Nat Turner

Slave Insurrectionist
1800-1831

In February 1831, there was an eclipse of the sun. A man in Southampton County, Virginia, by the name of Nat Turner, took it as a sign from God that he should lead a huge uprising to free those held in bondage.

Gathering together his closest friends, Turner made plans for a revolt that would take place on the Fourth of July. As the day approached, however, he became ill. Canceling the plans, the men waited for another sign. On August 13, 1831, a bluish-green haze covered the sun. Interpreting this as the sign they had been waiting for, Turner and six followers met again to work out the final details of the uprising.

On August 22, the revolt began. The first house to be attacked belonged to Nat Turner’s owner, Joseph Travis. Travis, his wife and child, and two other people were killed. For forty hours the revolt continued. Between sixty and eighty slaves joined the rebellion. They killed at least fifty-seven slaveholders and their families, sparing only poor whites who did not own slaves.

When word of the unexpected revolt reached the authorities, hundreds of armed white men rode off in search of Nat Turner. Dozens of rebel slaves, carrying only a few weapons, were killed or captured. Turner evaded authorities for two months. Finally, on October 30, 1831, the Virginia militia captured him. On November 5, he was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Six days later he was hanged and his body was disposed of secretly.

Although the revolt was over, reaction to it was just beginning. Of those formally charged with participating in the uprising, twenty-four were either acquitted or freed for lack of evidence. Twenty-nine were convicted. Seventeen of these, including Nat Turner, were hanged. Approximately 200 other blacks were killed by slave owners who were determined to terrify the remaining black population into submission.

The white community was shocked by the revolt. They could not believe that Nat Turner, of all people, had led it. Far from having a reputation as a violent or difficult slave, Turner had been a deeply religious man. Known as “The Prophet,” he had preached on Sundays and was highly respected by both black and white communities.

Nat Turner went to his death with dignity and courage. He had said that on the day he was to die, the sun would refuse to shine as a sign from God that slavery was evil. Not everyone took Nat Turner’s religious pronouncements seriously, but the local sheriff did. He refused to cut the rope that would spring the trap on the gallows. No one else was anxious to do it either, so an old drunk was brought from forty miles away to act as executioner. While the sun didn’t exactly refuse to shine, the sky did go dark when a major thunderstorm arose on the day of the hanging. Thunderstorms in November are a bit unusual and many people were quite impressed by the occurrence.