US African-American revolutionary. Born a slave, he believed that he was called by God to take violent revenge on whites and win freedom for blacks. With c.70 followers, he took a solar eclipse as a sign to begin his insurrection. More than 50 whites were killed before the revolt was crushed. Turner was later captured and hanged.

Leader of one of the bloodiest slave revolts in American history, Nat Turner was born a slave on October 2, 1800, in Southampton County, Virginia. He grew up on the farm of Benjamin Turner, becoming the property of Turner's brother Samuel upon Benjamin's death in 1810. Turner's mother, Nancy, was a native of North Africa who was sold into slavery and arrived in Virginia in 1795. She reputedly attempted to kill the infant Nat to keep him from a lifetime of servitude. Turner's father ran away when Nat was a child.

Turner's paternal grandmother, a slave named Bridget, schooled young Nat in the Scriptures. Turner was literate, and while Benjamin Turner was a Methodist who instructed his slaves in Christianity, it is not certain who taught him to read. Turner grew up to be devoutly religious, refusing to use tobacco or alcohol, and he began to experience visions in which he claimed to hear the voice of God. After one of these visions in 1821, Turner ran away for 30 days and returned, he said, at God's command. Sometime after his return, he married a slave named Cherry and had two or three children. When Samuel Turner died in 1822, Turner and Cherry were separated by sale, and Turner became the property of Thomas Moore. In 1825, Turner had another vision while at work in Moore's fields that prophesied a war between blacks and whites. Turner became an itinerant preacher after this vision and gained some renown. In 1827, he was credited with healing a white man named Etheldred Brantley of a mysterious disease, and the two men were baptized together. The next year, Turner had another vision that predicted the emancipation of the slaves.

Thomas Moore died in 1828, making Turner the property of his young son. Turner went to work on the farm of Joseph Travis in 1830 when Travis married Moore's widow. Turner's 1828 vision had instructed him to await a sign heralding the moment at which he should begin working to free the slaves. Turner believed that sign appeared in the form of a solar eclipse in February 1831, and he assembled four other slaves to plan a revolt for July 4. When the day arrived, Turner was ill, and the insurrection was postponed. After receiving another sign on August 13 in the blue-green tint of the sun, Turner and his conspirators gathered at Cabin Pond on the evening of August 21 and decided to attack that night.

At about 3 a.m. on August 22, Turner's rebels killed the entire Travis family as they slept. They continued on to other farms, killing all of the white people they could find, including women and children; pillaging guns and horses; and adding other slaves to their ranks. Turner eventually amassed between 60 and 80 rebels. Not all of them shared Turner's religious zeal. Some joined for the opportunity to exact revenge on their masters, others for the chance to loot for money and alcohol. In addition, not all
slaves joined Turner's rebellion or even supported it. Several slaves tried to stop the rebels and later would testify against them in court.

Word of the rebellion spread among Southampton County's whites, who quickly assembled their own patrols. Virginia's governor also dispatched the militia. These efforts halted the rebellion as white authorities set about capturing and trying its participants. In all, about 50 free and enslaved African Americans were tried, and about 20 were hanged; about a dozen more were forced to leave the state. Whites also patrolled surrounding counties in Virginia and North Carolina, and another 20 to 30 suspected rebels were condemned to death there. About 60 whites were killed during the rebellion.

Turner avoided capture for several weeks. Rumors circulated that he had drowned or run away to Maryland, but he remained hidden in Southampton County. He was discovered by a farmer named Benjamin Phipps on October 30 and taken to jail in the county seat of Jerusalem (now Courtland). He was hanged there on November 11, 1831.

Shortly after Turner's capture, a lawyer named Thomas R. Gray visited the slave rebel and asked him about the origins of the revolt. Gray published his interview as a pamphlet, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, later that fall and eventually sold 40,000 copies.

Nat Turner's rebellion occurred at a time of heightened anxiety over the security of slavery in the South. In 1822, white authorities in Charleston had stopped a rebellion planned by a free African American named Denmark Vesey. Seven years later, David Walker, a free black tailor living in Boston, began circulating a pamphlet among slaves encouraging them to rise up against slaveholders. And in January 1831, just months before Turner's revolt, William Lloyd Garrison elevated radical abolitionism to new prominence with the establishment of his newspaper, *The Liberator*. Slavery's defenders in Virginia responded to Turner's rebellion in several ways, not least of which was the effort in the press to describe Turner as insane. Though the state legislature considered instituting gradual emancipation as a means of prohibiting further uprisings, it ultimately moved to entrench slavery even further. After the rebellion, Virginia as well as other Southern states strengthened their militias and patrols, hardened legal restrictions on African American behavior, and worked to exclude abolitionist pamphlets and newspapers from the mails. For many African Americans, however, Turner was a hero who demonstrated his people's desire for freedom. Though few abolitionists agreed with his violent tactics, they seconded the indictment of slavery that the rebellion represented.

Nat Turner continues to be a controversial figure in American history. The novelist William Styron dramatized Turner's life in *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), for which he won a Pulitzer Prize. Yet many African Americans were upset by the novel's depiction of Turner as hostile to other slaves, infatuated with a white woman, and even engaging in homosexual activity. The novel's critics recorded their objections in the 1968 book *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*.

*See also* Abolitionist Movements; Resistance

**Further Readings**


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