

1831

NAT TURNER REBELLION

(1) August 1831 in Southampton, Virginia was the setting for one of the largest and deadliest slave rebellions in American history. Led by religious prophet and enslaved man Nat Turner, the rebellion struck fear into the hearts of whites throughout the South and left aftershocks that would last well into the post-Civil War era. The rebellion began on the night of August 21, when Turner, possibly inspired by a solar eclipse which he believed to be a religious sign, led a group of six slaves from plantation to plantation killing white people as they went. They hoped this would inspire other slaves to join them; Turner would



(Library of Congress)

eventually gather over fifty others who joined him in killing nearly sixty white people, including women and children, before white militiamen stopped the rebellion. Turner eluded capture for over two months, but he was eventually executed along with about fifty other African Americans. Though the rebellion lasted less than three days, the equally violent response further complicated the status of slavery in the United States for decades.

The rebellion caused panic among the whites of Southampton. Many fled their homes, and a white militia force assembled to put down the rebellion and capture Turner's men. However, the trials and executions were only the beginning of the violence. As fear spread throughout the region, whites retaliated and killed an estimated two to three hundred African Americans. Eventually, the government of Virginia intervened to end the carnage, but the damage was already done. Since the successful slave rebellion in Haiti in 1791, whites across the South had lived in constant fear of slave insurrections and faced the question of how to protect themselves, especially in the areas where the enslaved population outnumbered the white population.

((1) Excerpt from *National Park Service*) "No claim to original U.S. Government works.")