

Nat Turner's Rebellion: Evaluating Historical Opinions

Use the following worksheet to record information from the various primary and secondary sources. Make sure to:

1. Read the source and take notes on its description of Nat Turner
2. Select one meaningful quote that embodies the passage
3. Assess the subtext and context of the source
4. Determine a term that best describes the document's position regarding Nat Turner consider hero, villain, fanatic, religious, insane, leader, manipulative, brave, etc.

SOURCE 1: J. W. Cromwell, "The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection", 1920

Text:

Subtext/Context:

Term:

SOURCE 2: H. Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts, 1943

Text:

Subtext/Context:

Term:

SOURCE 3: W. S. Drewery, Slave Insurrections in Virginia, 1900

Text:

Subtext/Context:

Term:

SOURCE 4: *The Richmond Whig*, September 1831

Text:

Subtext/Context:

Term:

SOURCE 5: *The Richmond Enquirer*, August 1831

Text:

Subtext/Context:

Term:

SOURCE 6: T.R. Grey, The Confessions of Nat Turner, 1831

Text:

Subtext/Context:

Term:

Source 1: John W. Cromwell-“The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection.” The Journal of Negro History (April 1920).

Born a slave in Portsmouth, Virginia Cromwell’s father purchased the families freedom and sent John to a private school in Philadelphia. He became a teacher, writer, and political activist. After the Civil War, Cromwell opened a school for Freedmen in Virginia and played a prominent role in the reconstruction politics of the state; He organized Union League Clubs and was a member of the jury empaneled to try Jefferson Davis, the former President of the Confederate States of America. Cromwell was one of the first to write in what will eventually be called African American History.

“Whether Nat Turner hastened or postponed the day of the abolition of slavery . . . considered in the light of its immediate effect upon its participants, it was a failure, an egregious failure, a wanton crime. Considered in its necessary relation to slavery and as contributory to making it a national issue by deepening and stirring of the then weak local forces, that finally led to the Emancipation Proclamation...the insurrection was a moral success and Nat Turner deserves to be ranked with the greatest reformers of his day.

This insurrection may be considered an effort of the Negro to help himself rather than depend on other human agencies for the protection which could come through his own strong arm; for the spirit of Nat Turner never was completely quelled. He struck ruthlessly, mercilessly, it may be said in cold blood, innocent women and children; but the system of which he was the victim had less mercy in subjecting his race to the horrors of the “middle passage” and the endless crimes against justice, humanity, and virtue, then perpetrated throughout America. The brutality of his onslaught was a reflex of slavery, the object lesson which he gave brought the question home to every fireside until public conscience, once callous, became quickened and slavery was doomed.”

Source 2: Herbert Aptheker-*American Negro Slave Revolts*

Herbert Aptheker hated segregation and racial stereotypes, believed that slavery was exploitive and that slave rebellions occurred frequently. Was a member of the Communist Party of the United States, and in the 1950s was blacklisted for his beliefs. A committed labor unionist, he believed that tensions between social classes were important to understanding the past.

“In the absence of any evidence of equal weight to the contrary, one must conclude that Turner possessed the characteristic of great leaders in that he sensed the mood and feelings of the masses of his fellow beings, not only in his immediate environment but generally. The years immediately preceding his effort had been marked by a great rumbling of discontent and protest. Turner’s act itself carrying that rumbling to a high point caused an eruption throughout the length and breadth of the slave south—which always rested on a volcano of outraged humanity.”

Source 3: William S. Drewery-*The Southampton Insurrection*

William S. Drewery was a white Virginian who grew up near the area of the rebellion and descended from a family of planters and slave owners. He studied Nat Turner for his dissertation at Johns Hopkins. He read lots of primary sources, interviewed whites and blacks that knew people alive in 1831. He believed that slavery was a good thing that slaves were happy, and that slaves rarely rebelled.

“Thus the insurrection was not instigated by motives of revenge or sudden anger, but the result of long deliberation and a settled purpose of mind, the offspring of gloomy fanaticism acting upon materials but too well prepared for such impressions,” and of love of self importance, encouraged by the efforts of Negro preachers, who were influenced by external affairs, and employed in circulating inflammatory and seditious periodicals. Those who have received most are the most jealous and ready to complain. Nat Turner, as the Southampton slaves in general, was like a spoiled child, who, having been allowed too many privileges in youth, soon think he ought to be master of all he surveys. The calling of a Constitutional Convention to meet in October, 1829, inspired in the slaves of Matthews Isle of Wright, and the neighboring counties hopes of emancipation, and in case of failure of such declaration to rebel and massacre the whites. Doubtless Nat had heard the same subjects discussed, and, being conscious of the results of the convention, which not only failed to emancipate slaves, but limited the right of suffrage to the whites, he considered it time to carry out his threats. He was undoubtedly inspired with the hope of freedom, and the mere discussion of emancipation by a convention may have led him to believe that many of the whites would sympathize with his schemes. He is said to have passed the home of some poor white people because he considered it useless to kill those who thought no better of themselves than they did of the Negroes.”

Source 4: *The Richmond Whig*-September 17, 1831

Richmond Whig, 1831

The newspaper was published in a southern city and was read widely by planters throughout the region. The newspaper tended to promote the political views of the upper-class planters who paid to subscribe to the paper.

“Our insurrection, general, or not, was the work of fanaticism—General Nat was no preacher, but in his immediate neighborhood, had acquired the character of a prophet...he traced his divination in characters of blood, on leaves alone in the woods; he would arrange them in some conspicuous place, have a dream telling him of the circumstance; and then send some ignorant black to bring them to him, to whom he would interpret the meaning. Thus, by means of this nature, he had acquired an immense influence, over such persons as he took into his confidence. He, likewise pretended to have conversations with the Holy Spirit; and was assured by it, that he was invulnerable... I have been credibly informed, that something like three years ago, Nat received a whipping from his master, for saying that the blacks ought to be free . . . We therefore incline to the belief that he acted upon no higher principle than the impulse of revenge against the whites, as the enslavers of himself and his race; that being a fanatic, he possibly persuaded himself that Heaven would interfere; and then he may have convinced himself as he certainly did his deluded followers to some extent, that the appearance of the sun some weeks ago prognosticated something favorable to their cause. . .”

Source 5: *The Richmond Enquirer*-August 1831

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“...What strikes us as the most remarkable thing in this matter is the horrible ferocity of these monsters. They remind one of a parcel of blood-thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps; or rather like a former incursion of the Indians upon white settlements nothing is spared; neither age nor sex is respected—the helplessness of women and children pleads in vain for mercy. The danger is thought to be over—but prudence still demands precaution. The lower country should be on alert—the case of Nat Turner warns us. No black man ought to be permitted to turn a preacher through the country...
...A fanatic preacher by the name of Nat Turner (Gen. Nat Turner) who had been taught to read and write, and permitted to go about preaching in the country, was at the bottom of this infernal brigandage. He was artful, impudent, and vindictive, without any cause or provocation that could be assigned. He was the slave of Mr. Travis. He and another slave of Mr. T., a young fellow, by the name of Moore, were two of the leaders. Three or four others were first concerned and most active...They had 15 others to join them. And by importunity or threats they prevailed upon about 20 others to cooperate in the scheme of massacre...

...Nat, the ringleader, who calls himself General, pretends to be a Baptist preacher's great enthusiast—declares to his comrades that he is commissioned by Jesus Christ, and proceeds under his inspired directions—that the late singular appearance of the sun was the sign for him...”

Source 6: *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the leader of the late insurrection, in Southampton (county), by Thomas R. Gray, VA...Baltimore, 1831*

Thomas R. Gray, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, 1831*

After his capture and arrest on October 30, 1831, Nat Turner was imprisoned in the Southampton County Jail, where he was interviewed by Thomas R. Gray, a Southern physician, failed planter and slave owner. Grey stated that only Turner's words were recorded but in numerous instances Grey's words appear in the "Confessions."

"I was thirty-one years of age the second of October last, and born the property of Benjamin Turner, of this county...By this time, having arrived to man's estate, and hearing the Scriptures commented on at meetings, I was struck with that particular passage which says, "Seek ye the kingdom of heaven, and all things shall be added unto you." I reflected much on this passage, and prayed daily for light on this subject. As I was praying one day at my plough, the Spirit spoke to me, saying, "Seek ye the kingdom of heaven, and all things shall be added unto you.,'... and then again I had the same revelation, which fully confirmed me in the impression that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty.

Knowing the influence I had obtained over the minds of my fellow-servant (not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks-for to them I always spoke of such things with contempt), but by the communion of the Spirit, whose revelations I often communicated to them, and they believed and said my wisdom came from God, -- I now began to prepare them for my purpose, by telling them something was about to happen that would terminate in fulfilling the great promise that had been made to me.

...about this time I had a vision- and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened-the thunder rolled in the heavens, and blood flowed in streams-and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see; and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it."

And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had home for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first. I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons. And immediately on the sign appearing in the heavens, the sea] was removed from my lips, and I communicated the great work laid out for me to do, to four in whom I had the greatest confidence..."