

Nat Turner: Rebel Hero or Murderous Psychopath?



Many people in the United States, not just in the South, saw Nat Turner not only as a criminal but as literally insane. Analyze each document in this packet and answer the questions that go along with them. As you do try to determine to determine if his actions were heroic, insane or worse.

Document 1: Historical Background

Adapted from <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-newnation/4574>

Nat Turner was born into slavery in Southampton, Virginia. In his twenties, he was a spiritual leader among his fellow slaves, and many people believed that he had been chosen by God to do great things. Then, in the 1820s, he had a series of visions through which he believed God was commanding him to prepare himself for a great battle against evil. In February 1831, a solar eclipse seemed to Turner to be the sign he was waiting for, and he began preparations for an insurrection. On August 13, the sun appeared blue-green in the sky, and Turner and his friends took this as the final sign.

On August 22, 1831, Nat Turner and six fellow slaves began their attack. Their plan was to move systematically from plantation to plantation in Southampton and kill all white people connected to slavery, including men, women, and children. They started on their own plantation and murdered Turner's owner and his family. During the next twenty-four hours, Turner and his fellow insurgents moved throughout the county to eleven different plantations, killing fifty-five people and inspiring fifty or sixty enslaved men to join their ranks. They then moved on to the town of Jerusalem with the intention of destroying the town and killing all the inhabitants. But before they could reach their destination, they were stopped by a heavily armed white militia. The Governor had called about three thousand militiamen to put down the rebellion.

The white militia hunted down and soon captured or killed the men who had participated in the rebellion. When Turner was finally captured, he was tried, convicted, and then hanged. Fifty-four other men were executed. Then, as fear spread through the white population, white mobs turned on blacks who had played no role in the uprising. An estimated two to three hundred African Americans, most of whom were not connected to the rebellion, were murdered by white mobs. In the aftermath of the rebellion, the state legislature of Virginia considered abolishing slavery, but instead voted to tighten the laws restricting blacks' freedom in hopes of preventing any further insurrection.

1. What evidence is there in this text that Turner was insane?
2. What happened to many African Americans because of the rebellion?

Document 2: Newspaper Illustration Shortly After the Event

HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA



The Scenes which the above Plate is designed to represent, are – Fig 1. A Mother begging for the lives of her children. – 2. Mr. Travis, cruelly murdered by his own Slaves. – 3. Mr. Harrow, who bravely defended himself until his wife escaped. – 4. A company of mounted Dragoons in pursuit of the Blacks.

3. If you saw this in a newspaper in 1831 what would you think about Nat Turner?
4. How could Figure 4 in the picture support the idea that Turner was a hero?

Document 3: Testimony of Nat Turner recorded by Thomas Gray

In my childhood a circumstance occurred which made an unforgettable impression on my mind. While I was playing with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overheard and said it had happened before I was born-- but I stuck to my story. Others were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shown me things that had happened before my birth.

And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose. My grandmother, who was very religious, and to whom I was much attached--my master, who belonged to the church, and other religious persons who visited the house, and whom I often saw at prayers, noticing my uncommon intelligence for a child, remarked I had too much sense to be raised as a slave, and if I was, I would never be of any service to anyone. To a mind like mine, restless, inquisitive and observant of everything that was passing, it is easy to suppose that religion was the subject to which it would be directed.

5. If you met someone who claimed to be able to tell stories that happened before they were born, what would you think of them? Explain.
6. How does Turner try to justify his actions?

Document 4: The Richmond Enquirer on Nat Turner's Rebellion

What strikes us as the most remarkable thing in this matter is the horrible ferocity of these monsters. They remind one of a parcel of blood-thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps. The danger is thought to be over-but the lower country should be on the alert. The case of Nat Turner warns us. No black man ought to be permitted to be a Preacher through the country. The law must be enforced or the tragedy of Southampton appeals to us in vain.

A fanatic preacher by the name of Nat Turner who had been taught to read and write, and permitted to go about preaching in the country, was at the bottom of this infernal brigandage. He was artful, impudent and vindictive, without any cause or provocation that could be assigned. They numbered about 40 or 50; and with knives and axes-knocking on the head, or cutting the throats of their victims. as they went from house to house, they drank hard alcohol -and it is believed, that in consequence of their being drunk, or just tired, they paused in their murderous career about 12 o'clock on Monday.

7. What are some words used in this newspaper article that make Turner sound like a villain?
8. This newspaper was written near where the rebellion happened. Why might that make this news story biased?

Conclusion

Based on the evidence here and your previous learning write a Rundown x3 answering the question: Should we view Nat Turner as a hero or a villain?