

400 Rebellions

The Documented Record of Enslaved People Who Refused: Resistance, Revolt, and the Organized Fight for Freedom (1776–1865)

Track	Contribution
Era	ERA III — Revolution, Expansion & Civil War (1776–1865)
Lens	Secular & Political
Content Warning	No
NC Connection	Yes — NC slave rebellions; Underground Railroad; NC freedom seekers
Research Status	Needs citation review
Paired Entry	See also: Entry 10 — Sold South (ERA III · Persecution)

Historians have documented more than 400 significant slave revolts and conspiracies in the history of the Americas. That figure covers only the events substantial enough to enter the written record — the majority in a newspaper account, a court proceeding, or a planter’s letter. Every act of individual resistance that did not reach a record was not counted. The 400 is a floor, not a ceiling. The documented record establishes, with the specificity that only primary source evidence can provide, that enslaved people in the Americas resisted their enslavement continuously, collectively, and at extraordinary personal cost from the first decade of the trade to its last.

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Major revolts and the evidence they left

The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) was the only successful large-scale slave revolt in the history of the Americas and the only one that produced an independent state. Approximately 500,000 enslaved people on the French colony of Saint-Domingue rose under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, and Henri Christophe, defeated the armies of France, Spain, and Britain, and established Haiti as the first Black republic in the Western Hemisphere on January 1, 1804. The Haitian Revolution terrified slaveholders throughout the Americas and accelerated the passage of more restrictive slave codes in the United States, including in North Carolina.

Gabriel's Conspiracy (Virginia, 1800) planned a coordinated march on Richmond by an estimated 1,000 enslaved people led by the blacksmith Gabriel Prosser. The conspiracy was betrayed before it could be executed. Gabriel was hanged. Denmark Vesey's Conspiracy (South Carolina, 1822) planned a coordinated rising in Charleston involving an estimated 9,000 enslaved and free Black people. Betrayed before execution. Vesey was hanged. Nat Turner's Rebellion (Virginia, 1831) was the deadliest slave revolt in U.S. history — Turner and his followers killed approximately 55 white people before being suppressed. Turner was captured and executed. The Virginia legislature debated abolition in the immediate aftermath — the last time an American slave state seriously considered emancipation before the Civil War.

DAILY RESISTANCE

Beyond the rebellions: the continuous refusal

The 400 major documented revolts represent the most visible form of a resistance that operated at every level of enslaved life. Enslaved people broke tools, feigned illness, worked slowly, stole food and materials, maintained secret religious and cultural practices, educated their children in defiance of anti-literacy laws, ran away individually and in groups, forged passes, sent intelligence to Union forces during the Civil War, and fled to Union lines in such numbers that Abraham Lincoln ultimately had no choice but to transform the war's purpose. The famous "contrabands" — enslaved people who fled to Union lines and whose labor and intelligence contributed materially to the Union war effort — represent the largest single act of collective self-liberation in American history.

"They were not passive victims. They were people under extreme duress who resisted every day in every way that was available to them. The record of that resistance is the most important counter-narrative to the mythology of docile servitude that American racism required."

NC LOCAL LENS · CUMBERLAND COUNTY

North Carolina freedom seekers and resisters are documented throughout the antebellum record. The Underground Railroad had documented routes through NC, with free Black communities in Fayetteville and Quaker networks in the NC Piedmont serving as waypoints for freedom seekers heading north. Runaway slave advertisements in Fayetteville newspapers — preserved at the NC State Archives and digitized in the "Freedom on the Move" database — document individual acts of resistance by name, providing primary-source evidence of enslaved people who refused Cumberland County bondage.

CITATIONS · CHICAGO STYLE

- 1 Aptheker, Herbert. *American Negro Slave Revolts*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943. Reprint, New York: International Publishers, 1983.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary

- 2 James, C.L.R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Dial Press, 1938.

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- 3 Freedom on the Move: A Database of Runaway Slave Advertisements. Cornell University, 2017–present.
<https://freedomonthemove.org>

Primary Source · Digital archive — open access

- 4 Oakes, James. *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865*. New York: Norton, 2013.

Peer-Reviewed Secondary
