

Nat Turner & His Rebellion

by Devin C. Parhms

The slave rebellion of 1831 led by Nat Turner is arguably one of the most well-known and documented rebellions in American history. From the early 20th century up to modern publications authors, scholars, and historians have depicted and attempted to gather the true motivation for the revolt that ravished southeastern Virginia and as well as the impact it had on Northern and Southern communities. The perception in early accounts gives the impression that the revolts did very little to effect the psyche of southern citizens and abolitionist while as early as the 1960s scholars began to imply the true significance of Nat Turner's revolt which caused mass paranoia and a changed mindset of the antebellum south. Not only was there a shift in ideology concerning the aftermath of the revolts, the primary cause of the revolt itself changed from Nat merely being led by "the spirit" to including psychological effects of being owned by several different masters with no hope of gaining his freedom. Over the last 70 years scholars have challenged the stance of Nat Turner's impact and his motives.

Written in 1931 Lamar Middleton's *Revolt, U.S.A* asserts that Nat Turner's actions throughout the rebellion were strongly influenced and led by his Christian beliefs and what he would describe as "the spirit." In his book, Middleton depicts Turner as a man who "sincerely believed himself appointed by the 'spirit' to a place of leadership over the "negroes" yet "had a mission, but precisely what he was never certain."¹ The spirit "failed" Nat in Middleton's words, which contributed to the fall of the rebellion along with Turner not being sure of "what the visions meant."² According to Middleton the thought of abolitionists believing that the cause of the revolts stemmed from "the injustice of slavery in Southampton County" was "beyond the truth."³ Middleton also denounces the importance of the slave

¹ Lamar Middleton, *Revolt, U.S.A* (1938),

<http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015027038192;view=1up;seq=1>.

² Ibid., 236.

³ Ibid., 235.

revolt within the white community by mentioning various other revolts that were put down throughout the south as well as the relatively calmness in the slave states following Turner's revolt. In his own words Middleton implies that Nat Turner's revolt was nothing extraordinary stating, "before the Turner massacres Negro insurrections were not uncommon" which gives the impression that it was one of many and just like the rest, it had been put down.⁴ According to the author, Nat Turner's actions "discouraged further attempts by the Negro..." and "corner abolitionist could be effectively silenced by reminders of Southampton."⁵ In the Lamar Middleton view Nat Turner's revolt was insignificant in the grand scheme of the southern society and was one of many revolts with little resounding impact.

Disputing Lamar Middleton's "impact" position, Herbert Aptheker in 1966 authored the book *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* which challenges Middleton's claims that the revolt had no impact on abolitionist or southern psyche. The stance that white citizens were not on alert in the wake of the rebellion was confronted by Aptheker when he states "...the Turner Revolt led a number of white people to leave their homes and seek more secure abodes" as well as claiming "...the shift in expressed ideology was simultaneous with the increased uneasiness of the slave regions."⁶ Though Middleton claimed abolitionists were silenced, it is evident that they were still prevalent in their stance. According to Aptheker abolitionist still created letters, pamphlets and conducted speeches to further their cause and try to put a halt to slavery.⁷ In Herbert Aptheker's view, Nat Turner indeed had an effect on white society and clearly proves his point.

Stephen B. Oates furthers the idea that white southerners were impacted by the rebellion of Nat Turner in his 1975 publication of *The Fire's of Jubilee*. Oates not only reassures the fear of the white southern population, he also takes a look at the paranoia that ensued. Southerners were so inclined to blame an outside influence for Turner's revolt; they foolishly aimed their frustration at a man named William Lloyd Garrison. It was a foolish move driven by fear because "ironically enough this dedicated pacifist rocked national attention because Southern whites accused him of inciting slave insurrections" and from their own paranoia "...made his reputation."⁸ Oates is stating not only were southerners blaming the wrong man for enticing Turner who probably never even heard of Mr. Garrison,

⁴ Ibid., 236.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1966) 93-97.

⁷ Ibid., 97.

⁸ Stephen B. Oates, *The Fires of Jubilee: Nat Turner's Fierce Rebellion*, (New York: 1975) 133-145.

they helped create notoriety for the movement they wanted to destroy. Oates echoes Aptheker's stance of white fear in his book by pointing out the fact "they could never escape the possibility that somewhere, maybe even in their own slave quarters, another Nat Turner was plotting to rise up and slit their throats."⁹ Stephen Oates emphatically proves the point that white southerners did have fear within their hearts and minds as they simply created their own problems out of paranoia.

David F. Allmendinger refutes earlier claims of the "spirit" being the motivator of Nat Turner in his 2014 book entitled *Nat Turner and the Rising Southampton County*. During the younger stages of Turner's life, Allmendinger puts in perspective that Nat indeed had great intelligence for a slave and "because of his unusual intelligence his masters might offer him special treatment, perhaps freedom" but "in time his masters proved disappointing."¹⁰ Allmendinger mentions the fact that seven different masters owned Nat Turner by the time the rebellion took place and "the transfer to yet another owner, coming after the reviling and the whipping became a turning point, a confirmation that the chain of possession would continue into the future and that none of these people would free anyone for any purpose."¹¹ The author puts in perspective that after being owned by seven different human beings with the chance of freedom slipping away as each day passed, Nat Turner realized that he will never see freedom unless he takes matters into his own hands. This fact is significant because it paints a deeper picture on of the "spirit" argument. The "spirit," though mentioned by the author, is a shallow excuse for Turner's actions because the treatment and lies fed to Nat throughout his life had a heavy effect on his motivation for freedom. Through research and the confessions of Nat Turner himself, Allmendinger provides a counter argument to the notion that the "spirit" caused Nat's rebellion by accounting for his lack of trust that his owners will do the right thing as well as his superior intelligence deeming the only way he could obtain freedom is by getting it himself, which led to his rebellion.

Adding on to Oates and Aptheker's claims, *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism* written by Kevin Pelletier in 2015 further explores the thought of the fear brought on by Nat Turner. Though Nat Turner is only covered for a portion of the book Pelletier clearly states the terror and fear he imposed among white southerners. Pelletier claims that Nat Turner "did succeed in

⁹ Ibid., 145.

¹⁰ David F. Allmendinger, *Nat Turner and the Rising Southampton County* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), <http://e-proxy.twu.edu:2104/lib/twuniv/re ader.action?docID=10921868&ppg=228>.

¹¹ Ibid., 20.

terrorizing the planter class with the image of a slave who might, at any moment, kill his master while he sleeps."¹² The atrocious act of "callously disposing of a sleeping infant" horrified the antebellum conscious to a point where they felt no white man, woman or child was safe. Pelletier puts in perspective that Nat Turner's actions implanted the idea that "black men are not to be trusted" to the point that even the innocence of a child was not safe from the "wrath" of a black man. Pelletier's description of the fear caused by Nat Turner derails earlier claims by Middleton that the white community was not affected in some way by the rebellion.

Nat Turner's rebellion was not the first rebellion in American history, but it sure was the loudest. Nat Turner not only led the most notable slave revolt in American history, but he put the fear of God within white southerners. The sheer thought of never being handed his freedom, led Nat to the point where he felt he had no option left but to kill and cause pure terror. The tale of Nat Turner transformed through the years from a man who led an unsuccessful and insignificant rebellion to one who will go down as the most influential and important slave rebellion in American History. The question is not why Nat Turner committed the actions he committed, but how can a man be driven to the point where his only chance for freedom is death.

¹² Kevin Pelletier, "David Walker, Nat Turner, And the Logic of Sentimental Terror," in *Apocalyptic Sentimentalism: Love and Fear in the U.S. Antebellum Literature* (University of Georgia Press, 2015), <http://ezproxy.twu.edu:2104/lib/twuniv/reader.action?docID=10987034&ppg=50>.