
Communities in Revolt

An Introduction

DANIEL W. CROFTS

Southampton County, Virginia, during the antebellum era was both ordinary and extraordinary. The most ordinary white farmer imaginable, Southampton's Daniel W. Cobb, lived a life of rural obscurity. Yet Cobb had nightmares about slave insurrections and about "large black rusty negrow men" accosting himself and his wife in bed.¹

Cobb's anxieties likely had roots in the history of his home county. In August 1831, Nat Turner and his allies massacred as many as sixty of their white Southampton neighbors. And this extraordinary event continues to reverberate. Turner's astonishing rampage has subjected Southampton to close scrutiny and elevated it to a niche in the American historical imagination. But in the articles that follow, Randolph Ferguson Scully, Patrick H. Breen, and Anthony E. Kaye show that any effort to understand the extraordinary must build on our understanding of the ordinary and familiar. Churches and evangelical communities stood at the center of the southern social order in the early to mid-nineteenth century, as did attachments to neighborhoods. To place Nat Turner in the context of his times, these three historians have chosen to study the long-ago rural world where he lived. Even if Turner remains inscrutable, Scully, Breen, and Kaye each have called attention to matters that must be taken into account.

Daniel W. Crofts is a professor of history at The College of New Jersey. He is the author of *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834–1869* (Charlottesville, VA, 1992) and *Cobb's Ordeal: The Diaries of a Virginia Farmer, 1842–1872* (Athens, GA, 1997).

1. Daniel W. Crofts, ed., *Cobb's Ordeal: The Diaries of a Virginia Farmer, 1842–1872* (Athens, GA, 1997), 84–92, quotation on 91.

Scully and Breen provide fresh readings of Baptist church records. Scully notes that religion profoundly shaped “the social relations, institutional structure, and culture of communities in southeastern Virginia” (683). He helps us understand the tensions that divided white and black male evangelicals. White men sought to maintain authority over congregations in which women outnumbered men, and in which blacks increasingly outnumbered whites. White male evangelicals tended to look askance at their black counterparts who requested permission to preach. As Scully recognizes, the “shocking, exceptional nature of the Turner rebellion” (676) defies easy analysis. But there can be no doubt that Turner was a “frustrated black spiritual virtuosi” (676) whose apocalyptic visions transcended “racial boundaries and institutional limitations” (676).

Breen studies the months after the Turner rebellion, when evangelical congregations attempted to rebuild communities of trust. Some whites doubted whether black members could remain in fellowship. Whites suspected that some blacks knew in advance about the revolt and did nothing to sound the alarm. Looking at one Baptist congregation, Breen finds that efforts to expel all black members failed, but that black members lost their right to hold separate services or to participate in a common interracial communion service. Hereafter, blacks had to worship under the same roof and at the same time and place as whites, but the communion service would be bifurcated along racial lines. Breen recognizes, however, that “whites who wanted to return blacks to communion defeated those who wanted their excommunication” (703). Even following the “most violent challenge to slaveholders’ authority” (702), significant rifts remained within the white community.

Kaye finds that the Old South was composed of neighborhoods where people encountered one another face to face. To be sure, neighborhoods were “untidy” and their boundaries were “hard to fix” (719). Whereas in the Natchez district neighborhoods consisted of “adjoining plantations” (711), in Southampton, where holdings were smaller, the perceived neighborhood likely included a number of different properties. Kaye reminds us that neighbors included both blacks and whites, as slaves attempted to carve out a degree of autonomy for themselves. He suggests too that we see slave society as “plural,” composed of “many neighborhoods” rather than “a single, unitary community” (706). Kaye notes that the oft-scrutinized *Confessions of Nat Turner*, edited by Thomas R. Gray, include repeated mention of neighborhoods. Here Kaye thinks that

Gray accurately preserved in written form Turner's actual language. Kaye also notes that the rebellion unfolded most successfully where it remained on terrain familiar to the principals. Only after it left the neighborhood did it spiral out of control.

Too much that is polemical or speculative has been written about Nat Turner. These three essays, by contrast, are informed by admirable restraint. Their authors understand the social dynamics of the Old South. They rely on primary sources. None succumb to the temptation to establish a comprehensive explanation for the Turner insurrection. None are seduced by after-the-fact reports of vast conspiracies known to many slaves within a fifty- or hundred-mile radius. Kaye insists that Turner's following was narrowly confined—that he used his charismatic powers to attract a handful of followers. Turner stated that he “enjoyed the confidence of the negroes in the neighborhood,” according to Thomas R. Gray. Having decided that various celestial signs called him to “slay my enemies with their own weapons,” he enlisted the help of four fellow slaves in whom he had “the greatest confidence.”²

It must never be forgotten that Turner was a radically unusual outlier. American slaves surely fantasized about spectacular retributive justice, and whites feared it. But slaves had every reason not to initiate collective killing sprees. They knew such plans were suicidal, and that usually decided the issue. Michael Wayne has examined closely a case in which aggrieved slaves conspired to murder a hated overseer, but carefully attempted to make it look like an accident. Large-scale collective action to undermine American slavery occurred only rarely, and most often in the form of runaway conspiracies. For example, Solomon Northup reported that slaves in western Louisiana in 1837 plotted a run toward what they hoped would be the free soil of Mexico. For most slaves and most slaveholders, however, individual acts of defiance were the only imaginable form of resistance. William W. Freehling has noted, persuasively in my opinion, that individual runaways were the most troublesome challenge an owner might expect to face. In slaveholding regions located near the free states, a Frederick Douglass just might make good his escape. Even if the possibility of group insurrection was far more terrifying, it was also far more unlikely. Both whites and blacks knew that rebels could never

2. Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston, MA, 1996), 45, 48.

assemble sufficient weapons to gain freedom by the use of armed force, or to escape the certainty of a ferocious counterattack supported by every level of governing power. They knew too that potential betrayal threatened any such undertaking.³

Any case for the plausibility and practicality of the Turner insurrection is wishful thinking.⁴ It is one thing to sympathize with Turner or to believe that he acted in a just cause. It is quite another to overlook the decisive obstacles that would crush any slave insurrection in antebellum America, or to conclude that Turner's religious visions offered a sensible plan of action. Thomas Parramore is far more persuasive in calling attention to Turner's shortcomings, both as a military strategist and as a military tactician.⁵ Staying in the neighborhood would not have helped. The moment the first fateful blows were struck in the Travis household, Turner and his group were doomed. So were many other black people who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Why did the insurrection occur in Southampton? Was it simply blind chance that a uniquely strong-willed and disaffected slave happened to live there? Perhaps so, but I share Breen's suspicion that Turner may somehow have been the product of an environment in which local whites were less than fully united on the propriety of slaveholding. Emancipation sentiment in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries ran with sufficient strength to win freedom for perhaps a fifth of Southampton's slaves. Some local Quakers and Baptists remained opposed to slav-

3. Michael Wayne, *Death of an Overseer: Reopening a Murder Investigation from the Plantation South* (New York, 2001); Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, ed. Joseph Logsdon and Sue Eakin (1853; rep. Baton Rouge, LA, 1968); 188–90; William W. Freehling, *The Reintegration of American History: Slavery and the Civil War* (New York, 1994), 193.

4. See especially Douglas R. Egerton, "Nat Turner in a Hemispheric Context," in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. Kenneth S. Greenberg (New York, 2003), 134–47, esp. 142–47. In 1999 Scot French also surmised that there had been a larger conspiracy. See Tony Horwitz, "Untrue Confessions: Why Hasn't History Told Us Who Nat Turner Really Was?" *The New Yorker*, Dec. 13, 1999, 88. In his 2004 book, however, French backed away from the idea that Turner had connections to a more broad-based attack on the slave system. Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (Boston, MA, 2004), esp. 61–64.

5. Thomas C. Parramore, "Covenant in Jerusalem," in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion in History and Memory*, ed. Greenberg, 58–76, esp. 61–62.

ery throughout the antebellum era. Where else in the defeated South might a prominent white official have sent a letter to Thaddeus Stevens in December 1865, to advise him about the right way to undermine “the old rotten secession pro-slavery oligarchy”?⁶

It is just possible that the divisions among Southampton whites may help us to understand Nat Turner. As Breen has noted elsewhere, young Turner was plainly a “child prodigy” whose owners recognized his remarkable abilities.⁷ He grew up in a place where a literate young slave would soon learn that some local whites didn’t approve of slavery. Indeed, some shared with blacks a belief that it was contrary to Christian teaching. How might all of this have shaped the outlook of a young black man who realized that he had far more God-given ability than his white enslavers?

The essays by Scully, Breen, and Kaye build upon and advance a second modern wave of interest in the Nat Turner insurrection. The first wave, triggered by the publication of William Styron’s much-discussed novel, occurred in the late 1960s and 1970s. Although somewhat overshadowed by the polemical responses to Styron, the cause of historical inquiry moved forward. Henry I. Tragle published a welcome anthology of heretofore unavailable documents. Stephen B. Oates contributed a believable biography of Turner. And Thomas C. Parramore’s fine history of the Southampton County included three riveting chapters on the insurrection.⁸

Since the mid-1990s, interest in Turner once again has revived. Kenneth C. Greenberg has played an especially visible role in the new wave. In 1996 he compiled many of the key documents regarding the Turner insurrection. His 2003 anthology collected a variety of historical essays,

6. Patrick H. Breen, “A Prophet in His Own Land: Support for Nat Turner and His Rebellion within Southampton’s Black Community,” in *Nat Turner: A Slave Rebellion*, ed. Greenberg, 103–18, esp. 113–14; Daniel W. Crofts, *Old Southampton: Politics and Society in a Virginia County, 1834–1869* (Charlottesville, VA, 1992), 90–95, 240.

7. Breen, “A Prophet in His Own Land,” 106–7.

8. William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (New York, 1967); Henry Irving Tragle, ed., *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831: A Compilation of Source Material* (Amherst, MA, 1971); Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner’s Fierce Rebellion* (New York, 1975); Thomas C. Parramore, *Southampton County, Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA, 1978), 65–121.

and was nicely timed to coincide with the appearance of his documentary film, *Nat Turner—A Troublesome Property*. Modern interest in historical memory informs the Greenberg anthology and separately published volumes by Mary Kemp Davis and Scot French. Scully, Breen, and Kaye not only join this second wave, but give it solid historical roots that are not always found in other studies of the insurrection.⁹

Earlier drafts of these three essays were presented together in July 2005, as part of a session on “Communities in Revolt: Southampton County and Nat Turner’s Rebellion” at the 2005 annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. Peter Kolchin provided the comments. I am pleased that the *Journal of the Early Republic* has decided to publish revised versions of the essays and comments.

9. In 1999, Tony Horwitz noted that the controversy over the Turner uprising had recently resurfaced “after a twenty-five year lull.” Horwitz, “Untrue Confessions,” 80. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner*; Greenberg, ed., *Nat Turner*; *Nat Turner—A Troublesome Property* (documentary film for the Public Broadcasting Network, written by Frank Christopher and Kenneth S. Greenberg, directed by Charles Burnett); Mary Kemp Davis, *Nat Turner Before the Bar of Judgment: Fictional Treatments of the Southampton Slave Insurrection* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1999); French, *The Rebellious Slave*.