How Nat Turner's Failed Revolt Changed the Debate on Slavery

On August 22, 1831, a group of slaves began a revolt in the county of Southampton, Virginia, that would go down in history as the largest uprising against the [Peculiar Institution](#) in nineteenth-century America. The rebellion was led by Nat Turner, a slave from Southampton, one of the few southern counties where black Americans were the majority.

Turner was born in bondage in 1800. As a child, he was taught to read and write, which would serve him later in life when he preached the gospel among his fellow slaves. At the age of twenty, he began to experience religious revelations and became convinced that he had been chosen by God to carry out the mission, [which was revealed to him a few years later](#), namely "to arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons."

The insurrection resulted in the death of nearly 200 people, 140 of whom were either slaves or free blacks. Although Turner managed to escape and hide in the woods for two months, he eventually was captured, tried and executed.

Turner's uprising was an exception. Contrary to slave communities in the Caribbean where slaves had led dozens of revolts and succeeded in some of them, slave insurrections were very unusual in the Antebellum South. What are the reasons behind this?

Slavery scholar [Eugene Genovese](#) provides three explanations. First, economic hardship and famine were common among slave communities in the Caribbean, which often led to social unrest and, ultimately, rebellions. In contrast, US slaves were relatively better fed than their Caribbean counterparts.

Second, plantations in the South were quite small, which made it difficult for slaves to organize on a large scale. Finally, the fact that the slave population widely outnumbered slaveholders facilitated the emancipation of the British and French colonies in the Caribbean. Yet this wasn't the case in the South, where slaves accounted for around [one third of the population](#).

Turner's revolt never posed a threat to the institution of slavery in the Antebellum South. In fact, it never involved more than 80 slaves at its peak. However, the revolt spread panic among the Southern population and three thousand troops were mobilized to suppress the insurrection. What was the real impact of Turner's uprising?

It is now widely accepted by slavery scholars that Turner's revolt led to a [change in the proslavery argument](#) in the 1830s and thereafter. The institution of slavery went from being considered an "evil in the abstract" to becoming a "positive good" that needed to be defended at all costs.

For instance, Thomas R. Dew, a professor of Political Economy at William and Mary College in Virginia, published in 1832 an [analysis of the debate on the abolition of slavery](#) that took place in the Virginia Legislature in the aftermath of Turner's rebellion where he argued against emancipation on the grounds that it would cause "a greater injury to both masters and slaves."

Similarly, George Fitzhugh, a nineteenth-century social theorist, [pointed out](#) that slavery was essential to protect "the weakest members of a society" that would otherwise find themselves defenseless in a capitalist society based on free labor.

Turner's revolt occupies a prominent position in the history of slavery in nineteenth-century America. Even though Nat Turner never represented a threat to the South's status quo, the revolt he led marked a turning point insofar as it helped shape the new proslavery arguments that emerged in the decades

before the onset of the American Civil War.

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Image Credit:
Nate Parker as Nat Turner in Birth of a Nation (Fox Searchlight