The Abolitionists: Nat Turner

Synopsis: Nat Turner was born into slavery on October 2, 1800, on a plantation in Southampton County, Virginia. He became a preacher who claimed he had been chosen by God to lead slaves to freedom. As a young man, he led a group of slaves to rise up against white slave owners. The rebellion was defeated, and Turner was eventually caught and later hanged.

Early Life

Nat Turner was born on October 2, 1800, in Southampton County, Virginia. He was born on the Virginia plantation of Benjamin Turner. His owner allowed Nat to learn about reading, writing and religion.

As a small child, Turner was thought to have a special talent. He described things that happened before he was even born. His mother and grandmother told Turner that he "was intended for some great purpose." Turner was deeply religious. He often read the Bible and prayed.

In 1821 Benjamin's brother Samuel Turner owned Nat. Nat ran away and hid in the woods for 30 days. He believed he got a sign from God, so he came back to the plantation. When Samuel Turner died in 1825, Nat Turner became the slave of Thomas Moore. After Moore died, his widow married John Travis. Then Nat Turner worked on Travis' lands.

Slave Rebellion Leader

In 1825, Turner had a vision of a bloody war between black and white spirits. Three years later, he thought he had received another message from God. Turner thought this message told him to "arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons."
There was a solar eclipse that occurred in February 1831. Turner saw this quick covering of the sun by the moon in the sky as a signal. He thought it meant that the time to rise up had come. On August 21, 1831, Turner and his supporters began their rebellion against white slave owners by killing the Travis family. Turner gathered 40 or 50 more slaves to join him. They began a killing spree throughout the county. They took guns and horses from those they killed. Most sources say that about 55 white men, women and children died during Turner's rebellion.

Turner and his men faced off against a group of armed white men at a plantation near the town of Jerusalem. The confrontation soon dissolved into chaos, and Turner ran into the woods.

Death And Legacy

While Turner was hiding, groups of whites took their revenge on the blacks of Southampton County. They killed between 100 and 200 African-Americans.

Turner was captured on October 30, 1831. He pleaded not guilty during his trial. He believed that his rebellion was the work of God. He was sentenced to death by hanging. This sentence was carried out on November 11, 1831. Many of the men who had fought with him met the same fate.

The rebellion put fear in the heart of white Southerners. It ended any movement in that region to free the slaves. Southern states passed even harsher laws against slaves.

Turner's actions also encouraged the movement to end slavery, though. Some Northerners who wanted slavery to end supported Turner somewhat.

People have remembered Turner in different ways over the years. He has been seen as a hero, a religious extremist and a villain. Turner became an important icon of the 1960s black power movement. He was an African-American who stood up against unjust white authority. Others have objected to Turner's slaughtering of men, women and children to achieve this goal.

Historian Scot French told The New York Times that the story of Nat Turner lives on today because the questions it raises are still important to people's lives.

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