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### **Slave Rebellions in the United States**

During the British colonization of America and the later formation of the United States of America, slavery was alive and well within its borders. Starting at Jamestown in 1619 with the arrival of a Dutch vessel carrying twenty black indentured servants (McKissack 13), the slave population grew considerably over the next two hundred years, eventually outnumbering the white population in many locales. By 1860 they accounted for 75% of the population in the South (Bailey 360) and in some South Carolina counties blacks outnumbered whites on a scale of almost five to one (McKissack 5.) This situation was not the least of the slaveholder's concerns, for a well organized slave revolt could easily overpower the less numerous white population. As will be discussed in this paper, this event played out several times but never resulted in a complete victory for the slaves, at least not in the United States. Slaves in the United States had the ability and numbers to overthrow slaveholders on a massive scale, but they lacked the unity, commitment, and tools to succeed. However, the fear this threat invoked was successful in causing the slaveholders to live an apprehensive life and one that was self-degrading (Bailey 362.)

Slaves were first imported from overseas, mostly from the west coast of Africa, and sold to slaveholders in the Americas. They were originally captured by African coastal tribes, who traded them in crude markets on the tropical beaches to itinerant European and American flesh merchants. Usually branded and bound, the captives were herded aboard sweltering ships for the gruesome "middle passage" where death rates ran as high as 20 percent (Bailey 71.) "Perhaps 10

million Africans were carried in chains to the New World in the three centuries or so following Columbus's landing. Only about 400,000 of them ended up in North America, the great majority arriving after 1700" (Bailey 70.) Blacks accounted for nearly half the population of Virginia by 1750 (Bailey 71.) Slaves were more numerous in the southern states, where they worked on the rice and indigo plantations under hellish conditions.

As stated by McKissack, "Slavery is as old as recorded history and so are slave rebellions."

(1). According to Herbert Aptheker, three factors appear to have had some influence in promoting slave unrest in the United States: a relative increase in the number of Negroes as compared with that of the whites accentuated the danger arising from the former; industrialization and urbanization were phenomena that made the control of slaves more difficult; and, perhaps most important, economic depression, bringing increased hardships, sharpened tempers, forced liquidations of estates (including the human beings involved), and more widespread leasing of slaves, induced rebelliousness (114). This paper focuses on and discusses the larger slave rebellions, but less organized resistance was more widespread and more successful ("Slavery in the United States.") These included silent sabotage, work slowdowns, and individual physical resistance. McKissack states that "masters were constantly plagued with tools that were mysteriously broken, gates that were left open for livestock to stray, boats left to drift, and false illnesses" (17).

The fear of a successful slave rebellion in the United States was not unfounded. In 1791, Toussaint L'Ouverture led a slave revolution on the French colony of Saint-Domingue that ended with the abolition of slavery there and the formation of Haiti, the first black nation in the Western Hemisphere (McKissack 5.) Contrary to the efforts of the American slaveholders, news of this event eventually reached slaves in the United States and they used it as a rallying cry for revolt.

One of the earliest slave rebellions in the United States was the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina. The rebellion was not well documented and only one eyewitness account exists (Thornton 1102). It was one of the largest and costliest in the history of the United States (Thornton 1101), led by an Angolan slave named Cato (or Jemmy, depending on the source.) He used his knowledge of drums to communicate with other African-born slaves and soon a group of twenty men and women joined him as a rebel fighting unit (McKissack 22). Starting at the Stono River, Cato overtook two guards and captured arms and ammunition from a storehouse. The group then began marching towards Florida where they intended to live alongside other runaways (McKissack 23). They continued attracting other slaves with the beating of their drums and soon their force reached about one hundred in number. After marching approximately 12 miles, the group stopped in a large field to celebrate their victory. The celebration was premature, for it gave the militia time to surround the party and a battle ensued. The slaves dispersed, and over the next ten days, fourteen slaves and seven whites were killed (McKissack 23). Cato was captured and promptly executed. The purpose behind this rebellion appeared to be an escape to freedom in Florida, not a revolution. But it shows that slaves were eager and able to rebel, at whatever the cost.

Another major revolt occurred in Virginia during 1800, organized by a twenty-four year old slave named Gabriel Prosser. Prosser was highly influenced by Toussaint's victory in Haiti, and often read about it "out loud to groups of slaves who cheered and applauded as the scenes unfolded" (McKissack 61). His plan was to mount a surprise attack on Richmond, raiding the armory (Hooker), capturing arms, burning warehouses, and perhaps taking the governor, James Monroe, hostage (McKissack 62). After months of planning, where he managed to gather an armory of weapons (Hooker), Prosser had over a thousand recruits ready to assist in the revolt. It was to take place at midnight, August 30<sup>th</sup>, 1800, but at noon on that day it began to rain,

generating a flood that washed out the bridges into Richmond (Hooker). Additionally, two slaves betrayed him and the local militia was alerted and instructed to put down the revolt. Prosser temporarily escaped with the help of the captain of a coastal schooner (McKissack 65). He was later captured in Norfolk in September 1800, put on trial, and hanged on October 7<sup>th</sup>, 1800.

Had it not been for Prosser's unfortunate luck with nature and the betrayal of two of his followers, it is likely he would have successfully taken the city of Richmond (Hooker). One can only speculate what may have happened from there, but it's possible his success would have inspired other slaves to join his revolt leading to a massive battle between the whites and the blacks.

In 1801 another slave attempted to start a revolt but was also foiled by betrayal (McKissack 69). Betrayal was often a major obstacle to organizing successful slave revolts. This made the leader's job even more challenging because he not only had to keep the plan hidden from whites, but also hidden from many of his fellow slaves since not all could be trusted.

Denmark Vesey, another slave inspired by the Haitian revolution, was a free black in Charleston who was executed in 1822 for encouraging South Carolina slaves to rise up (Wiener 21). Vesey was a literate man who bought his freedom at the age of thirty with money he'd won in a lottery (McKissack 72). For two decades he enjoyed a relatively prosperous life working as a carpenter (Smith 80). In late 1821, Charleston authorities closed the black-operated Hampstead A.M.E. Church. Vesey, being a religious man, was infuriated by this and began planning his rebellion (McKissack 76). He organized groups by picking leaders who could recruit large numbers of slaves and lead them in the completion of their assigned operations. They were given enough information to successfully carry out their individual part in the revolt, but only Vesey knew all the details (McKissack 77). Vesey knew that the more people involved, the more likely

the chance of betrayal. By not disclosing all the details, Vesey was able to ensure that if one person were caught, he would be unable to identify other participants or endanger the whole scheme. His plan involved setting fire to the city of Charleston, killing all the white people, seizing ships in the harbor and sailing to Haiti (Wiener 21). The revolt was to start on the second Sunday in July 1822 with as many as nine thousand men involved (McKissack 79). Almost all the slaves in the plantations surrounding Charleston had joined the revolt (Hooker). But like Prosser's foiled plan before it, a slave betrayed him by informing his master of the plan. Because of this, Vesey moved the revolt date ahead by one month. At first the authorities were unaware how significant the conspiracy was. Because Vesey created cells that were unaware of the actions of other cells, the scheme at first appeared small. Two leaders of the plot were even arrested and questioned, but later released when their composure and coolness fooled the wardens (Aptheker 271). Another slave then turned informer and more arrests followed, with one slave agreeing to act as a spy. This soon led to complete disclosure and one hundred and thirty-one blacks were arrested. In the end, thirty-seven were hanged between June 18<sup>th</sup> and August 9<sup>th</sup>, including Vesey.

There has been some debate over what role Vesey really had in this revolt. Most historians have relied on the official report of the trial, published after the court proceedings. But in "Denmark Vesey: A new verdict" Wiener states that Michael Johnson, professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, has argued that all the testimony was coerced by beatings and the threat of execution, so none of it should be taken at face value (21). Johnson comes to this conclusion from reviewing the court transcript itself, which is different in crucial respects from the official report. For one thing, the transcript indicates that Vesey confronted and questioned his accusers whereas the official report states nothing about this. It also indicates that "there was no consensus among the witnesses that Vesey was the head of the plot; at least six named people

other than Vesey as the leader” (Wiener 21). Hooker states, “Vesey’s revolt was immensely frightening to southern slave owners. Not only was it difficult to crack the plot, despite the fact that thousands of slaves were involved, but the sheer thoroughness of the violence planned chilled the hearts of even the most confident slave owners.”

One of the most famous and bloodiest revolts was the Nat Turner slave revolt of 1831 in Southampton, Virginia. It lasted for two days and resulted in the deaths of approximately fifty-seven whites, mostly women and children (Beaulieu 150). The decade preceding this event was one of economic depression throughout the South and marked by a dangerously disproportionate rate of population growth, that of Negroes distinctly outstripping that of the whites (Aptheker 293). These conditions spurred a feeling of malaise in the slaveholding area, resulting in the expansion and development of anti-slavery feeling. Aptheker states that “it was into such a situation (one is tempted to assert, though proof is, of course, not at hand, that it was because of such a situation) that the upraised dark arms of vengeance of Turner and his followers crashed in the summer of 1831” (294).

Nat Turner was born on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1800, and was raised by his paternal grandmother and mother (McKissack 99). His mother was born in Africa and taught Nat about the many African traditions, including reading prophetic signs. Nat learned how to read and spent much time reading the Bible (Aptheker 295). When in his early teens, he began having dreams and later daylight visions (McKissack 100). He became convinced that he was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty, and in the spring of 1828, while working in the fields, he claimed to have been visited by a spirit that told him a serpent had been loosened and that he should take on and fight against it (Aptheker 296). Turner then waited for a sign from God, which came to him in the form of a solar eclipse on February 12<sup>th</sup>, 1831. From this he set out his plans for a rebellion that was to take place on the Fourth of July, involving him and four

other slaves. But when this day arrived, Nat was ill, so he decided to wait for another sign before carrying out his rebellion (Aptheker 297). This day came on August 13<sup>th</sup> when, according to Aptheker, the sun turned a greenish blue color. McKissack said the eclipse happened on this day, so there appears to be some confusion between the authors on this matter (103). Whatever the case, Turner felt this event was yet another sign and rescheduled the rebellion for the night of August 21<sup>st</sup>. Their first attack was against Nat's master and his family (Aptheker 298). Hooker states that they executed all the members of the family with only one hatchet and one broadax between them ("Slave Rebellions"). They took all the weapons, ammunition, and horses they could find, recruiting several more slaves along the way (McKissack 105). From there they moved on to the next house where they repeated the same action. Within twenty-four hours the rebellion had grown to approximately seventy slaves, and at least fifty-seven whites had been killed within a twenty-mile range (Aptheker 298). "Turner planned to raid the larger plantations, recruit others, then escape into the Dismal Swamp where they could form a community and lead guerrilla warfare on the plantations" (McKissack 105). It never got that far. Turner's group stopped at a farm owned by James Parker in order to recruit more slaves. This took longer than expected and a volunteer corps of whites arrived, causing the slaves to retreat. "By the morning of the 24<sup>th</sup>, three companies of artillery with a field piece and one hundred stands of spare arms, together with detachments of men from the warships Warren and Natchez were on their way to the scene of the trouble" (Aptheker 300). Other soldiers joined, and a massacre soon followed. The exact number of blacks that were killed was never known, but in excess of one hundred is likely (Aptheker 301). Turner himself escaped and went into hiding for over two months (McKissack 106). He was caught on October 30<sup>th</sup>, tried, and hanged on November 11<sup>th</sup>, 1831 (Aptheker 302). Although the number of slaves involved in Turner's rebellion was small compared to those of Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vesey, the brutal deaths of fifty-seven

whites--men, women, and children--caused much fear and outrage in the South (McKissack 106). Many feared that more slaves were hiding in the swamps, waiting to sneak in and murder them in their sleep.

As can be seen from these failed revolts in the United States, slaves were willing to rise up and fight back against those who enslaved, even when their numbers were small and the risks great. Both Prosser and Vesey were successful in organizing thousands of men to revolt, but both were betrayed by other slaves. This lack of unity was common among the slave population. Some slaves were treated better than others and did not want to risk losing their lives and families to a revolt, especially when the outcome was uncertain. Others may have actually feared for the lives of their master and his family, and yet others fled during the revolt, unwilling to commit to the cause. Some historians emphasize the behavior of certain captives as a function of their specific African origin. The Bijagos, the Djolas, and the Balantas tended to resist and commit suicide more frequently to avoid capture (Lara 6). Especially in the case of Vesey, if the betrayal had not happened, it is likely the revolt would have succeeded, at least initially. Similar to the Revolutionary War in America, slaves were willing to fight for their freedom, even when the odds were stacked against them. Perhaps one successful revolt would have been all that was needed to make slaveholders reconsider their actions, due to fear or other causes, resulting in abolition much sooner than the end of the Civil War in 1865.



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