Mini-Unit Title: Nat Turner’s Revolt and Its Effects

| Author: Nicole Van Rheenen | Grade Level: Elementary |
| School: Sycamore Park Elementary School, Culpeper County | Time Estimate: 5 days (45 minute periods) |

Overview:
The students have spent the year learning about Virginia. The units that have been taught thus far are Virginia geography (involving map skills), Virginia’s Native Inhabitants, Jamestown, The American Revolution, and The New Nation (how Virginians—Washington, Madison, Mason, and Jefferson contributed to our country). This mini-unit is a part of the unit on the Civil War. Students will already know the differences between the North and South’s economies. They will understand the disagreements about whether or not new states should be slave or free. They will also have an understanding of what life under slavery was like. After completing this mini-unit, the students will be able to describe the various ways that slaves resisted their enslavement, and how Nat Turner in particular resisted slavery. They will be able to discuss the various perspectives of slave owners, abolitionists, and slaves concerning this revolt, as well as the direct effects of the rebellion. (They will be able to explain the enactment of the slave codes as well as why this rebellion helped lead Virginia to secession and war.) The students will be able to analyze various primary and secondary sources that will lead them to the understandings discussed above. My class is not homogenous, but overall I would say they are an advanced group. I have the gifted children in my room, and they are quite capable students.

Historical Background:
Differences in the Northern and Southern economies became evident during the 1800’s. The 1800’s was a period of much growth and change. Many important events occurred at this time. In 1801 Thomas Jefferson became President. In 1804 Lewis and Clark explored the Louisiana Purchase. In 1809 Madison became President, followed by Monroe in 1817. The War of 1812 with Britain occurred. In 1823, President Monroe issued the Monroe Doctrine. Arguments arose between the states as to whether or not new states should be labeled as slave or free. In 1822 Denmark Vesey’s attempt at insurrection failed. In 1829 a convention met in VA to write a new state constitution. This constitution gave only whites the right to vote. Also at this time, there was a backlash against anti-slavery literature and the VA legislature made it illegal to teach slaves to read or write. Following this on September 25, 1830, the first national Negro convention occurred in Philadelphia. In 1831, Garrison published his first issue of The Liberator. Lastly, in 1833, after Nat Turner’s rebellion, on December 4, the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded in Philadelphia.

Slavery changed over time and was enforced differently in various regions. It did not consist solely of a cruel master abusing a slave on a large cotton plantation. Poor whites for example, had little interest in enforcing slavery. In South Carolina and Virginia, slavery was introduced when the frontier was being explored, and thus many blacks worked with whites and indentured servants. In Virginia, some African Americans worked on small farms, and thus were treated differently than those on larger
plantations in other states. During the frontier period, slaves were viewed as cunning and deceptive. When the plantation system arose however, slaves were seen as stupid and witless. Over time, slaves came to be viewed more and more as property rather than servants. The American Revolution however, gave slaves an opportunity to point to the injustice of the system. It also led to many slave owners gaining political power in the new country. The Supreme Court was also ruled over by slaveholders between the ratification of the Constitution and the Civil War.

Slavery was a controversial issue for many Americans. When slavery was first introduced in the Americas, there was some difficulty in determining whether a person would be characterized as a slave or not. In 1808, the slave trade was prohibited by Article 1, Section 9, Clause 1, of the Constitution, but by then only South Carolina was still importing slaves. Article 4, Section 2, Clause 3, of the Constitution stated that a runaway slave had to be returned to their owner. However, Thomas Jefferson had doubts as to the validity of slavery. After the American Revolution, slavery seemed very hypocritical. Later on, Lincoln suggested that the Civil War was divine punishment by God for the institution of slavery.

From 1800 to 1860, Virginia had more slaves than any other state. Slaves were treated as property and were often separated from their families. They usually worked five and a half days in a week. Some slaves planted, others were servants, and some were blacksmiths, carpenters, or other skilled laborers. Slave children often worked in the gardens and kitchens and took care of animals. Slaves resisted slavery in many ways. This included running away, breaking tools, letting farm animals escape, and stealing.

Nat Turner was born in 1800 and was a slave preacher. He believed that he was God’s messenger sent to save his people. He came to this belief through several visions of black and white angels fighting. Several signs, including a solar eclipse, and a strange atmospheric effect in the sky, persuaded him that it was time for his violent rebellion. Nat Turner and six other men: Hark, Henry, Nelson, Sam, Will, and Jack, met on August 1831, and launched their rebellion. His revolt occurred in Southampton County, Virginia, which was an area of small farms. The people in Southampton County, and Virginia in general, considered themselves to be benevolent slave masters. They did not expect their slaves to rebel. The rebellion began at Joseph Travis’, Turner’s master’s, house where the rebels killed the family with ax blows. The slaves went from farm to farm for twelve hours, killing any whites in sight. Most of the people killed were women and children because many of the men were away at a revival. Some slaves helped defend their masters against the rebels. Many slaves also joined the revolt throughout the day, so that there were almost eighty slaves in all before the revolt was suppressed by the militia. Turner’s main objective, as stated by himself through Thomas Gray, was to create terror and alarm. In all, around fifty-seven whites were killed. Turner himself admitted to killing only a teenage girl. Turner hid in the woods for several days after his revolt until he was captured and jailed in Jerusalem on October 30. Nat Turner and twenty of his followers were killed because of his revolt. This revolt consisted in more deaths than any other slave revolt in United States’ history.

This revolt caused a tremendous amount of fear in the area. The governor received any demands for men and guns to put down supposed slave rebellions. Many innocent blacks, at least one hundred twenty, were murdered in the aftermath. Governor Floyd thought that Nat Turner’s revolt was the result of black preachers and Yankee
agitators. Many Southerners connected this rebellion to Yankee abolitionist desires to end slavery. Some charged Garrison with instigating Turner as well. Garrison denied this by saying that he and his abolitionists were Christian pacifists who sought to earn their liberation through moral argument.

Before this revolt, many lawmakers wanted to end slavery. However, the violence and fear triggered by this event made many feel that they needed to control slaves more strictly. Some whites considered Turner a cruel, deceptive man who used religion to persuade other slaves to commit a horrific crime. Others viewed him as a true religious fanatic. Some whites who considered Turner’s actions evil, still believed that slavery needed to be abolished, and that slavery was immoral. The black abolitionist David Walker and Thomas Jefferson had both predicted that slavery would cause such a dangerous and rebellious person as Nat Turner. His revolt led many abolitionists to further action.

The Virginia legislature met as a result of the revolt as well. Some representatives from areas west of the Blue Ridge Mountains wanted slavery abolished. Governor John Floyd, who was himself a slaveholder, thought that statewide abolition was the only way to prevent future attacks of a similar nature. Some put forth plans to have all blacks colonized at state expense. They debated the gradual abolition of slavery, but decided to tighten the slave codes instead. These codes strengthened the militia systems. It became illegal for black preachers to preach without a white man present or for blacks to even assemble without a white presence. African Americans were not allowed to own guns or to learn to read or write. Speaking against slavery also became a crime. The point of these codes was to prevent African Americans from communicating or meeting in large groups. Thomas Randolph, a grandson of Thomas Jefferson, who had advocated gradual abolition, predicted at the meeting of the House of Delegates that the dissolution of the Union would soon occur because of slavery. During the 1830’s and 1840’s the South became a martial society set upon preserving slavery. Slave discipline was enforced more strictly in order to prevent another rebellion. However, to many blacks of the period, Nat Turner became a hero who had stood up against injustice and given the whites a taste of their own medicine.

Overall, there were few slave rebellions in the U.S. because it was policed very carefully. The three major plots in the U.S. (by Prosser, Vesey, and Turner), all occurred outside the plantation belt, and all the leaders were more privileged and educated men. Religion was also important in all three rebellions, reflecting its importance in the slave community. Such rebellions showed that slaves were not happy and that the plantation system was not as seamless as it seemed. Harriet Tubman later (1850-1860) helped slaves resist slavery by leading them on the Underground Railroad to the North. In 1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe spoke out against slavery in her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In 1859 John Brown led a raid at Harpers Ferry in an attempt to start a slave rebellion. Finally, in 1861 the Confederacy was formed.

Turner is still a problematic figure today. If he is accepted as an American revolutionary, then his means of violence is also sanctioned. Still, others consider him a man of God who acted against injustice. He is viewed by some as a leader in the black community, and by others as a religious fanatic. Still others believe him to be motivated by pure vengeance. He is a controversial figure in United States history, and will most likely remain so for many years to come.
Major Understanding:
Students will understand that Turner’s rebellion was a sign of the underlying discontent of slaves in the south. Moreover, this rebellion was one of the factors that eventually helped lead Virginia to secession. It caused greater fear and stricter enforcement of the slave codes by southern whites. It also solidified the divisions in various Americans’ perspectives on the institution of slavery.

Objectives:
Students will:
2. Examine an article from *The Liberator*, another newspaper account, and a woodcut from the time to explain the reactions of slave owners, abolitionists, and slaves to this revolt.
3. Be given a primary source quote from a person of the time, and will participate in a role play meeting of the Virginia legislature in order to decide what should be done concerning Turner’s revolt.
4. Compare and contrast the results of their role play with the historical information available.
5. State the effects of the rebellion (How it was one of the events leading to secession, and how it caused stricter slave codes to be enacted.)
6. Create a newspaper article or cartoon that reflects a particular perspective from the time.
7. Analyze newspaper articles, a woodcut, a message from the Governor, and a draft of a bill that are primary sources from this time period.

Standards of Learning:
Skills
VS.1 The student will develop skills for historical and geographical analysis including the ability to
a) identify and interpret artifacts and primary and secondary source documents to understand events in history.
b) determine cause and effect relationships.

Content
VS.7 The student will demonstrate knowledge of the issues that divided our nation and led to the Civil War by
a) identifying the events and differences between the northern and southern states that divided Virginians and led to secession, war, and the creation of West Virginia, such as that
   • Nat Turner led a revolt against plantation owners in Virginia.