorough in their search for Nat Turner, they would have watched to see if Turner made contact with his family. Turner foiled such a trap. According to his testimony, he avoided contact with all in the black community, a sensible precaution for the most wanted man in Virginia.

In the days after the revolt, escaping the detection of both whites and blacks must have been difficult. Fortunately for Turner, he had his earlier experience when he had run away for “thirty days.” Unlike many other outliers, Turner’s first escape was done without ongoing assistance from the black community. That experience of hiding prepared Turner well for the days after the revolt. For six weeks after 25 August 1831, Turner remained in the hole “never leaving my hiding place but for a few minutes in the dead of night to get water which was very near.”¹⁰ Despite the intense manhunt, Nat Turner remained concealed.

The early confidence that Turner would soon be caught evolved into a suspicion that Turner had somehow escaped from Southampton. A correspondent from Petersburg was among the first to voice this opinion. Two weeks after the revolt, this anonymous writer opined, “The ringleader, Nat Turner ... is not yet taken, and my impression is, *will never be*.” The writer explained that when Turner realized the revolt was about to fail, “he no doubt left the country and ere this is secure in one of the non-slaveholding states.”¹¹ No reports of Turner in a free state survive, but there were reports that he was spotted in Baltimore. In early September, *Niles Weekly Register* reported, “A negro man supposed to be the famous gen. Nat, of the Southampton negroes, arrested and detained at Baltimore as a runaway slave—has been demanded by and given up to the executive of Virginia.” How this identification had been made is a bit perplexing, as the reward for Nat Turner, which included the first widely circulated

¹⁰ Gray, 9, 17. For the discussion of Nat Turner’s relationship to the black community during his first escape, see chapter 1.

¹¹ Boston Universalist *Christian Register*, 1 October 1831.

description of him, did not appear for another week. Given the lack of information, it should not be surprising that Baltimoreans soon realized that they had misidentified the man. In fact, the suspect was “a slave from the Northern Neck in Virginia who had been for some time employed by a person in Georgetown...” The black man was arrested when he offered to sell the horse for “a price which excited suspicion.” “[T]he alleged culprit has been removed . . . to the District of Columbia, where the crime was committed, to take his trial.”¹²

Baltimoreans were not the only ones to think mistakenly that they had seen the elusive rebel leader. In Botetourt County, Virginia, a man fitting Nat Turner’s description was seen headed toward Ohio just days before the reward notice with the description of Nat Turner had reached the western part of the state. Two hunters had encountered the unfamiliar man. This black man was dressed, according to one report, in the type of coat “generally worn by itinerant preachers.” The young hunters stopped the man, and as they searched him, they found a large knife. They were about to undertake a more thorough search when the unknown preacher dropped his knapsack, and he fled. The two hunters fired after him and gave chase, but to no avail. The unknown preacher escaped. When the hunters finally returned to examine the knapsack that the man left behind, they found a prayer book inscribed with the name, “*Zephenira Turner, Richmond.*” They also found “some ammunition.” Immediately, the white community jumped to the conclusion that this had to be the fugitive leader of the famous revolt. One correspondent even insisted that the man “doubtless would have been taken if the Governor’s Proclamation [describing Nat Turner] had fortunately reached this part of the country a few days sooner than it did.”¹³

¹² Baltimore *Niles Weekly Register*, 10 September 1831, in Tragle, 76-77; Norfolk Herald, 19 September 1831; Richmond *Enquirer*, 20 September 1831, in Tragle, 88.

¹³ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 6 October 1831. Richmond *Enquirer*, 4 October 1831, 18 October 1831, in Tragle, 117, 123; *Edenton Gazette and Farmer’s Palladium*, 19 October 1831. William Sidney Drewry says that the

News that Nat Turner had been stopped nearly two hundred miles from the scene of the revolt in western Virginia led the people in the area to undertake “measures” to investigate if the Southside plot reached into Appalachia. These measures failed to reveal Turner, but another slave, Billy, was arrested on 10 October 1831, “on the charge of being concerned with Nat Turner in raising an insurrection.” Billy’s disposition and the news that Turner had been spotted in the neighborhood was enough to earn Billy a trial. More tragically, the measures also seem to have resulted in the death of Zephenira Turner, who had simply been trying to escape a state that had become unfriendly to any black preacher, let alone an armed one named Turner.¹⁴

The hunters who had stopped Zephenira Turner said that he escaped along the road to Sweet Springs, forty miles west of Botetourt. Thirty miles past Botetourt, at the crossing of the New River in Lewisburg, now in West Virginia, “a negro man presented himself to the ferryman.” The ferryman asked to see a pass, but man, who later reports identified as Zephenira Turner, did not have one. The ferryman concluded that Turner was a runaway and tried to arrest him, but Zephenira Turner escaped again. Although he had eluded the whites, he still had to get across the New River if he wanted to escape from Virginia. Unable to cross at a ferry, Turner apparently decided to risk crossing the river alone. The decision was fatal; Turner’s body was later found “floating down the river.” The whites—who were convinced that they had found Nat

names in the Bible were “Mesheck Turner” and “richman [sic] Wheeler,’ in a child or Negro writing.” See Drewry, 89, f. 2. The articles in the *Richmond Enquirer* and the *Edenton Gazette and Farmer’s Palladium* both provide examples of the white community reporting that this itinerant minister was really Nat Turner.

¹⁴ *Richmond Enquirer*, 4 October 1831, 18 October 1831, in Tragle, 117, 123; *Edenton Gazette and Farmer’s Palladium*, 19 October 1831. William Sidney Drewry says that the names in the Bible were “Mesheck Turner” and “richman [sic] Wheeler,’ in a child or Negro writing.” See Drewry, 89, f. 2. The *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, 6 October 1831, reported that the name was “Zephenira Turner, Richmond,” but agreed with the report in the *Enquirer* about most of the other details.

Turner—searched the body and discovered “a large Spanish knife, a pistol,” and either a watch or “something like a diamond.”¹⁵

Sightings of Nat Turner far from the scene of the revolt did not imply that everyone agreed that Turner had left Southampton. One report described how a party of mounted men found Turner “on the edge of a reed swamp on Nottoway River, about two miles below Jerusalem.” Turner fled into the swamp but was trapped when he his footing slipped as he tried to leap across a bog. The next issue of the Norfolk *Herald* brought an unequivocal disavowal of this report: “the story of the capture of the insurgent NAT, we regret to state, is sheer fabrication. The lie was so much like the truth that we could not doubt it.”¹⁶

Fabricated stories and mistaken sightings of Nat Turner did nothing to discourage those who hoped to capture Virginia’s most sought after man and claim the rewards, which had climbed to more than one thousand dollars. But Turner’s hiding place near the starting point of the revolt was good. By the start of October, Turner had grown more daring and perhaps hungrier. In the *Confessions*, he described his attempts to eavesdrop, to find out what was happening, but the expeditions met with limited success. He gathered “little or no intelligence.”¹⁷ He had better luck finding food, but this success in scavenging food ultimately led to his capture.

One night in the middle of October while Turner was out, a dog came to his hideout and found some of the meat that he had stolen. The dog returned a couple days later with its owners—one of whom was Nelson, identified in a newspaper report as “a fellow servant of the

¹⁵ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 24 October 1831; Baltimore *Niles Weekly Register*, 29 October 1831, in Tragle, 131; Boston *Recorder*, 2 November 1831. The author of the report in the *Whig* surmised that this “must have been the same individual who made his escape ‘from the young men in Monroe, at the expense of his coat and bundle.’”

¹⁶ Norfolk *Herald*, 30 September 1831, 3 October 1831. (Emphasis in original.) The initial report was also quoted in the Richmond *Enquirer*, 4 October 1831, in Tragle, 116-17, although Tragle did not note the correction.

¹⁷ Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 4 November 1831, in Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 136; Drewry, 88; Gray, 17.

leader of the late insurrection”—in tow. Turner pleaded to Nelson not to turn him in, but as soon as Turner identified himself, the slaves fled. They immediately told some in the white community that Turner was hiding in the neighborhood of the revolt. “[I]n a short time, five or six hundred persons were in pursuit.” Turner had guessed that the two slaves would “betray me,” so he relocated to a new hiding place on Nathaniel Francis’s farm. He hid beneath fodder stakes in a den that one white later admitted was “very ingeniously contrived.” The whites did not find Turner for weeks, although “he had been seen several times” by blacks in the neighborhood.”¹⁸

On Thursday 27 October 1831, Nathaniel Francis “was riding through his fields examining the condition of his fodder stack, when to his astonishment, Nat stepped out from between two of the stacks.” Francis was stunned, but Turner smiled “without showing any hostile intention.” According to the earliest account, Francis drew his pistol, but his shot sailed high, passing through the brim of Turner’s hat. With his sword and “a ham of bacon” in his hands, Turner escaped from Francis.”¹⁹

Francis did not capture Turner, but the encounter left no doubt that Turner was still in the neighborhood. One resident of the neighborhood described how this news led to an intense, “unremitting” manhunt. Despite an intense search that included a sweep of the farm on which Turner hid, the men were unable to find Turner on Friday or Saturday. At about noon on Sunday, 30 October, Benjamin Phipps, who was out with a gun but was not one of the search

¹⁸ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 24 October 1831; Gray, 17. Drewry identifies Nelson as “Red” Nelson, the same person responsible for saving Lavana Francis. See Drewry, 90.

¹⁹ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 7 November 1831; Gray, 17; Drewry, 90; Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 138; Norfolk *Herald*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 134. The Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 3 November 1831, ran a letter dated 29 October 1831, that described the encounter even before Turner was caught. The story of Nathaniel Francis shooting at Nat Turner was also described in the Norfolk *Herald*, 2 November 1831. In a slight variation on the stories from Southampton, Eliot Whitehead described Francis shooting at Turner with a shotgun. See Richmond *Enquirer*, 15 November 1831. A similar report, also counting twelve buckshot holes through Turner’s hat, appeared in the Norfolk *Herald*, 7 November 1831.

party, spotted a “brush shake” as he was crossing Nathaniel Francis’s farm. He investigated. Pine brush had been placed over a hole that Turner had dug out under a fallen tree. Seeing the opening of “the newly dug cave” Phipps called out for help, but the other whites were out of earshot. Phipps aimed “a shotgun well charged” at Turner, but before Phipps pulled the trigger Turner spoke. He offered to surrender. According to the *Confessions*, Turner recalled, “I requested him not to shoot and I would give up...” Phipps demanded Turner’s weapons, at which point one account described how Turner “threw away an old sword.” Turner remembered it more ceremoniously: Phipps “demanded my sword. I delivered it to him...”²⁰ Whether the sword was thrown or delivered, the meaning of the moment was clear: more than two months after the rebel army was suppressed, the rebel general, dirty and gaunt, finally surrendered his sword.

As Turner emerged from his hiding spot, Phipps ordered him to lie down on the ground. Phipps then tied Turner, and, according to the earliest report from someone in the neighborhood, waited for others to arrive. The news that Turner was captured spread fast as exuberant whites fired guns in celebration and others investigated to find the cause of the ruckus. Within an hour a hundred people thronged to see Turner. Soon the whites decided to parade the captured rebel leader through the neighborhood. One resident described his joy at seeing Turner “yesterday carried from house to house in the neighborhood, where the females, who made such narrow escapes from him and his gang, expressed a curiosity to see him.” Although a man from Petersburg who had been in Southampton at the time reported, “not the least personal violence

²⁰ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 7 November 1831; Norfolk *American Beacon*, 2 November 1831, in Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 132; Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 137, 138; Gray, 17; Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 4 November 1831, in Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 135. A correspondent to the Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 138, also said Turner “threw down [the sword] and surrendered.” Most sources suggest that Turner spoke first: see Gray and Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 4 November 1831, in Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 135; Norfolk *Herald*, 7 November 1831; Norfolk *American Beacon*, 2 November 1831, in Tragle, 132; Richmond *Enquirer*, 15 November 1832, in Tragle, 139. For a source that describes Phipps speaking first, see Norfolk *Herald*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 134.

was offered to Nat,” another report described a crowd “so much excited, [that] it was with great difficulty he could be conveyed alive to Jerusalem.” According to the black oral tradition, even unsympathetic slaves accosted Turner. Allen Crawford, who was born on Peter Edwards’ farm after the revolt, told an interviewer a century after the revolt that when Turner was brought to Peter Edwards farm, “Grandma ran out and struck Nat in the mouth, knocking the blood out and asked him, ‘Why did you take my son away?’”²¹

After spending Sunday night in the neighborhood of the revolt, Phipps and an armed escort took Turner to Jerusalem. As Turner had once hoped, his arrival in Jerusalem was accompanied by gunfire, although in this case the guns were fired “by way of rejoicing for the capture of Nat.” The procession arrived in Jerusalem at about 1:15 P.M. When Turner arrived in Jerusalem, Phipps conveyed his captive to the competent legal authority, in this case, two justices of the peace: James Trezvant and James W. Parker. The men, who had been among the seven most active judges, examined Turner. “[A]fter 1 ½ or 2 hours of close examination [Turner] was committed to the prison.” The white community in Southampton was relieved; Turner was “at last lodged safely in jail.” As had happened the day before, a large number of people—one observer estimated “nearly one hundred persons”—gathered “for the purpose of

²¹ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 7 November 1831; Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 4 November 1831, in Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 135, 136; Norfolk *Herald*, 7 November 1831; Norfolk *Herald*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 134; *Weevils in the Wheat*, 76. Historians have argued that WPA interviewees spoke much more freely to black interviewers than to white interviewers about many things, including “their admiration of Nat Turner.” If this is true, this makes the story Allen Crawford told to Susie Byrd, a black interviewer, more compelling. See John W. Blassingame, “Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems,” in *The Slave’s Narrative* ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984): 78-98, “admiration” on 91.

The letter that the *Herald* published on 7 November is also quoted in Richmond *Enquirer*, 15 November 1831, in Tragle, 139. The Petersburg *Intelligencer* described Benjamin Phipps taking Turner to “his own residence.” The contradiction between the Petersburg *Intelligencer* and the Norfolk *Herald*’s reports can be easily reconciled by realizing that they were not necessarily describing the same moment. In the neighborhood of the rebellion, people may have wanted to torture and lynch Turner even as the authorities in Jerusalem made sure that that did not happen when he was put into their custody. Many things can explain the different responses, but the distinction between the official responses and those of the public is consistent with my argument about official efforts to push the response into the legal arena, where the leaders of society could control it more easily.

gratifying their curiosity.” As much as they hoped they would understand by looking on the countenance of the “dejected, emaciated and ragged” rebel leader, people were even more interested to hear what he had to say about the revolt.²²

From the beginning, whites found that Nat Turner was willing to talk about the revolt. A letter from a white who said that he knew Turner “well,” noted that Turner seemed “willing to answer any questions.” The Norfolk and Portsmouth *Herald* also reported that Turner was “very free in his confessions.” Another letter—published in the Richmond *Enquirer*—described Turner’s testimony as “voluntary,” and another letter noted, “he seems quite communicative about the rebellion.”²³

Thomas R. Gray, who had served as a defense attorney in the trials of five other accused rebels, noticed Turner’s willingness to speak about the revolt. Wanting to hear Turner’s unique perspective on the revolt, Gray asked Turner for a more extensive interview, perhaps suggesting the publication of Turner’s account. According to the *Confessions*, on Monday evening, 31 October, Turner agreed to Gray’s request. On Tuesday, 1 November, Gray, having secured the permission of the jailor, began an extended interview that would eventually result in the most famous account of the revolt.

According to the *Confessions*, after Gray arrived at Turner’s jail cell on 1 November, Turner began the interview “without being questioned at all.” Turner began a narrative that described his life from his childhood until the instant when Turner announced, “I am here loaded with chains, and willing to suffer the fate that awaits me.” Gray never explained how he made

²² T. Trezevant, to Messrs. Shields and Ashburn, Norfolk *American Beacon*, 2 November 1831, in Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 133; Norfolk *Herald*, 2 November 1831; Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 136; Richmond *Enquirer*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 133; Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 4 November 1831, in Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 136.

²³ Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 7 November 1831; Norfolk *Herald*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 134; Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, 15 November 1831, in Tragle, 138, 139, 137.

his notes, although he did state that he had written Turner's testimony with "with little or no variation, from his own words." A contemporary letter—perhaps written by Gray—likewise notes that "a gentleman is engaged in taking them [Turner's words] down verbatim."²⁴

Although people had accepted the early reports suggesting the authenticity of the *Confessions*, for the last fifty years historians have been wary of accepting the authenticity of the *Confessions* written down by an unsympathetic white lawyer. In 1966, Herbert Aptheker entitled his book on the revolt including the *Confessions*, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion Together With the Full Text of the So-Called 'Confessions' of Nat Turner Made in Prison in 1831*. In 1971, Seymour Gross and Eileen Bender make the argument implicit in Aptheker's title explicit. They argue that Gray was "anything but a blank-faced screever; that he was, on the contrary a shrewd man who knew precisely what he was doing and why." They suggest that Gray's use of sinister language was part of an attempt "to depict Turner as a possessed, deluded, religious maniac..."²⁵

²⁴ Gray, 7, 18, 4. In this chapter, when I describe Turner's narrative, story or account, I refer to the five-thousand-word section of Gray's *Confessions* told from Turner's perspective. I refer to the pamphlet as the *Confessions*. On the identity of the author of the longest letter in the Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, which was also printed in the Richmond *Compiler*, Daniel Fabricant points to strong similarities in language between the letter and the points in the *Confessions* where Gray wrote in his own voice and concludes that it is "extremely likely that Gray was the author of the letter." In contrast, David F. Allmindinger, Jr. identifies this author as William C. Parker, and Scot French describes the author as "an anonymous Southampton County correspondent." Allmindinger guesses that it was Parker because the author referred to Gray anonymously as "a gentleman." French implicitly precludes the possibility that this was Gray because (i) French identifies the correspondent as a magistrate (although the letter stated, "I heard him [Turner] examined by the magistrates") and (ii) French finds the content of the letter inconsistent with Gray's account. In fact, French concludes, "The magistrate's summary, as published in the *Compiler*, suggests that the style—if not the content—of Turner's 'confessions' might have differed dramatically had another author taken them down." I believe Fabricant's identification of the author more compelling than Allmindinger and French's, but if Allmindinger or French is right that this letter was written by someone other than Gray, French's reading of the letter—that it somehow implied Gray's active manipulation of Turner's testimony—misreads the evidence. If this letter were written by someone other than Gray, the independent statement that Gray "is engaged in taking them [Turner's words] down verbatim from his [Turner's] own lips" becomes the strongest piece of evidence that Gray wrote, as he said he did, Turner's "own words." See Fabricant, 344-345, quote on 355; French, 47.

²⁵ Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion Together With the Full Text of the So-Called 'Confessions of Nat Turner Made in Prison in 1831* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966); Seymour L. Gross and Eileen Bender, "History, Politics and Literature: The Myth of Nat Turner," *American Quarterly* 23 (October 1971): 487-518, quotes on 492, 493. The serious questioning of the reliability of Gray's manuscript also followed the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Since Styron relied heavily upon the *Confessions* in his controversial novel, some who wanted to undermine the historical foundation of the novel may have attacked Gray's *Confession* as a way to debunk Styron's *Confessions*. On the controversy over Styron's book, see Albert Stone, *The*

Gray certainly saw Turner as a “religious maniac,” but that does not suggest that Gray invented Turner’s religiosity. All the sources that describe Turner’s confessed motivation—including the trial records and a letter dismissive of Turner’s testimony and thus certainly not composed by Gray—agree that Turner described himself as a deeply religious figure. No doubt, Gray agreed with the rest of Southampton’s white population that Turner was a “fanatic preacher,” as one of the earliest letters from Southampton reported, but that does not imply that Gray misrepresented Turner’s testimony.²⁶

More significantly for an analysis of Turner’s account, Gross and Bender argue that some of the language was anachronistic or inconsistent with other parts of the *Confessions*. At least one contemporary reviewer had made similar critique: “The language is far superior to what Nat Turner could have employed.” The historian Scot French implicitly agrees that Gray took liberties with the *Confessions*, suggesting that “the style—if not the content—of Turner’s ‘confessions’ might have differed dramatically had another author taken them down.”

Although this type of close textual argument has been used to attack the reliability of the *Confessions*, a similar reading also can be used to support the idea that Gray preserved parts of Turner’s testimony, even some of Turner’s choice of words. For example, people disagreed about how to describe the place where Turner had been captured. Some called it “a cave,” others “a hole,” others still “a den.” Gray called the place “a cave.” In contrast, Turner said that he was captured “in a little hole I had dug out with my sword.”²⁷ The distance between Turner and Gray

Return of Nat Turner: History, Literature and Politics in Sixties America (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992); Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); Kenneth S. Greenberg, “Nat Turner in Hollywood,” in Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003): 243-249.

²⁶ For the report of Turner as a “fanatic preacher,” see Richmond *Enquirer*, 30 August 1831, in Tragle, 44; Norfolk *Herald*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 134-135; Nat Turner’s Trial, in Tragle, 222.

²⁷ Gross and Bender, esp. 497; for the review of Gray’s *Confessions*, see Richmond *Enquirer*, 29 November 1831; French, 47; Gray: “cave,” 3, “hole,” 17. For other “cave:” see Norfolk *American Beacon*, 2 November 1831, in Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 132; Richmond *Enquirer*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 133;

that this small detail implied was reinforced by Gray's willingness to let Turner's testimony stand even when Gray did not believe the story that Turner told. For example, Gray included Turner's story about how, as a child, he had miraculously learned to read. Gray faithfully recorded this story even though he interpreted it as so much nonsense. To Gray, the explanation of Turner's literacy was simple: "it was taught him by his parents."²⁸

Because Gray's *Confessions* is the only document that purports to capture Turner's own voice, it is impossible to know how heavily Gray edited Turner's language. On the one hand, historians must keep in mind that Gray's "faithful record" of Turner's "own words," with "little or no variation" allowed Gray some leeway to amend silently Turner's testimony. On the other hand, historians should be wary of dismissing the authenticity of Turner's language in the *Confessions* on slight or ambiguous evidence. Jean Yellin has debunked similar arguments that denied Harriet Jacobs' authorship of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.²⁹

The idea that the five-thousand-word narrative at the heart of the *Confessions* was a reasonable transcript of what Turner said is supported by a careful attention to the *Confessions*. The statement was composed quickly. The first published version appeared less than a month after Nat Turner's capture. This makes it likely that Gray, as he stated, got his copyright on 10 November, less than two weeks after Turner's capture. The composition of the Gray's

Petersburg Intelligencer, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 135; Richmond *Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, (two different letters) in Tragle, 136, 138. For "den:" see Norfolk *Herald*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 134. Fabricant argues that the letter in the Richmond *Enquirer* was published by Gray. He points to several similarities in phrases but does not mention that both use the word "cave." See Fabricant, 344-345.

²⁸ Gray, Turner's story of how to read, 8, "taught him by his parents," 18.

²⁹ Gray, 4. The discussion of Harriet Jacobs is in Jean Fagan Yellin, "Text and Contexts of Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: Written By Herself" in *The Slave's Narrative* ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984): 262-82; and Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs, A Life: The Remarkable Adventures of the Woman Who Wrote Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, New York: Basic Books, 2004), esp. xv-xxi. For an example of someone questioning Harriet Jacobs' authorship, see John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 234. Gross and Bender also argue that the evidence that Gray marshaled to support the authenticity of the *Confessions* was excessive, suggesting that he invoked authorities in the publication of the *Confessions* to hide the liberties he took with Turner's testimony. This evidence can be interrupted the other way: Gray's ham-handed invocation of authority was a sincere attempt to validate an authentic confession.

Confessions was quick, but Nat Turner's narrative was composed even sooner. By the third day Gray visited Turner, probably Thursday, 3 November, Gray claimed to have transcribed a copy of Turner's narrative³⁰—something that I believe for reasons I explain below. As a result, Gray either wrote as Turner spoke or from notes immediately after leaving the jail cell.

At one point in the *Confessions*, Gray described how “during his [Turner's] statement, I had, unnoticed by him, taken some notes as to some particular circumstances.”³¹ How could Gray's note taking escape Turner's notice? If Gray were taking notes of Turner's testimony, the comment that he made unnoticed notes would be inconsequential. The statement makes more sense if Gray were writing a transcript of Turner's testimony or if he wrote no notes. Given the amount of new information recounted in the *Confessions*—one historian counts 116 new pieces of information in Turner's account of the revolt³²—one might infer that Gray transcribed Turner's account as Nat Turner spoke.

Other evidence suggests that Gray wrote as Turner spoke. Although Turner's testimony began as a soliloquy, Gray interrupted Turner's narrative sixteen times. Three times he interrupted the story to ask questions that Gray included in the *Confessions*. At other points, Gray asked unrecorded questions, and noted Turner's response parenthetically. For example, in the *Confessions*, Turner described interpreting the signs in the skies. According to Turner's narrative, the Holy Spirit “would make it known to me when I should commence the great work—and until the first sign appeared, I should conceal it from the knowledge of men—And on the appearance of the sign, (the eclipse of the sun last February) I should arise and prepare myself...” Since Gray described himself “having forborne” asking questions “except in the

³⁰ The publication of Gray's *Confessions* was noted in the *Richmond Enquirer*, 29 November 1831, and an early advertisement for it appeared in the *Washington Globe*, 22 November 1831; Gray, 18.

³¹ Gray, 18.

³² David F. Allmindinger, Jr., “The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,” in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 40.

cases noted in parenthesis,” it seems clear that when Turner mentioned “the sign,” Gray asked him, what sign?³³ Then Gray recorded Turner’s response, the February eclipse, in parenthesis.

Seven of the twelve parenthetical interruptions were comments of this kind: answers to unrecorded questions asked by an active listener trying to follow Turner’s story. Did Turner act as a conjurer to get the support of the other slaves? Who was the white man Turner baptized? What was the sign that allowed Turner to begin telling others about the revolt? Who were the four rebels in whom Turner “had the greatest confidence”? Where did the revolt begin? If fifteen slaves were part of the revolt, and the nine mounted men rode off, what did the other six do? Who were the last two slaves with Turner after the revolt ended? Gray apparently asked these questions—or something like them—to help him follow Turner’s confession.³⁴

Although he never explained himself, Gray also used parenthetical comments to make comments not in Turner’s voice. Twice Gray commented on something that Turner said. Gray noted on Turner’s head and chest “a parcel of excrescences which I believe are not uncommon, particularly among the negroes...” Gray also commented parenthetically that the rebels’ policy to kill the young, the old, and women was “invariably adhered to.” Three of the five comments by Gray occurred in the description of the battle at Parker’s place. When Turner stated that the whites fired from long range, Gray responded that such an action—which he did not deny—was “against the positive orders of Captain Alexander P. Peete.” When Turner mentioned some of the whites whom he thought the blacks had killed, Gray insisted that the rebels had not killed any whites during the battle. Finally, when Turner described how the whites at the gate had rallied

³³ Gray, 11, 18.

³⁴ The parenthetical comments from which I induce question are in Gray, 9, 11, 12, 13, 17.

with the Peete's men who had retreated to ambush the rebels, Gray explained that this was actually a new party from Jerusalem that knew nothing of the party led by Captain Peete.³⁵

Despite Gray's insistence that he wanted to let Turner tell his own story his own way, Gray was not willing to allow mistakes in Turner's narrative to stand. When Turner misrepresented what the whites had done, Gray corrected these mistakes with parenthetical comments. Few editorial decisions could be more fortunate for historians: since it seems unlikely that Gray would correct a narrative that he had already silently altered, by making the corrections parenthetically, one can see evidence that Gray let Turner's statements be published. Furthermore, if Gray published what he believed to be a seriously incomplete and flawed description of the events at Parker's farm, this provides support for Gray's contention that he was trying to publish Turner's recount "from his own words."³⁶ He apparently recognized the importance of Turner's narrative—even when Gray thought that it was flawed—and this decision increases one's confidence in Turner's amanuensis.

The twelve parenthetical comments—both Turner's short responses to Gray's questions for clarification and Gray's asides—were apparently written into the text as it was composed. On Thursday evening, 3 November, Gray began a cross-examination of Turner. According to the text, Gray commented that he was glad to have "the advantage of his [Turner's] statement before me in writing." In addition to Gray's reliability, there is reason to think that as Gray cross-examined Nat Turner, he had a written copy of Turner's narrative including all of the

³⁵ *Ibid.*, "excrescences," 7, "invariably adhered to," 12; on the encounter at Parker's, 15-16. David F. Allmindinger, Jr., a strong supporter of the authenticity of the *Confessions*, attacks the reliability of the "account of the skirmish at Parker's field, which Gray tried clumsily to present in the voice of Nat Turner. He failed to disguise the true perspective as that of a white man riding with the first party of volunteers." This reading seems to me insupportable. What made this section clumsy was Gray's constant interruptions and clarifications of Turner's story. If Gray had tried to hijack "the voice of Nat Turner," the section would have been far less "clumsy," and far less helpful to historians. See Allmindinger, "The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 32.

³⁶ Gray, 4.

parenthetical interruptions. In the course of the cross examination, Gray asked Turner about one extraordinary revelation: in his story, Nat Turner described doing many experiments, including some on the production of paper and gunpowder. It is hard to imagine two products whose production by slaves would be more likely to terrify southern whites. Gray asked him about these experiments. Turner's answers—which were not given—satisfied Gray to the extent that he commented in the *Confessions*' only footnote: "When questioned as to the manner of manufacturing these different articles, he was found well informed on the subject."³⁷ Why was this comment put in a footnote when other comments by Gray were put into parenthetical notes? My explanation is that, as Gray stated, he had already composed the text of the *Confessions*. Having no place on the handwritten page for a parenthetical comment, Gray added this comment in the margin.

The evidence that Turner's testimony was written quickly poses problems for the position, supported by the historian Kenneth S. Greenberg, that "Gray intentionally or inadvertently organized Turner's confession so that it confirmed his own interpretation of the rebellion." As David F. Allmindinger, Jr. argued in his vigorous defense of the veracity of the *Confessions*, Gray was able to maintain Turner's perspective throughout.³⁸ That may seem inconsequential, but most of the action on Monday takes places outside of Turner's sight. Turner traveled at the rear of the rebels—this was how he spotted Margaret Whitehead when the others could not see her—but this meant he missed much of the action. Nonetheless, the *Confessions* were consistent with Turner's limited perspective, instead of the stories that some have said that Gray wanted to tell.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18, 8.

³⁸ Kenneth S. Greenberg, "The Confessions of Nat Turner: Text and Context," intro. *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (Boston: Bedford Press, 1996), 9; David F. Allmindinger, Jr., "The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," in Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 40.

Kenneth S. Greenberg finds it “plausible” that one of the most important accounts of the revolt, the letter published in the Richmond *Constitutional Whig* on 26 September 1831, was by Gray and that he “later shaped the *Confessions* to conform to his earlier analysis.” But Gray did not make Turner’s account conform to the letter in the *Whig*. When one looks at the specifics in the letter, Gray left out important details. For an example, the letter to the *Whig* contained a description of the death of John T. Barrow, who “resisted [the rebels] manfully.” Even if Gray were not the author of this letter, he liked this story so much he included it in material he added at the end of the *Confessions*. Gray described how “John T. Baron . . . told his wife to make her escape, and scorning to fly, fell fighting on his own threshold.” But this flattering story of a fallen hero was omitted from Turner’s narrative. Why? The simplest explanation is that Gray was recording what Turner said and Turner had not witnessed Barrow’s death. Turner arrived at Barrow’s house after the other rebels had left. Turner discovered that “they had been here and murdered him [Barrow]. I pursued on their track to Capt. Newit Harris’.” In keeping with Turner’s limited perspective, other stories of escapes—of a girl at Levi Waller’s, of Harriet Whitehead and of Lavania Francis—were likewise excluded from the text. Gray, who was the attorney for reluctant rebel Jack and the star witness Moses, also excluded the interesting details from their stories.³⁹ In all of these cases, perspective trumped all other considerations, making Gray’s claims that he allowed Turner to speak “from his own words” that much more believable.

That Gray seems not to have corrupted Turner’s account, however, does not imply that Turner was entirely reliable. Turner himself may have told Gray things that were untrue. It would be foolhardy to assume that the leader of America’s most famous slave revolt would tell a

³⁹ Greenberg, “Text and Context,” 9-10; Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 96; Gray, 20. Gray certainly knew about the escapes because he included accounts in his commentary at the end of the Gray’s *Confessions*.

white lawyer everything he knew about the revolt.⁴⁰ Although nothing that Turner could say or do would alter the judgment of those who held his fate in their hands, Turner might have wanted to minimize the role of other blacks to shield them from white retribution. Furthermore, contemporary whites believed that Turner's "pretended prophecies" proved "his insanity."⁴¹ Historians should consider the possibility that the messianic rebel-leader was an unreliable reporter.

Listening to what Turner said, Turner's most antagonistic audience—Southampton's whites—concluded that Turner was a reliable narrator. This conclusion was doubtlessly aided by how Turner carried himself, but the whites were on their guard to make sure that they were not tricked by the leader of the revolt. One of the people who saw Turner on the day he was captured later listened to Turner's testimony. After hearing Turner speak for "more than an hour," this long-time neighbor admitted, "I am disposed to think [he] tells the truth." This disposition was not simply an act of faith. In this case, the writer noted that Turner's "account of the plot exactly corresponds with that of the other leading men who were apprehended."⁴²

The first correspondent's skeptical stance was typical. Whites in Southampton tended to accept Turner's story, but they reserved final judgment until after they cross-examined Turner

⁴⁰ Historians' debate about the reliability of the testimony of former slaves was heightened after the publication of Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974). See *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); John W. Blassingame, "Introduction," in his *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews and Autobiographies* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); and Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979). For a discussion of this topic with respect to Vesey's rebellion, see, Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 58 (2002): 948-949. In making his argument against believing the confessions of some of Denmark Vesey's accused allies, Johnson refers an 1819 case where two men in Vermont confessed to killing a man who was later found alive in New Jersey. For more theoretical discussions of some problems involved in interpreting confessions, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), esp. 38-39; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, v.1 trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1990), esp. 58-63; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), and Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confession: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁴¹ *Norfolk Herald*, 4 November 1831, in Tragle, 135.

⁴² *Richmond Constitutional Whig*, 7 November 1831

and fact-checked his account (using the things that the whites had learned about the revolt). For example, the first people to interview Turner in Jerusalem, the magistrates James Parker and James Trezvant, found that Turner answered “every question clearly and distinctly, and without confusion or prevarication.” Turner’s willingness to answer questions and his ability to do so precisely made him seem reliable, but it did not stop the two prominent men from engaging in “close examination.” For almost two hours, these two men quizzed the rebel leader. As two of the most active judges, Parker and Trezvant had a large fund of knowledge about the revolt, and what they heard from Turner did nothing to make them doubt his story. A letter in the *Richmond Enquirer* also noted that Turner seemed to answer “with great candour.” In this case, the correspondent had attended the interrogation by Trezvant and Parker, but he still had his own questions, especially on Turner’s prophetic pronouncements. Like the judges, the correspondent “examined him [Turner] closely,” although in this case the correspondent admitted that Turner’s pronouncements always “seemed to mystify.”⁴³

Like the other whites, Thomas R. Gray accepted Turner’s “free and full confessions;” unlike the other whites, Thomas Gray recorded some detail about the way that he cross-examined Turner. At the end of Turner’s narrative, Gray commented that he had asked Turner if the conspirators included anyone beyond the immediate neighborhood. Turner said no. Then Gray asked Turner about rumors of a slave revolt from Wilmington, North Carolina. The panicked reports of a slave revolt near Wilmington had subsided, but Gray—hundreds of miles away from Wilmington—was unsure if Turner had some better insight than the sporadic newspaper reports. Turner again said no, and as Gray paused, Turner commented, “I see sir, you

⁴³ [Norfolk] *American Beacon*, 2 November 1831, in *Richmond Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 132; *Richmond Enquirer*, 8 November 1831, in Tragle, 137.

doubt my word; but can you not think the same ideas, and strange appearances about this time in the heaven's [sic] might prompt others, as well as myself, to this undertaking."

Gray dropped the line of inquiry about Wilmington, but he continued questioning Turner's veracity. On Thursday evening, once Turner's narrative had been written and two days before Turner's trial, Gray took his draft of Turner's account, and began "a cross examination." Evidently, as has been discussed above, he asked Turner about the manufacture of paper and gunpowder, but Gray's questions were not limited to Turner's most astounding claim. Gray pored over the transcript and asked his interlocutor about everything he said. Gray concluded Turner's testimony was "corroborated by every circumstance coming within my own knowledge or the confessions of others whom [sic] had been killed or executed, and whom he had not seen nor had any knowledge since 22d of August last."⁴⁴ Gray compared Turner's account to things in his own knowledge, which—keeping in mind his parenthetical comments—included the events at Parker's farm, the evidence from the court cases he attended, and also the testimony of those killed without trial. Like a careful lawyer (or historian), Gray checked carefully before he concluded that Turner's testimony was true.

⁴⁴ Gray, 3, 18. Interestingly, this section of the *Confessions* contains a problem for those historians who want to argue that Gray authored the 26 September letter to the Richmond *Constitutional Whig*. David F. Allmindinger, who is the most methodical in trying to identify authors of published letters, asserts that Gray wrote the *Constitutional Whig* letter. In part based upon that identification, he insists that it was Gray who "ridiculed the notion of a general conspiracy from beginning to end." This assertion by Allmindinger does not square with those parts of the *Confessions* where Gray seriously doubts Turner's testimony about the local limits of the rebellion. Gray's serious suspicion that there might have been a general conspiracy implies that he did not write that letter.

One other piece of evidence, also discovered by David Allmindinger's careful research, also suggests that Thomas R. Gray did not write the letter to the Richmond *Constitutional Whig*. The letter to the *Whig* was dated 17 September 1831, but it seems that at the same time Thomas R. Gray may have been suffering from a serious illness, perhaps a version of the same disease that killed his father sometime between 6 and 19 September 1831. Allmindinger has found a doctor's bills for visits to a Thomas Gray for each day from 12 September 1831 to 20 September 1831. He argues that since Gray's father's will was probated on 19 September 1831, those visits were to attend to the son, the lawyer Thomas R. Gray. This inference also explains why Gray did not make any appearances in court in either Sussex or Southampton at any point in September after 6 September 1831. (In contrast, the author of the letter described being caught up with professional duties.) If Gray were ill enough to require the daily attendance of a physician—something I am not entirely convinced of—this illness reduces the likelihood that Gray authored the letter. See Richmond *Constitutional Whig* 26 September 1831, in Tragle, 94; Allmindinger, 33, 356, fn. 50. For an earlier identification of Gray as the author, see Henry Irving Tragle, "Styron and his Sources" in Tragle, 397-414, esp. 406-409.

On Saturday, Southampton County's court met to try the leader of the Southampton revolt. The usual bank of five judges was doubled and included six of the most active judges. (Alexander P. Peete was the only one of the most active judges not on the bench.) The panel included two judges—Thomas Pretlow and Richard Goodwyn—who had each heard multiple trials. The court also included two judges who had not sat on the bench for any of the earlier trials: Richard A. Urquhart and Samuel B. Hines. Both of the new judges fit the profiles one would expect for such a prominent case. The historian Daniel W. Crofts calls the Urquharts one of the “two wealthiest families in the county.” Richard Urquhart owned thirty slaves. The second new judge, Samuel Hines, was even richer. He owned forty-nine slaves. These changes did nothing to change the court's make-up from an institution that was dominated by a handful of the wealthiest members of society.⁴⁵

The prosecutor Meriwether Broadnax opened his case against Nat Turner by calling the state's star white witness, Levi Waller. (The state's star black witness, Moses, had already been sent to Richmond as the first step of his banishment from the state.) As Waller had done in earlier trials, he described the events that had happened on his farm. Consistent with the narrative in the *Confessions*, which had Turner arrive at Waller's farm late, Waller first mentioned Turner after the murders had ended and the rebels were drinking. Turner, who rode Dr. Musgrave's horse, “seemed to command the party.” As they left, Turner “gave command to the party to ‘go ahead’ when they left his [Waller's] house,” and he even ordered Peter Edward's Sam to leave with the rebels. (Sam's unwilling compliance with the command had also been noted in his own trial, but it had not earned him a reprieve.) One of the lawyers—with such an open-and-shut case it is impossible to know which one—asked Waller if he was sure that the

⁴⁵ Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 12; 1830 Census; Nat Turner Trial, in Tragle, 221-223. Tragle mistypes Thomas Pretlow's name. He writes, “Thomas Preston,” see Tragle, 221.

person that he saw in charge of the revolt was Turner. Waller swore “that he cannot be mistaken in the identity of the prisoner.”⁴⁶

After Waller’s testimony, James Trezvant took the stand. Trezvant and James Parker—both among the judges hearing Turner’s case—were the magistrates to whom Phipps brought Turner when he got to Jerusalem. Trezvant was called to recount Nat Turner’s testimony. At this point, the two accounts of the trial differ. In the *Confessions*, Gray wrote, “Col. Trezvant was then introduced, who being sworn, narrated Nat’s Confession to him, as follows: (*his Confession as given to Mr. Gray.*)” On the other hand, the court record noted things that Trezvant had said, but lacks any reference to Gray. This discrepancy leads Henry Irving Tragle to conclude, “there is no indication that the ‘Confession’ given to Thomas Gray was read in Court.” Kenneth S. Greenberg agrees that Gray’s “trial record was very likely his own creation.” Both men apparently disregard the affidavit—signed by six of the judges and certified by James Rochelle, the clerk of the court—that attested that “the confessions of Nat, to Thomas R. Gray, was read to him in our presence, and that Nat acknowledged the same to be full, free and voluntary; and that furthermore, when called upon by the presiding Magistrate of the Court, to say if he had any thing to say... [he] replied he had nothing further than he had communicated to Mr. Gray.”⁴⁷

Gray’s assertion that Turner’s own story had been read to the court deserves more credit. After all, it must be remembered that the court records were not transcripts of the trials, but

⁴⁶ Nat Turner Trial, in Tragle, 221-223; Gray, 20-21. David F. Allmindinger, Jr. shows that Moses had been “received into the penitentiary at Richmond on 30 October.” See Allmindinger, “The Construction of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*,” 40

⁴⁷ Nat Turner Trial, in Tragle, 221-223; Gray, 20-21, 5; Henry Irving Tragle, “Styron and His Sources,” in Tragle, 244; Kenneth S. Greenberg, “*The Confessions of Nat Turner*: Text and Context,” 13. Historians who are going to dismiss Gray’s assertions should grapple with some of the questions that follow such a situation. If Gray’s statements about the readings were lies, were the signatures also forged? This seems unlikely as only six out of ten of the judges signed the notice. If Gray were forging signatures to give his account the appearance of authority, would not he put all ten signatures? On the other hand, if the signatures were not forged, one must explain why six men would sign a document that contained nothing but an outright lie.

outlines as captured by the court's clerk. The absence of Gray's name in Turner's trial record does not mean that Gray's name was not mentioned, but that if it were mentioned, the clerk Rochelle did not deem it worth noting in a short synopsis (fewer than two hundred words) of Trezvant's lengthy testimony. Trezvant's testimony began with those details most relevant to the trial: he described how Turner had freely confessed, "he was one of the insurgents engaged in the late insurrection, and the Chief among them." Trezvant recounted how Turner struck the first blow of the revolt and how "he killed Peggy Whitehead." Trezvant also noted that Turner remained steadfastly committed to the revolt until the bitter end. These observations were the ones most relevant to the court, mostly likely the most relevant information culled from the almost two hour interview the magistrates had with Turner on 31 October 1831.

According to the trial records, at this point, Trezvant narrated "a long account of the motives which lead [sic] him [Turner] finally to commence the bloody scenes which took place." The rest of the court record of Trezvant's testimony described Turner's ability to interpret omens, to cure diseases, and to communicate directly with God. What was the source of this information? It could have been Trezvant's own recollection of Turner's examination. Another possibility is that, as Gray suggested, Trezvant read Gray's handwritten text of Turner's testimony. If—as I argue above—Gray had already composed Turner's five-thousand-word narrative by Thursday night, then that would be available for Trezvant to read to the court, just as Gray described. Gray's version of Turner's story would certainly qualify as "a long account," taking perhaps a half an hour to read. It would also supply all the details Rochelle included in his testimony, with one exception: Rochelle wrote that Turner "had in this manner effected a

cure upon one of his comrades,” while Gray’s *Confessions* described Turner curing a white man.⁴⁸

One might ask, why would not Gray narrate Turner’s account? Of course, that question can easily be extended: why did not Broadnax call Turner himself to the stand? According to the code of southern honor, whites believed that the most powerful men were the most credible. In other words, a slave’s story recounted by a powerful man was more reliable than the original story itself. Likewise, the confession of the most famous slave rebel, taken down by an impoverished young man striving to join the elite, was more reliable once it had been recounted by Southampton’s most accomplished politician. Others could have read Turner’s testimony, but only Trezvant’s prestige endowed the tale told by a slave with the imprimatur of someone of national importance.⁴⁹

At the end of his testimony, Trezvant returned to the bench. The ten justices found Turner guilty. Gray recorded the moment in detail. “Jeremiah Cobb, Esq. Chairman, pronounced the sentence of the court in the following words: ‘Nat Turner! Stand up. Have you any thing to say why the sentence of death should not be pronounced against you? Ans. I have not. I have made a full confession to Mr. Gray, and I have nothing more to say.’” While Gray’s quotes have been attacked as self-interested, Rochelle’s court record was remarkably similar.

After Turner was found guilty, he was asked if he had anything to say for himself before the

⁴⁸ Gray, 20-21; Nat Turner Trial, in Tragle, 221-223. Rochelle may have mistakenly called Etheldred T. Brantley “a comrade” as he tried to summarize in a hundred words the five-thousand-word account that he heard read once.

⁴⁹ More clearly than anyone else, Kenneth S. Greenberg discusses the importance of prestige and honor in the creation of accepted truth in the old south. See his *Honor and Slavery: Lies, Duels, Noses, Masks, Dressing as a Woman, Gifts, Strangers, Humanitarianism, Death, Slave Rebellions, The Proslavery Argument, Baseball, Hunting, Gambling in the Old South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), esp. 3-50. More broadly on southern honor, see, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

One oral account describes Turner fielding a judge’s questions at his trial. Thomas Pretlow’s granddaughter described how her grandfather had asked Turner “What was it that led you to start your insurrection—was not your master kind to you?” I think this line of questions more likely to have happened when Turner was first questioned, not during the trials. This account of “Mrs. White of Franklin” is in Peter Rodgers Brown, “The Theology of Nat Turner as Reflected in the Insurrection,” M.S.T. (Oberlin, 1949), 113.

sentencing. Rochelle noted that “he said nothing but what he had before said.” This statement—recorded independently by a harried clerk and a poor lawyer—is the best evidence that historians have that Turner did not dispute how the whites handled his testimony.

The trial ended exactly as everyone knew it would end: Turner was sentenced to death. According to Gray, Jeremiah Cobb gave a short speech blaming Turner entirely for the revolt. Cobb ordered Turner back to the Southampton jail. From there, he ordered Turner to be taken “to the place of execution, and on Friday next, between the hours of 10 A.M and 2 P.M. be hung by the neck until you are dead! dead! dead and may the Lord have mercy upon your soul.” Although Rochelle omitted the dramatic speech, he recorded the same judgment with one exception. According to his account, Turner was sentenced to be hung between ten o’clock in the forenoon and four o’clock in the afternoon.” Turner was valued \$375, which was payable to the estate of Putnam Moore, his young owner who had died along with the rest of his family at the first home visited by the rebels. Turner’s attorney, William Parker, was granted the proscribed ten-dollar fee for his perfunctory defense.⁵⁰

After six days in jail, Turner went out to the place of execution, a tree where the other rebels had been hanged. One newspaper reported that as he went to his death, “*General Nat* sold his body for dissection...” This early report that Turner’s body was dissected is something that most historians have accepted. This conclusion also makes sense given the medical demand for cadavers, including from Virginia’s new medical school at the University of Virginia. One historian has found that “blacks served most of the needs of Virginia’s medical community for

⁵⁰ Gray, 20-21; Nat Turner Trial, in Tragle, 221-223.

autopsy and dissection cadavers,” and it seems likely that Turner’s body was among those turned over to doctors.⁵¹

The idea that Turner’s body was used for science has made historians consider the stories—saved prominently in the oral histories—that Turner’s body was also desecrated. Like other historians, John Cromwell accepted that Turner’s body had been given over to science, but he also noted that Turner “was skinned to supply such souvenirs as purses... and his bones divided as trophies to be handed down as heirlooms.” Although the only two sources that describe Turner’s death omit references to such gruesome treatment of Turner’s corpse, references to items purportedly made from the remains of Nat Turner have surfaced repeatedly in the last hundred years.⁵²

The most problematic part of the earliest report of the execution is the statement that Turner sold his body “for ginger cakes.” Almost immediately, this notice drew criticism. Thinking “a slave cannot make a bargain or own anything,” William Lloyd Garrison rejected the

⁵¹ Norfolk *Herald*, 14 November 1831. (Tragle quoted this notice, although he changed “in” and left out the author’s italics. See Tragle, 140.) For an early example of a historian who accepted the story of Turner’s body being used by science, see Drewry, who reports that Turner’s “body was delivered to the doctors, who skinned it and made grease of the flesh. His skeleton was for many years in the possession of Dr. Massenberg...”¹⁰². More recently, Kenneth S. Greenberg has accepted that Turner’s body was “likely” dissected after Turner died. See Greenberg, “Name, Face, Body,” in Greenberg, ed. *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory* (New York: Oxford, University Press, 2003), 18.

For discussion of the relationship between the medical community and Virginia’s blacks, see Todd Savitt, *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) 290; Phillip J. Schwarz, “‘A Sense of Their Own Power’: Self Determination in Recent Writings on Black Virginians,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 97 (1989): 279-310. For a contemporary discussion of grave robbing, see Richmond *Constitutional Whig*, 2 March 1832. (This information I interpret as background to the medical demand for cadavers; I do not imply that Turner’s cadaver was sent to Charlottesville.)

Interestingly, twenty years after Turner’s rebellion, a grave robbing organization had been established in Norfolk. Lewis W. Minor, a doctor at the Norfolk Naval Yard Hospital, arranged for Thomas White to steal recently buried cadavers and send them in barrels (packed with bran) to Charlottesville. The criminal activity was uncovered when the barrel holding the corpse of a free black man, Daniel Stubbs, was improperly addressed. See Tommy L. Bogger, *Free Blacks in Norfolk Virginia, 1790-1860: The Darker Side of Freedom* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), 129-131.

⁵² John Cromwell, “The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” *Journal of Negro History* 5 (1920): 218. For a discussion of Nat Turner’s remains, see Kenneth S. Greenberg, “Name, Face, Body,” in Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, 18-22; and Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave* 278-282.

report that Turner sold the rights to dissect his body. The historian Kenneth S. Greenberg adopts a similar stance when he asserts, “the report that Turner sold his body for ‘ginger cakes’ is certainly false.” While the correspondent mentioning the ginger cakes, whose letter was published just days after Turner’s execution had no affection for the man he called “[t]his wretched culprit,” the reporter also described the bravery of Turner as he faced his death. Since the correspondent reported this type of flattering detail about Turner’s death, one should consider the possibility that this report about selling his body was true.⁵³

The context of the report that Turner sold his body makes the story more believable. Ten days before Turner’s capture, Thomas Ritchie, the editor of the Richmond *Enquirer*, attacked an account of Gabriel’s Rebellion printed in Albany *Evening Journal* that Ritchie called “a vile tissue of fabrications.” Among other mistakes, the Albany article claimed that the slave rebel Gabriel had been drawn-and-quartered. Exasperated with this history, Ritchie had gone to the official papers of the Commonwealth to prove that the Albany *Evening Journal* was wrong. Virginians had hanged Gabriel. The unknown author of the report on Turner’s death had read Ritchie’s rebuttal and saw his report on Turner’s death as an opportunity to add his mite to this attack on a northern antislavery “libeller.” In the parenthetical comment where the comment about Turner selling his remains appeared, the man who recounted Turner’s death noted that whites were humane executioners. He pointed out to “the Albany biographer of Negro cut-

⁵³ William Lloyd Garrison, quoted in Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave*, 278 Greenberg, “Name, Face, Body,” 19; Norfolk *Herald*, 14 November 1831. Garrison’s premise coincides well with the principle of slavery, but does not coincide with what historians have learned about how slavery was practiced in the south. For the clearest discussion of the negotiations associated with slavery, see Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage, 1974). Greenberg rejects the report about Turner’s selling his body as “likely just another way to humiliate and dishonor the slave rebel.” If this author was willing to make up information to dishonor Turner, one must ask why he was willing to describe Turner as someone—like the “free and honorable gentlemen, unlike the slaves they governed”—who was “not afraid to die.” Greenberg’s insistence that white men of honor wanted to make slaves look like cowards makes this report to the contrary, which unambiguously described Turner as someone who clearly had a “mastery over the fear of death,” appear more believable. For a discussion of the importance of the ways of facing death, see Kenneth S. Greenberg: *Honor and Slavery*, 87-114, quotes, 88.

throats,” that Turner was hanged, not quartered. The author of the report on Turner’s death then conceded one point: “He [the editor of the Albany *Evening Journal*] may say, however, that *General* Nat sold his body for dissection, and spent the money in ginger cakes.” Although the italicized “*General*” mocked Turner, the observation did establish a limit for what whites would do to an executed rebel. Since the point of the comment was to dispute a story about white mistreatment of rebels, the concession that whites bought and dissected Turner’s body should not be dismissed out of hand.⁵⁴

Two accounts of Nat Turner’s execution were published at the time of Turner’s death, one in the Norfolk *Herald* and one in the Petersburg *Intelligencer*. The two reports differed about the time of the execution: the *Herald* wrote that Turner died “[p]recisely at 12 o’clock;” according to the story heard by the editor of the Petersburg *Intelligencer*, Turner died at “about 1 o’clock.” They also disagreed about the size of the crowd: the *Herald* reported, “There were but a few people there to see him hanged;” the *Intelligencer* noted that there was an “immense crowd assembled on the occasion.” Despite the differences, both accounts agreed that Turner retained his poise: The *Herald* observed, “He betrayed no emotion;” the *Intelligencer* agreed, “He exhibited the utmost composure throughout the whole ceremony.” At Turner’s last moment, the *Intelligencer* reported that he refused the chance to speak and “told the Sheriff in a firm voice, that he was ready.” The *Herald* added that Turner “even hurried the executioner in the performance of his duty.” On 11 November 1831, Nat Turner died.⁵⁵

The identity of those who saw Nat Turner die will remain a mystery, but one interested party was not in the audience. Thomas R. Gray had already taken the manuscript of the *Confessions* and left Southampton with the hope of publishing his manuscript. In the days after

⁵⁴ Norfolk *Herald*, 14 November 1831; Richmond *Enquirer*, 21 October 1831, in Tragle 124-131.

⁵⁵ Norfolk *Herald*, 14 November 1831; Petersburg *Intelligencer*, 15 November 1831, both quoted in French, *The Rebellious Slave*, 50. French characterized the two accounts as “sharply divergent.”

Turner's trial, Gray wrote significant material that he added to the kernel of Turner's testimony. Gray included (i) an introduction, (ii) an affidavit signed by six of the judges and certified by the clerk of the courts, (iii) an afterward that described some of Gray's conversations with Turner and also told the stories of some of the people who escaped the rebels, (iv) Gray's own account of the trial, (v) a list of the whites who had died, and (vi) a list of the sentences of slaves who had been tried. This material was apparently compiled within a few days of Turner's trial. Five days after the trial, the day before Turner's execution, Gray appeared in Washington D.C. He registered the title of the *Confessions* with the clerk of the court in the nation's capital.⁵⁶

By establishing copyright immediately, Thomas R. Gray signaled his primary goal in compiling the *Confessions*: Gray hoped for a windfall. His financial situation was precarious, and, in November of 1831, he was desperate for a payoff. As the scion of a wealthy Southampton family, Gray had been established in the 1820s with the things one needed to become a successful planter. He was given slaves and in 1821, his father had given him his own four hundred acre farm. By 1827, Gray had eight horses and paid taxes on twenty-three slaves over the age of twelve. Confident of his success, he even became a justice of the peace. The young planter's prospects may have seemed bright, but by 1831 fortune's wheel had spun. Gray sold his land and slaves, resigned his commission as a magistrate, and began working as a lawyer. The revolt may have seemed fortuitous, providing for the young lawyer five easy cases that paid cash, but the trials had not been long underway when Gray suffered another financial setback. His father died.⁵⁷

In September 1831, Thomas Gray, the father, contracted whatever illness it was that killed at least nine elderly residents of Southampton. Aware of approaching death, Thomas Gray

⁵⁶ Gray, 2.

⁵⁷ Parramore, 105-107, and fn. 250-251; Allmindinger 26-27; Southampton County Legislative Petitions, 16 December 1811. Thomas C. Parramore was the first to show that Thomas R. Gray was the son of Thomas Gray.

wrote his will on 6 September 1831. Gray knew about his namesake's financial problems, and he realized that anything he gave to his son would likely be sold to pay off his son's outstanding debts. To avoid that, Thomas Gray decided to disinherit his son. By disinheriting his son, the father made his estate inaccessible to either Thomas R. Gray or his creditors. At the same time, Thomas Gray did not want his other children, Edwin and Ann, to inherit Thomas R. Gray's patrimony. The sick father saw one way out of his conundrum: Thomas Gray bequeathed one third of his estate to Ellen Douglas Gray, Thomas R. Gray's only daughter and Thomas Gray's granddaughter.⁵⁸

This clever ploy preserved the Gray family estate, but it meant that after Thomas Gray's death, Thomas R. Gray's financial problems became harder to resolve. The son was still in debt—except for one that his father had secured and was paid off in the estate—and the son had lost the prospect of relief, either from a living father or from an inheritance. If he was going to make it out of debt, he was going to have to do it himself. Hearing the newly captured Turner recount his amazing story, Gray envisioned the type of financial success that would allow him to pay off his debts and reestablish himself at the top of Southampton's society. Copyright was key to this because without copyright, newspapers would be able to publish the account, undermining sales of the short pamphlets. Thus it was no surprise that Gray appeared in Washington D.C. five days after Turner's trial, with a manuscript in hand, to establish an exclusive legal right to the *Confessions*. Once he had registered his copyright, Gray traveled to the region's biggest city, Baltimore, to find a publisher. In Baltimore, he engaged the firm of Lucas and Deaver to print

⁵⁸ Thomas C. Parramore was also the first to note that Thomas R. Gray had been disinherited by a father who died in the weeks after the rebellion. His research into the Gray family has been tremendously important for the understanding of the *Confessions*, but I disagree with his interpretation in one way: Parramore argues that Thomas Gray disinherited his son "in order to spite his son." This seems unlikely, especially since Thomas Gray appointed Thomas R. Gray his executor. See Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia*, 105-107, "spite," on 105; Draft of the Will of Thomas Gray, in Cocke Family Papers, UVA.

an unknown number of copies of the *Confessions*. By the end of November, just weeks after Turner's execution, the *Confessions* was published. Turner's story was saved for future generations.

CHAPTER 12

CHRISTIAN VOICES

Thirty years after Nat Turner's Revolt, another crisis forced Southampton's deeply divided political community to fall into line under the leadership of the county's elite. During the secession crisis, Southampton "cast not a single vote against secession six weeks after the war started." Daniel W. Crofts notes, however, that this consensus was an anomaly; it stood in contrast to the county's "long tradition of disagreement among whites."¹ According to Crofts, this history of intense party politics emerged in the 1830s, but there is no evidence that the political fights he studies ever addressed the elite-dominated responses to Nat Turner's Revolt. The debate that implicitly questioned the tempered response, when it took place, occurred in county's churches.

Southampton's church history had roots extending to the tumultuous time of the English Civil War. During the seventeenth century, George Fox preached a radical new version of Christianity, and the Society of Friends—who their many enemies ridiculed as "Quakers"—were soon a target of persecution. Many Quakers left England, famously for Pennsylvania, as well as other English colonies. Southampton County became a focus, with its first meeting established even before George Fox's death in 1691. In the eighteenth century, tension developed as Virginia grew ever more dependent upon slavery and the Quakers grew increasingly uncomfortable with slavery. By 1776, Southampton's Black Creek Friends Meeting had renounced slaveholding. Revolutionary ideology contributed to the passage of Virginia's first

¹ Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834-1869* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), xi.

manumission law, and some of Southampton's Quakers were among the first to free their slaves. For example, in 1782—the same year that Virginia passed its first law allowing manumissions—Thomas Pretlow Sr., father of one of Nat Turner's judges, freed eighteen slaves.²

Quakers were not the only ones in Southampton to object to slavery. In 1774, a nineteen-year-old David Barrow began preaching at Southampton's newly established Black Creek Baptist Church. Although he owned two slaves in 1782, he came to the conclusion that slaveholding was “contrary to the laws of God and nature.” In 1784, he freed his slaves and encouraged his brethren to do the same. In 1786, the Black Creek Baptist Church, influenced by the example of its anti-slavery minister, declared slavery “Unrighteous.” What one historian calls “the clearest position any Virginia congregation would take in opposition to slavery in the Revolutionary era” led at least three church members to free their slaves over the winter of 1787-1788. David Barrow's antislavery extended beyond Southampton. In 1790, Barrow was in attendance when the General Committee of the Baptist Associations passed a resolution that “called slavery a ‘violent deprivation of the rights of nature’ and urged for Baptists to use ‘every legal measure, to extirpate the horrid evil from the land.’”³

² Crofts, 90-91; Stephen B. Weeks, *Southern Quakers and Slavery: A Study in Institutional History* Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, v. 15 (Baltimore, 1896), 84-85. For a description of the Quaker encounter with slavery in the north, see Jean R. Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

³ J. Stephen Kroll-Smith, “Transmitting a Revival Culture: The Organizing Dynamic of the Baptist Movement in Colonial Virginia, 1760-1777,” *Journal of Southern History* 50 (1984): 555, f. 20; David Barrow, ed. Carlos R. Allen, Jr., “David Barrow's Circular Letter of 1798,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 20 (1963): 445; Minute Book of Black Creek Baptist Church, 1774-1804, 24 November 1786, VBHS; Jewel L. Spangler, “Becoming Baptists: Conversion in Colonial and Early National Virginia,” *Journal of Southern History* 67 (2001): 259; Minutes of the General Committee, 1790, quoted in Charles F. Irons, “‘The Chief Cornerstone’: The Spiritual Foundations of Virginia's Slave Society, 1776-1861,” (Ph. D. University of Virginia, 2003), 85. For more on David Barrow, see also Vivien Sandlund, “A Devilish and Unnatural Usurpation’: Baptist Evangelical Ministers and Antislavery in the Early Nineteenth Century, A Study of the Ideas and Activism of David Barrow,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 13 (1994): 262-277; James David Essig, “A Very Wintery Season: Virginia Baptists and Slavery, 1785-1797,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 88 (1980): 170-185; and James D. Essig, *The Bonds of Wickedness: American Evangelicals Against Slavery, 1770-1808* (Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1982), 74-78.

The extraordinary antislavery activities of David Barrow, however, can easily obscure the tenacity of proslavery Christianity, even within the Black Creek Baptist Church. The pronouncement that slavery was “Unrighteous” followed extensive debate, and despite the church’s determination, more than a third of the members of Black Creek Baptist Church continued to own slaves during the 1780s and 1790s. In 1787, the antislavery contingent at the church forced another debate, this time on the propriety of hiring slaves. The antislavery forces lost this debate. By the early 1790s, the momentum of the opponents of slavery had been stopped. Frustrated at a church growing increasingly intransigent in its countenance of slavery and unable to muster a majority to use church discipline to punish the slaveholders, the opponents of slavery were reduced to protest. They decided to boycott communion—the moment when the entire church was supposed to come together—to make clear their belief that the slaveholders did not belong with them at the altar. In 1791, five members, including David Barrow’s wife, refused to attend Black Creek Baptist Church’s remembrance of the Lord’s Supper.⁴

Efforts to reinvigorate opposition to slavery at Black Creek Baptist Church failed. In 1798, David Barrow—who had preached at the church since its establishment and been at the heart of Black Creek Baptist Church’s antislavery movement—left Virginia. While Barrow continued his witness against slavery in Kentucky, the antislavery voices in Southampton grew quiet. After a quarter century of quiescence, however, another minister at Black Creek Baptist Church renewed the debate over slavery. Reverend Jonathan Lankford had been a member of Black Creek Baptist Church since at least 1802, so it is possible that he had known David

⁴ Spangler, 261; Crofts, 92; Parramore, *Southampton County*, 52-53. Spangler makes the point about the tenacity of proslavery religion even at Black Creek Baptist Church compellingly in her study. More broadly, Sylvia R. Frey looks at how in the post-revolutionary era, whites accepted a version of Christianity that was able to strengthen slavery. See Frey, *Water from the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), esp. 243-283.

Barrow. In 1816, Lankford was called to the church's pulpit. He served nine years with little sign of discord. Then, in December 1825, Jonathan Lankford shocked the church by announcing that he "could not, nor would not [sic] administer the ordinances of the Gospel to the church any longer—because a Part of the church were slave holders."⁵

Lankford continued to preach, but holding a communion service was out of the question in such a deeply divided church. Lankford was not willing to surrender the pulpit, but others in the church refused to believe that slaveholding was a sin that disqualified the slaveholders from church membership. The debate, which the secretary described as "lengthy but brotherly and affectionated," was one-sided: Lankford ended up not only losing his job as minister; a majority of the church decided to take Lankford's name off the church's roster. The church committee, headed by Carr Bowers, then wrote a report that found that Lankford had "yielded too much to the delusion of Satan."⁶ This church, which had a tradition of antislavery perhaps as strong as any other evangelical church in Virginia, had now made the church's position clear: antislavery actions were the work of the devil.

Immediately after the revolt, Black Creek Baptist Church responded like other churches near the site of the revolt. In September, the sacrament of communion was postponed indefinitely "in consequence of the unpleasant feeling The white Brethren have towards the black Brethren." In December 1831, after the court had finished its own examination into the slave revolt, the church struck a committee to undertake its own investigation of the blacks who

⁵ Minute Book of the Black Creek Baptist Church, 1818-1862, September 1827, VBHS. See also Parramore, *Southampton*, 62-64; Crofts, 92-93, Essig, 74-78.

⁶ Minute Book of the Black Creek Baptist Church, 1818-1862, September 1826, March 1826, September 1827, VBHS; Crofts, 92-93; Parramore, *Southampton*, 62-64. See also W. Harrison Daniel, "Virginia Baptists and the Negro in the Antebellum Era," *The Journal of Negro History* 56 (1971): 6. The clerk, Carr Bowers, added the two words "brotherly and" after he had composed the original draft of the minutes.

were a part of the church to see if they should be “restored to the privileges of the church.”⁷ For the next four months, the church examined its black members to determine who should be re-admitted to communion.

This was a moment when the church could dissent from the military and legal settlement reached by a relatively small number of men. Nothing could stop the whites in the church, a majority of whom were not slaveholders, from deciding to hold their black brethren to a higher standard of loyalty than the court had demanded. The court had refused to condemn a rebel; it had recommended mercy for several people who had actually been part of the revolt; it acquitted some who tried to join the revolt; and it refused to prosecute those tangentially involved in the revolt who had done things such as pass messages for the rebels. In contrast, the church could dismiss any slave who expressed the least resentment about slavery or sympathy for the revolt. In fact, the whites, had they been inclined, could have expelled all blacks from the church. The church did none of these things. Instead—following the cue of the court of oyer and terminer—every black member whom the church examined was brought back into fellowship.⁸

The church that had once been a beacon to antislavery decided to defer to Southampton’s elites. This decision was consistent with the expulsion of Jonathan Lankford in 1826. When Lankford argued that slavery was sinful, the congregation of Black Creek Baptist Church rejected its minister. Instead of heeding its minister’s rebuke, the church followed the leadership of prominent slaveholders. Interestingly, two future judges—Carr Bowers, who owned twenty-five slaves, and Benjamin Griffith, who owned eleven slaves—played critical roles the move to

⁷ Minute Book of Black Creek Church, 1818-1862, September 1831 – April 1832, VBHS. Raccoon Swamp Baptist Church, officially known as Antioch Baptist Church, was in the midst of a similar struggle. The accusations of Beck that the church had been a focus of revolutionary activity divided the church. Like Black Creek Baptist Church, Antioch Baptist met in October and decided, “In the present perplexed situation, it is thought best to forbear the Administration of the Lords Supper, till next May meeting.” They also examined the blacks, expelling William Archer, who had been jailed for his involvement “in the horrid Insurrection.” Other blacks were allowed to remain in the church. See Minute Book of Antioch Baptist Church, 1772-1837, October 1831, VBHS.

⁸ Minute Book of Black Creek Church, 1818-1862, January 1832 – April 1832, VBHS.

expel Jonathan Lankford. The men were the only permanent members of the committee struck to write a report on the Lankford incident. Presumably Carr Bowers, who would later be among the most active judges in the trials, had an especially important role: as the clerk, he composed the report that pronounced that “Satan” had sway over Lankford. Bowers was also the emissary the church sent to Robert T. Daniel to ask him if he would be willing to replace Lankford.⁹ Given the prominence of Bowers and Griffith in the church, it is not surprising that when the church responded to the revolt, it choose not to discipline its black members. Instead, it accepted that the judges in charge of Southampton’s official response had done enough.

At first, Mill Swamp Baptist Church’s response to the revolt was similar to Black Creek Baptist Church’s. In October, the whites at Mill Swamp Baptist Church decided to exclude all blacks from communion until the church made a formal decision to restore them to fellowship. This decision meant that blacks and whites would not worship in the same church, but it did not mean that blacks were barred from all church attendance. According to the church’s minutes, except on days of communion, when the entire church gathered together, blacks had their own segregated meetinghouse.¹⁰

⁹ 1830 Census; Minute Book of Black Creek Church, 1818-1862, March 1827, June 1827; September 1827; October 1826, VBHS. The committee initially included Bowers, Griffith and the new minister Robert T. Daniel. Daniel wisely begged off the committee that was writing the report that had expelled his predecessor and two church members replaced him. Daniel W. Crofts also notes the role played by Bowers in this episode. See Crofts, 93. Benjamin Griffith served as a judge on three trials and the evidentiary hearing for Arnold Artis. Griffith also was the tax collector in Nottoway Parish in the 1820s.

¹⁰ Minute Book of Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 1812-1840, 1 October 1831,. For the reference to the “coloured members” and “their meeting house” see 2 June 1832, Minute Book of Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 2 June 1832. A letter from Mill Swamp Baptist Church to the Portsmouth Association Minutes also noted “coloured persons are not permitted to attend our Regular Church Meetings.” Portsmouth Association Minutes, undated [1832?], 1801-1840, VBHS. For another example of racially divided churches in Virginia, see James Lindsay Smith’s *The Autobiography of James L. Smith...* (Norwich CN: 1881; available on-line, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/smithj/smithj.html> [28 June 1831], 31. Smith recalled how in his Northern Neck church, there were essentially two separate services under one roof: “The white people occupied the part next to the altar, while the colored people took the part assigned them next to the door, where they held a protracted meeting among themselves. Sometimes, while we were praying, the white people would be singing, and when we were singing they would be praying; each gave full vent to their feelings, yet there was no discord or interruption with the two services.” Smith escaped slavery in 1838.

In March 1832, when the question about the status of black church members was reopened, Josiah Holleman asked: “Is it expedient or right to allow slaves, Free negroes and mulattoes to hold meetings by themselves in the day or night?” The answer of the white members of Mill Swamp Baptist Church—that the black meetinghouse must be supervised—fit within a broad consensus that emerged in the white community after the Southampton revolt. State officials and Baptist associations agreed: blacks should not be allowed to preach to themselves unsupervised.¹¹

In the aftermath of a deadly slave revolt led by someone the whites saw as a religious fanatic, it is not surprising that whites agreed on the necessity of white supervision for a quasi-independent black church. The white consensus, however, was shattered when Mill Swamp Baptist Church turned to the subject of reintegration of its communion table. This question led to “considerable debate,” one that was held over the course of three separate quarterly meetings.¹² Explicitly, the debate was about black communicants; implicitly, this was the chance for some Southamptonites to challenge the official response, which some thought treated the blacks too mildly.

At the June 1832 quarterly meeting, the debate about black communicants at Mill Swamp Baptist Church was renewed. For the second quarterly meeting in a row, the church could not reach an agreement. Debate was postponed for another three months. Sketchy notes make it impossible to recreate the debate, but a note put into the June 1832 minutes suggested one line of argument used by those who wanted to excommunicate the blacks. Immediately after the

¹¹ Minute Book of Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 1812-1840, 2 March 1832, VBHS. For the Portsmouth Association’s prohibition of black preachers, see Portsmouth Association Minutes, 1801-1840, May 1832, VBHS. This recommendation was made by Mill Swamp Baptist Church and was adopted unanimously. The General Assembly passed a law against black preachers as the first part of an omnibus bill on slaves and free blacks. See *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia Begun and Held at the Capitol, in the City of Richmond, on Monday, the Fifth Day of December, 1831* (Richmond, 1832), 3.

¹² Minute Book of Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 1812-1840, 2 March 1832 including quote “considerable debate”; 2 June 1832; 31 August 1832, VBHS.

postponement of the debate on the question of the black members, Josiah Holleman asked for clarification on a question: “Is it disorderly for a member of the church, who knew a Felony being committed, to keep it to himself?” Given the context, it seems likely that Holleman—who had been among those who excluded blacks from the church in October and who had pushed to increase the supervision of the semi-autonomous black church—wanted a justification for expelling blacks from the church.¹³ His question implied a sin of omission: those slaves and free blacks who heard about the revolt and did nothing deserved to be kicked out of the church.

Holleman’s argument put his opponents, those willing to accept the type of resolution reached by the court of oyer and terminer, into a difficult spot. Holleman’s implicit analogy—that the blacks who did nothing during the revolt were morally in the same situation as the person who witnessed murder without trying to help—revealed one part of the black response to the revolt that the court of oyer and terminer willfully ignored. Slaves did not join the revolt in great numbers, but—with a handful of exceptions trumpeted by whites as signs of slaves’ loyalty—they did not rush to the aid of the whites. Holleman’s opponents understood the implications of Holleman’s question. Accepting this principle would essentially create an ideological litmus test of loyalty to the slaveholding regime that few blacks would pass. A strict adherence to this principle would devastate the black church within Mill Swamp Baptist Church. Understanding the implications of this question for the ongoing debate, the church postponed answering this question. This question would be answered only when the church figured out how it was going to handle its black communicants, something that did not happen until a year after the revolt.¹⁴

¹³ See Minute Book of Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 1812-1840, 2 June 1832, quote; on Holleman’s role in this debate 1 October 1831, 2 March 1832, VBHS.

¹⁴ Minute Book of Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 1812-1840, 2 June 1832, VBHS

The divisions in the church were ossifying. Immediately after the debate over the black members ended at the quarterly meeting in June 1832, the church decided to “dispense with Communion on next Sabbath.” Nothing in the church notes explained the reason for this, but it is not unreasonable to suppose that the dissent over the church’s black members made it impossible for the church to come together in communion in the full sense of the sacrament. In June 1832, the church appointed a five-man committee, including Josiah Holleman and, one would guess, some who represented those members who wanted to bring blacks back into communion, to “go into examination of their coloured members at their meeting house ... and adjourn to any other time and place they think it proper to do so.”¹⁵ Having full authority to investigate the black church members, this committee was ordered to report back to the church at the next quarterly meeting, where the debate would finally be settled.

On 31 August 1832, more than a year after the revolt, the people of Mill Swamp Baptist Church met to finish the fight about black communicants. The first question the church addressed was Josiah Holleman’s question about the responsibility of church members to report felonies. The church decided that God required more from Christians than the judges had demanded of the black people in Southampton. Church members had a responsibility to inform authorities about any crime underway. Accepting this rule, the church staked out a new position. While Virginia’s Baptist churches had a traditional antipathy to state power, some Baptist churches had held members responsible for obeying the law. Mill Swamp Baptist Church went a step farther in its alliance with the temporal authority. According to Mill Swamp Baptist Church, Christian responsibilities extended beyond obeying the law and included actively

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

supporting secular order.¹⁶ Moreover, given the context of this question, this responsibility did not only extend to citizens or whites, but to all church members, including those who were enslaved.

After Holleman's query had been answered, the committee that examined the black church members made its report. The church minutes did not record the substance of the report, but they did note that the report led to "much debate on the subject." That there was a debate suggests something about the committee's findings. Since some whites still argued against expelling the church's black members, one can infer that the church's examining committee did not discover a smoking gun—some sort of evidence that the black members had been active participants in the revolt. Likewise, since Holleman and his allies did not stop their effort to excommunicate the black members, one can infer that the church's examining committee did not find evidence that the black members had actively worked to help the authorities suppress the revolt. The church was split on how to handle the responses of the majority of slaves, who did not actively support the revolt, but did not actively oppose it either. Finally, the year-long debate came to a conclusion. At the end of the debate, the blacks were "retained as members." The attempt of Holleman and his allies to hold the church members at Mill Swamp Baptist Church to a more rigorous standard than the one used by the courts failed. The blacks were brought back into communion.

Holleman and his allies, while losing the debate, were able to extract one concession. Blacks, who had just been welcomed back to communion, were prohibited from joining the rest

¹⁶ Minute Book of Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 1812-1840, 31 August 1832, VBHS. For the revolutionary tradition of the Baptists segregating themselves from the world, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (New York: Norton, 1988; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982) and Donald Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), esp. 56-58. Peter Butler, who was censured by Black Creek Baptist Church in February 1778 for "Rejecting Civil Authority", is an example of a Southampton Baptist disciplined for not obeying the laws. See Spangler, 257.

of the congregation in the communion lines. Instead the resolution required “that the coloured members of this Church at all future lines of Communion, seat themselves in the part of the House that they now occupy” and that they would receive communion there.¹⁷ This resolution formalized the already segregated seating patterns at Mill Swamp Baptist Church and then extended them one step: henceforth the communion line itself was going to be segregated.

This resolution also specifically put an end to one subversive moment during the communion service. No longer would white ministers and deacons serve the slaves and free blacks. Instead, “the present Deacons [shall] carry the bread and the wine and deliver it to one or more of the Black members who shall distribute it to the balance.”¹⁸ The reasons for these Byzantine instructions were not given, but it seems as if the whites in the church did not want to give the blacks even a fleeting vision of whites serving blacks. By adopting these strict racial guidelines, the church’s white members tailored Mill Swamp Baptist Church’s communion service to fit their ideas of proper race relations.

Whether the new communion service was an appropriate way to remember the Last Supper is another question. On the night of the Last Supper, Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. He explained: “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.”¹⁹ Whites at Mill Swamp Baptist Church refused to abide by either the example of self-abnegation or the command of service as they recalled Jesus’ last meal. One of the problems was that Jesus’ words and actions may have seemed frightening in the aftermath of a slave revolt led by Nat Turner, who described his inspiration for the revolt entirely within a Christian framework. But a bigger problem with Jesus’ example was that it stood in the way of white fellowship. Insisting on full Christian fellowship for black church members would have

¹⁷ Minute Book of Mill Swamp Baptist Church, 1812-1840, 31 August 1832, VBHS.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John 13:14.

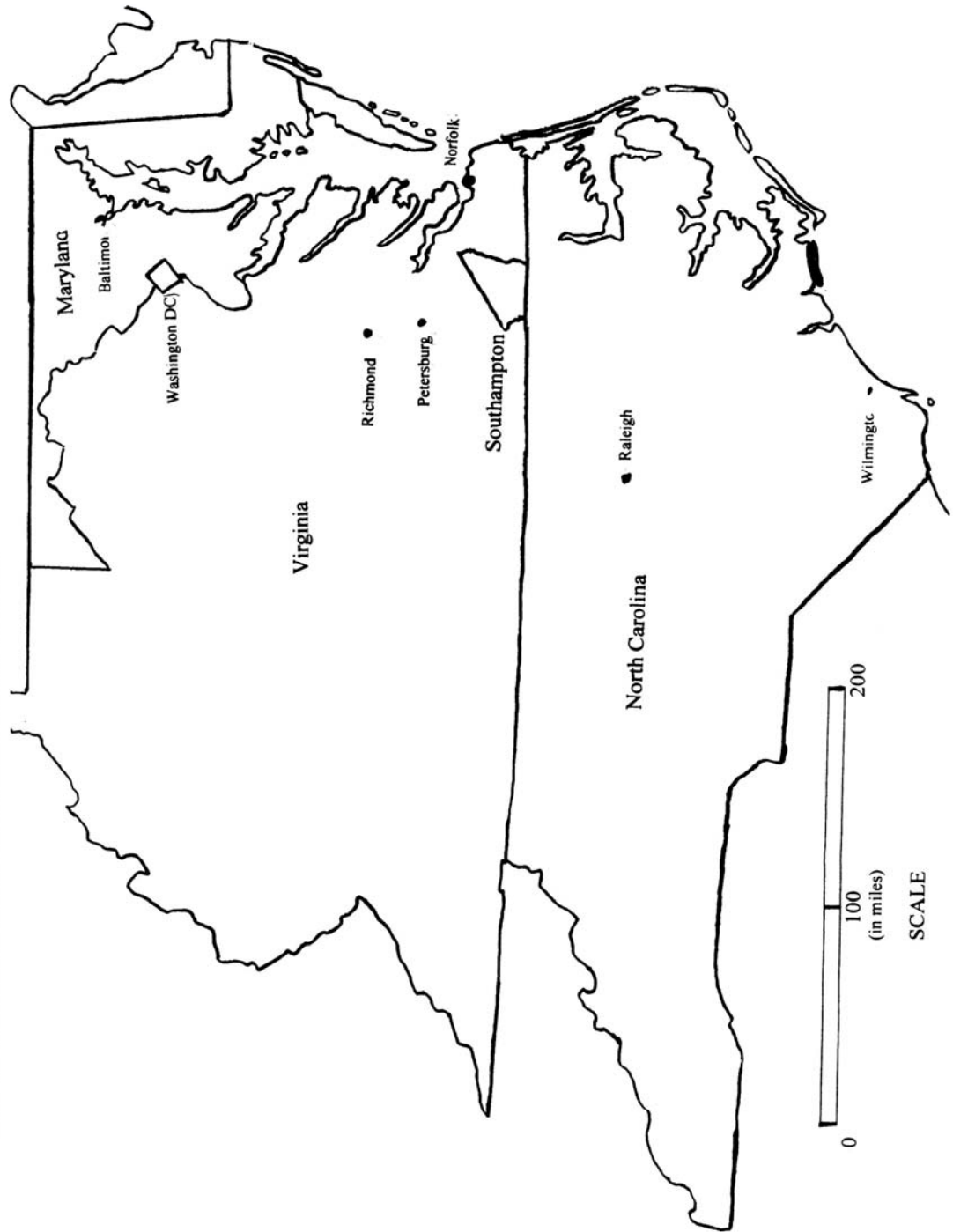
splintered the white church. Instead of destroying Mill Swamp Baptist Church on this issue, the whites settled on a racist compromise agreeable to the different factions among the church's white congregation but ultimately incompatible with Jesus' teaching.

The resolution of the debate at Mill Swamp Baptist Church marked the perfect completion of the hegemonic moment that occurred in Southampton in the aftermath of Nat Turner's Revolt. At the start of the revolt, the imbalance of power in Southampton was so great that the rebels were unable to tap a large mass of sympathetic allies. Instead the same slaves who Josiah Holleman rightly suspected of harboring sympathy for the rebels decided that the odds in the revolt were too long and that Nat Turner's Revolt was not worth the risk. Thus most slaves remained aloof from Nat Turner's call for vengeance and the rebellion was easily suppressed. The failure of the revolt clearly foreclosed the possibility of future radical resistance within Southampton County, and the power of the slaveholders over their slaves was only strengthened in the aftermath of the revolt. This power would not come into question again until another war—fought by much more evenly matched forces—would allow a much greater proportion of slaves to make a different calculation and support those fighting to destroy the slaveholders' power.

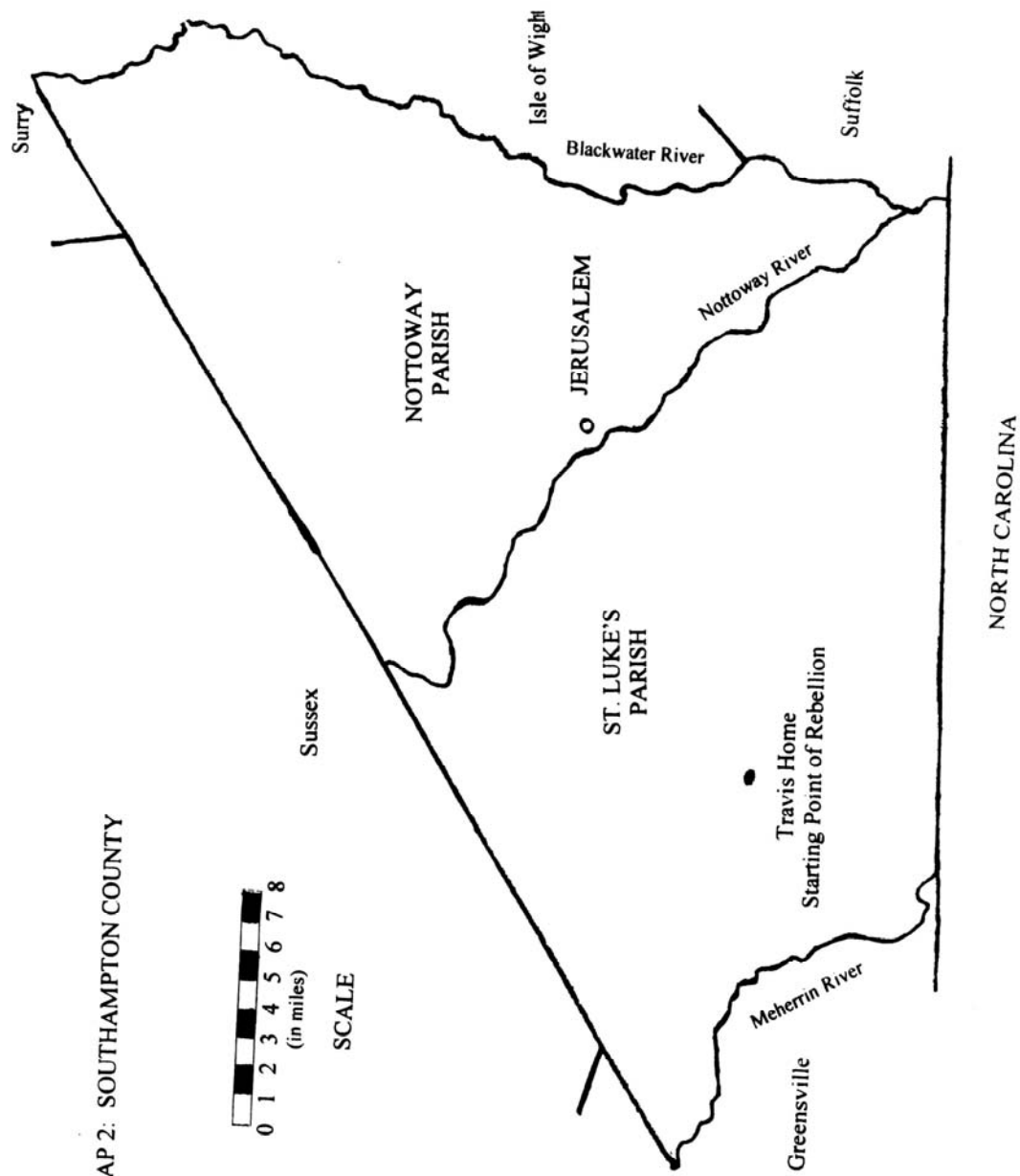
Holding important positions of leadership within Southampton, the wealthy slaveholders and their allies were also able to gain the support of most whites, including those non-slaveholders who had no direct stake in protecting the only type of property that could murder whites. At first, the leaders of Southampton imposed the rules for the white response by fiat, and many whites in Southampton County bristled at being denied the opportunity to strike out more

violently against slaves who threatened the lives of white people. Many whites were unhappy that they had been denied power, but—because the slaveholders and their allies dominated both the militia’s command structure and the court of oyer and terminer—there was little that the citizens could do to challenge the official response to the rebellion. The discontent felt by a large part of the white population soon faded. The drama of the thorough, formal trials and increasing confidence that the revolt had been an isolated anomaly led to the citizenry’s change of heart. Once the citizens of Southampton County accepted the idea that it was unnecessary for them to punish those slaves who stayed out of the rebellion but sympathized with Nat Turner, it was clear that the status quo of slavery would be maintained. For thirty years, this status quo would remain unquestioned. When a new crisis that threatened slavery itself did emerge in the Spring of 1861, one should not be surprised that the whites in Southampton County put aside their many differences and voluntarily joined together in support of the slaveholders, just as they had in the aftermath of Nat Turner’s Revolt.

MAP 1: VIRGINIA, NORTH CAROLINA AND MARYLAND



MAP 2: SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY



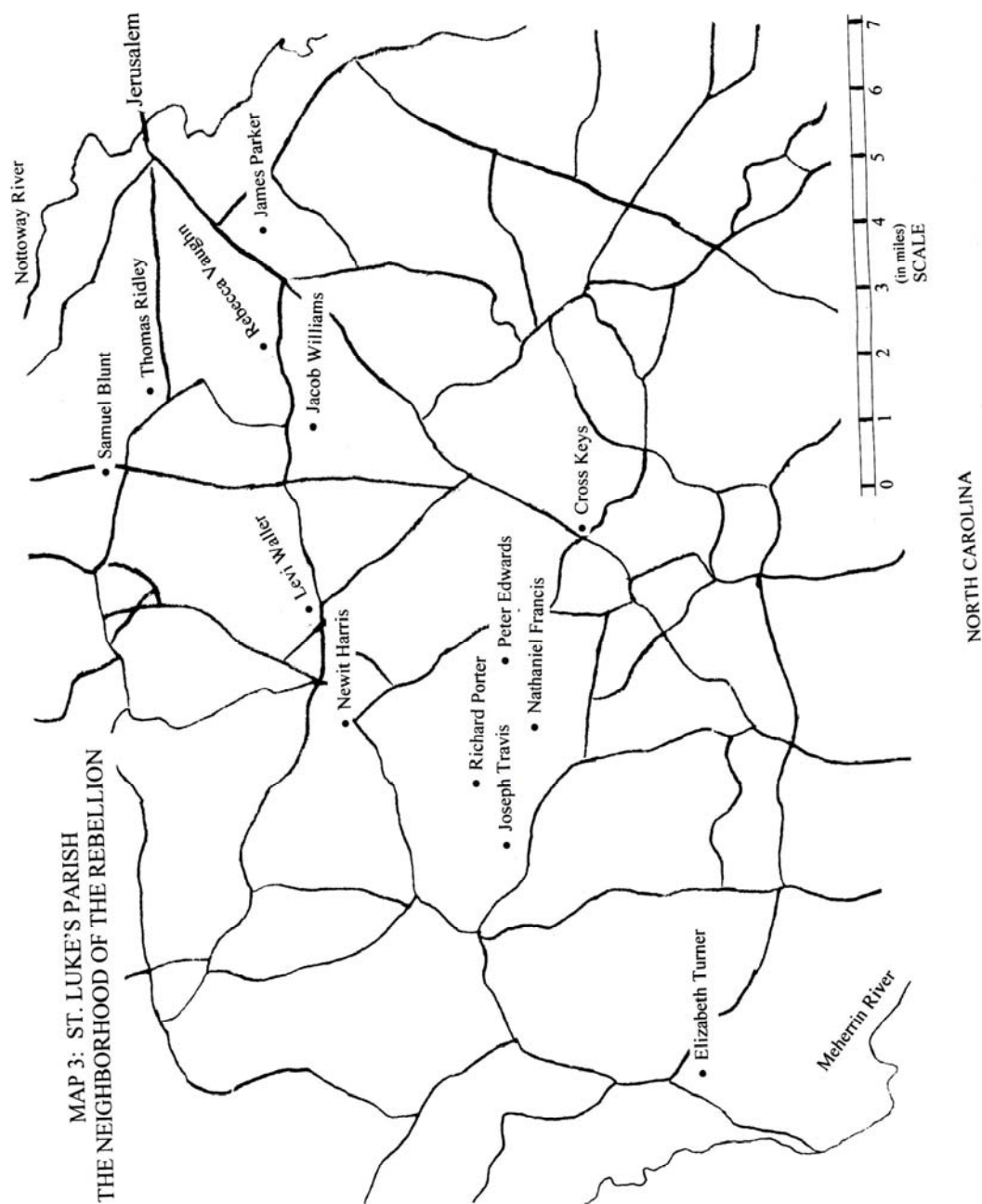


TABLE 1: SLAVE POPULATION OF SOUTHAMPTON COUNTY, 1824-1839

Slaves Over Twelve Years Old. From Southampton County Tax List

	St. Luke's Parish	Nottoway Parish	Total
1824	2476	1738	4214
1825	2501	1750	4251
1826	2446	1730	4176
1827	2507	1755	4262
1828	2464	1757	4221
1829	2468	1767	4235
1830	2439	1718	4157
1831	2444	1701	4145
1832	2337	1630	3967
1833	2264	1572	3836
1834	2254	1581	3835
1835	2260	1565	3825
1836	2270	1548	3818
1837	2085	1440	3525
1838	2153	1483	3636
1839	2123	1467	3590

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- Bremo Recess Papers
- Cabell Family papers
- Cocke Family Papers
- David Shaver Collection
- Edgehill-Randolph Family Papers
- Gilman Family Papers
- Letters from Ex-Slaves in Liberia
- Stuart-Baldwin Family Papers
- Tucker-Harrison Smith Family Papers
- Wallace Family Papers
- Webb-Prentis Collection
- Wickham Papers
- William Campbell Letter

Duke University Special Collections, Durham, NC

- James Iredell, Sr. and James Iredell, Jr. Family Papers
- John Heritage Bryan Papers
- John Richardson Kilby Papers
- William W. Renwick Papers

Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, VA

- Blow Family Papers
- Brown-Coalter Tucker Papers
- Jerdone Family Papers

Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

- American Colonization Records (manuscript and microfilm)
- Black History Collection
- James Henry Hammond Papers
- John Floyd Papers
- Miscellaneous Manuscript Collection—Alexander Macomb to Nathan Morse, 12 October 1831
- William Cabell Rives Family Papers

Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA

- Bryan Family Collection (microfilm)
- Francis Jerdone Papers (microfilm)
- John Floyd Letterbook
- William B. Walthall Autobiography (typescript)
- William Simpson Letterbook

North Carolina Archives and Department of History, Raleigh, NC

- William Bernard Harrell, "Recollections" (typescript)
- Benajah Nicholls Papers

Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

- Beale-Davis Family Papers
- Bryan & Leventhorpe Papers
- Bumpas Family Papers
- Crenshaw Miller Papers
- DeRosset Family Papers
- Elliot and Gonzales Papers
- Francis Ruffin Papers
- Haywood Family Papers
- Hubbard Family Papers
- James McDowell Papers
- John DeBerniere Hooper Papers
- John Kimberly Papers
- John Walker Papers
- Kenan Family Papers
- Langdon-Young-Mears Collection
- Lenoir Family Papers
- Michael Ferral Papers
- Miriam Cox Letter
- Mordecai Family Collection
- Moses Ashley Curtis Diary
- Nicholas P. Trist Papers
- Pettigrew Family Papers
- Sally Long Jarman Papers
- Screven Family Papers
- Thomas Ruffin Papers
- William Gaston Papers
- William Henry Holcombe, Autobiography and Diary (microfilm)

Virginia Baptist Historical Society, University of Richmond, Richmond, VA

- Dover Baptist Association
- Middle District Baptist Association
- Portsmouth Association Minutes
- Antioch Baptist Church [also known as "Raccoon Swamp"]
- Black Creek Church Minute Book

Mill Swamp Church Minute Book

Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA

- Minutes of the Virginia Branch of the American Colonization Society
- American Colonization Society Papers
- Bolling Family Papers
- Blow Family Papers
- Benjamin Brand Papers
- Byrd Family Papers
- Carrington Family Papers
- Claiborne Family Papers
- Mary Lee Fitzhugh Custis Papers
- Early Family Papers
- Hugh Grigsby Blair Papers
- Harrison Family Papers
- Higginbotham Family Papers
- Holladay Family Papers
- Lee Family Papers
- Majette Family Papers
- Mason Family Papers
- Myer Family Papers
- Nash Family Papers
- Peyton Family Papers
- Preston Family Papers
- Edmund Ruffin Papers
- Tayloe Family Papers
- Temple Family Papers
- Tompkins Family Papers
- Robert Lee Traylor Papers
- John Tyler Letter
- Wickham Family Papers

Government Records

Federal Census: Southampton County, 1830

Library of Virginia Richmond, VA

- Executive Papers
 - Slave and Free Negro Letterbook
- Legislative Petitions
 - Accomack County
 - Albemarle County
 - Augusta County
 - Charles City County
 - Culpeper County

- Fauquier County
- Northampton County
- Loudoun County
- Norfolk City
- Norfolk County
- Southampton County
- Norfolk City Order Book (microfilm)
- Southampton County
 - Court Judgments
 - Court Records (manuscript and microfilm)
 - Personal Property Tax List (microfilm)

North Carolina Archives and Department of History, Raleigh, NC

- County Records
 - Bertie County
 - Slave Records
 - Superior Court Minutes
 - Chowan County
 - Miscellaneous Slave Records
 - County Court Records
 - Duplin County Court Records
 - Gates County, Miscellaneous Papers: Slave Records
 - New Hanover
 - County Court Minutes
 - Superior Court Minutes
 - Northampton County Slave Records
 - Onslow County
 - Court Records
 - Miscellaneous Papers: Slave Records
- Executive Papers
 - Governor's Letter Book, v. 28
 - Governor's Papers, v. 59-63

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Tarboro, NC

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