

TWO AMERICAS • LUMINARIES • LEGEND • CONTENT WARNING

The Serpent Was Loosened

Nat Turner and the Reckoning That Followed

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Persecution / Contribution Track • ERA III • Southampton County, Virginia

Content Warning

This entry describes a mass killing, a public execution, and extrajudicial mob violence against Black Americans, most of whom had no connection to the events described. It is presented for historical understanding, not for its violence.

Who He Is

Nat Turner was born enslaved October 2, 1800, in Southampton County, Virginia. Unusually for an enslaved man of his era, he was literate, owned a Bible, and devoted himself to fasting, prayer, and religious study — standing among other enslaved people as someone marked for a special purpose. He reported a series of visions across the 1820s that he read as divine instruction to act, and interpreted a solar eclipse on February 12, 1831, as the sign he had been waiting for.

August 1831

Turner confided his plan to four trusted associates — Henry, Hark, Nelson, and Sam. Beginning early on August 21, 1831, the group killed the family of Turner's enslaver, then moved house to house recruiting more men and killing white residents as they went; the force grew to more than forty. Approximately fifty-five to sixty-five white Virginians were killed, including an estimated twenty to thirty children — the deadliest slave rebellion in American history. Organized militia put the rebellion down within about thirty-six hours.

Confession and Execution

Turner evaded capture for just over two months before being found by a local farmer on October 30, 1831. While awaiting trial he dictated an account of his life and the rebellion to attorney Thomas R. Gray, published as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* — a document Gray claimed recorded Turner's own words "with little or no variation," but which scholars have since treated as contested rather than a transparent record. Even the *Richmond Enquirer* at the time questioned whether the document's polished language could plausibly be Turner's own speech. He was hanged November 11, 1831, in Jerusalem, Virginia.

In the aftermath, white militias and mobs killed an estimated 120 to 200 Black people, the overwhelming majority with no connection to the rebellion at all — a toll historians describe as poorly documented and likely undercounted, since it left none of the formal record the judicial executions did.

The Response Across the South

Nearly every Southern slave state passed new laws in the rebellion's wake criminalizing the teaching of enslaved people to read and write, restricting Black religious assembly without a licensed white minister present, and further constraining free Black populations.

NC Local Lens

North Carolina's border counties felt the panic immediately — Southampton County sits only about twenty miles from the state line. Militia was called out in Hertford, Halifax, and Northampton Counties;

residents in Edgecombe, Gates, and Chowan Counties armed themselves; panic reached as far as Duplin, Sampson, and New Hanover Counties, more than a hundred miles away, including a false rumor that Clinton had been burned. The North Carolina General Assembly passed its own harsher restrictions on enslaved and free Black people in direct response. One specific, and specifically fragile, thread ties this to Fayetteville: after torture on September 5, 1831, an enslaved person in Duplin County reportedly "confessed, true or not," per NCpedia's own phrasing, to a rumored plan in which conspirators would march south to Wilmington and then "execute a similar mission on their return north to Fayetteville." Two men accused as leaders of this alleged plot, Dave and Jim, were killed by a mob days later. This is a torture-extracted account of a rumored future plan naming Fayetteville as a target — not a record of any actual event, arrest, or legislative act in Cumberland County itself, and this entry does not present it as more than that.

Sourcing Caveats for Future Sessions

The Confessions document: its reliability is genuinely disputed among historians; treat every direct quote attributed to Turner as "as recorded by Gray," not Turner's unmediated words.

Death tolls: white victims given as 55–65 depending on source; Black reprisal victims range even more widely, from roughly 23 to over 200, reflecting how poorly the extrajudicial killings were documented.

The Duplin County "confession": rests entirely on torture-extracted testimony per NCpedia's own account — treat its content as unreliable while treating the killings of Dave and Jim as a documented historical event in its own right.

Citations

Chicago Notes-Bibliography style, primary and institutional sources.

1. "The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va.," Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>.
2. "Turner's Revolt, Nat (1831)," Encyclopedia Virginia, Virginia Humanities, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/entries/turners-revolt-nat-1831/>.
3. "Nat Turner's Rebellion: Repercussions Felt in N.C.," North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, August 21, 2016, <https://www.dncr.nc.gov/blog/2016/08/21/nat-turners-rebellion-repercussions-felt-nc>.
4. "Slave Rebellions," NCpedia, State Library of North Carolina, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.ncpedia.org/slave-rebellions>.
5. "August 1831: North Carolina and Nat Turner," NC Miscellany, University of North Carolina Libraries, accessed September 13, 2026, https://blogs.lib.unc.edu/nmc/2009/08/01/this_month_aug_1831/.
6. "Nat Turner's Rebellion," Africans in America, PBS/WGBH, accessed September 13, 2026, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3p1518.html>.

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