Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County

The Southampton Rebellion remains the most famous slave rebellion in American history. It was not the largest or even the first. From the hinterlands of the African continent to the plantations of the New World, rebellion and resistance on the part of enslaved African Americans was common, persistent, and widespread. But the Southampton Rebellion, also called Nat Turner’s Rebellion, captured the attention of the American nation in the late summer of 1831. The death of nearly 60 whites at the hands of enslaved people motivated Virginia’s leaders to consider an end to slavery within the Commonwealth’s borders. Nat Turner, the rebellion’s charismatic leader, became an instant folk hero that would live on to inspire generations of resistance and social movements. Historians have long been fascinated with the life story of Nat Turner and the details of the rebellion that lasted from late on the 21st to the 23rd of August 1831. From 19th-century abolitionist texts to more contemporary historical treatments, authors have almost always fashioned Nat Turner as the rebellion’s central personality. David F. Allmendinger, Jr., follows in this tradition of centering Turner’s compelling life story in his well-researched study, Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County.

The rebellion was a watershed moment in antebellum history but it was also a community crisis with a deep local history that reaches back beyond even the lifetime of its most prominent actors. The book’s first chapter begins with the compelling line, ‘Of all the accounts that appeared in 1831, only the memoir within The Confessions of Nat Turner advanced the notion that the rebellion leader’s motives had a history’ (p. 11). Allmendinger valuably asserts that the Southampton Rebellion has a history of its own and sets about narrating it. To do so he begins with one of the most famous sources associated with the Southampton Rebellion, a pamphlet titled, The Confessions of Nat Turner. Shortly after local authorities sentenced Nat Turner to hang for his role in orchestrating the rebellion, a local lawyer named Thomas R. Gray questioned him and took down Turner’s account of his actions. Gray published his interview with Turner shortly after Turner’s death. Allmendinger closely adheres to the oral history provided by Nat Turner in this interview to structure Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County. He builds a timeline of Southampton County history before the rebellion crafting a narrative around Turner’s own words that takes Turner’s role as an oral historian of Southampton County seriously.

The author divides the book into three distinct sections: Masters, Rebellion, and Telling Evidence. In the first
section he focuses on the history of intertwined white families in the section of Southampton where Nat Turner grew up. The section details in four chapters the many economic and kinship connections between the Reece, Francis, and Turner families. Through the lives of these families Allmendinger traces the county’s deepening commitment to slavery bolstered by white kinship in the decades before the rebellion took place that Turner would rebel against in adulthood. Following Turner’s biography, the author starts with turn of the 19th-century Southampton County. He relies heavily on traditionally consulted sources like court records, wills, and census records to corroborate Turner’s narrative and the historical development of the estates of white families in the county. He charts genealogies that intersected through marriage and property holding to create a much more connected picture of the white victims of the rebellion. The boundaries between farms and households that seem so solid and immovable on historical maps become permeable and dissolve in light of these families’ generational ties within the county. Most importantly with their tendency to use those ties to solidify access to property, including enslaved property, their economic interdependence becomes strikingly clear. Allmendinger uses the details of intertwining family histories to demonstrate the white community’s deepening commitment to slavery. He also notes how the choices of white slave owners lined up with Turner’s own narrative of developing religious and radical consciousness.

Section two chronicles the events of the Southampton Rebellion with this neighborhood history in mind. Again, the author emphasizes the interconnected nature of the white slaveholding community as he charts the many decisions Turner made between February and August of 1831. The author notes that the same local families who built their legacies on slavery in section one, owned the men in Nat Turner’s small group of original co-conspirators that he introduces in section two. Throughout the chapters in this section he highlights the connection of individual slave rebels to the white families that owned them. Allmendinger highlights the close familial connections of victims as he chronicles the series of attacks and small skirmishes throughout the neighborhood that comprised the main events of the rebellion. This emphasis on the tight-knit white community continues into the author’s discussion of how local militia and officials succeeded in putting the uprising down.

The third section provides an account of the rebellion’s immediate aftermath in both the county courthouse and the community. After the local militia put down the uprising in Southampton, local officials jailed a number of African Americans, enslaved and free, who they suspected of involvement in the rebellion plot. As property, enslaved African Americans were valuable assets and their owners fully expected the state to compensate them for the loss of their property in the case of a guilty verdict. Local court officials kept careful records of the trials because they provided official valuations of enslaved property. Allmendinger uses these trials and their conclusions as backdrop for Thomas R. Gray’s interview with Nat Turner. From there he provides a close reading of The Confessions of Nat Turner that includes a detailed history of Gray and a deep interrogation of the pamphlet as a historical source.

The book’s coda begins with Nat Turner’s execution. It does not dwell on how local whites mutilated Nat Turner’s remains, the legislation authorities passed in Richmond that endeavored to expel free African Americans from the Commonwealth, or the broad effects of the Southampton Rebellion. Instead, Allmendinger returns to the small group of white families with than upon whom his investigation is largely built. He briefly defines a community that continues to maintain deep economic and kinship connections. Most importantly, he describes a community with a staunch commitment to slavery as an economic and social system even after the death of nearly 60 of its white members.

The historiography of antebellum American slavery benefits from studies like this that acknowledge the importance of the South’s middle class: small to mid-sized plantation owners. This is ultimately the strength of the text. Allmendinger effectively demonstrates how middling families built financial security and solvency for their heirs across generations by investing in human property. He highlights how, year-by-year, generation-by-generation, slavery did not fade in the Old Dominion but adapted and gained greater importance for non-elite and elite whites alike. Allmendinger presents a detailed and impeccably researched history of white slave owners in the neighborhood most immediately affected by the Southampton Rebellion. Through the twists and turns of probate, chancery, and marriage records, he traces the rising
fortunes of some and the declining prospects of others as they waded through the economic turmoil of early national and antebellum Virginia. He demonstrates how small time slaveholders invested in enslaved property and committed to slavery as an economic system consistently. And he illustrates just how movable human chattels were to white families looking to establish themselves despite the period’s popular depictions of paternal and sentimental relationships between masters and the enslaved.

In this way Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton illustrates in detail what and whom Nat Turner and his co-conspirators were rebelling against. Enslaved rebels knew, sometimes from childhood, the whites that they murdered. It is important to better know the victims of the rebellion in order to better understand what exactly happened in Southampton in 1831. Of course, as this work makes explicit, enslaved people had also always known slavery. This work makes clear that through their formative years the enslaved of Southampton County had only experienced evidence that their owners had no intention of eradicating the county’s driving economic force.

While the author gives the white families most affected by the Southampton Rebellion detailed histories, the African American residents of Southampton County remain a mystery. While readers will find a close reading of Nat Turner’s words as filtered through Gray’s interpretation in The Confessions of Nat Turner, enslaved and free African-American people of Southampton remain the chattels and marks in the ledgers and censuses that Allmendinger engages as his source material. The text traces how enslaved people like Nat Turner passed from owner to owner and the many ways that whites in the county demonstrated their commitment to slave holding. But what of the enslaved experience in the decades that led up to 1831? How did enslaved people survive and resist enslavement before and after the rebellion? Given the broad scholarship on slave rebellion and resistance, a historiography that from its earliest days acknowledged the persistence of resistance on the part of the enslaved, is it really possible that Nat Turner was the sole enslaved person in Southampton with rebellion on his mind?

According the Allmendinger’s own analysis, Nat Turner thought that a great multitude of enslaved people would eventually join him and that other men like him existed who thought as he did that it was time to foment rebellion. Turner as it happened was both right and wrong. Yes, a number of local people, free and enslaved, joined in the rebellion in Southampton County in 1831. Yes, enslaved people and their free white and black allies had long fought and would continue to fight against slavery until its abolition. But, no, the entire enslaved population of the Americas did not rise up against their owners in 1831. The Southampton Rebellion ended at the hands of local militia and slavery remained dominant and intact for another generation. Allmendinger duly notes that there remains no evidence of widespread communication between the small faction Nat Turner assembled and other groups of enslaved people elsewhere. But the question remains: Who were potential allies and rebels and what experiences with the African American community was Turner accounting for when fomenting his violent plan? Enslaved people were not the passive movable chattels that official documentation often makes them out to have been. Slaveholding required a series of physically, mentally, and emotionally violent power negotiations on the part of both the enslaved and slaveholders. While the financial histories of whites in the county provide one look at slavery as an economic system, they only reveal glimpses of how slavery operated as a system of social control and bondage. They almost never reveal the considerable violence that slave holders visited upon their human chattels.

This work begins by taking seriously Nat Turner’s assertion that the Southampton Rebellion has a history. As far as we know from Gray’s account, Turner began with his own childhood, his experience of bondage, and his very early realization that he was special, loved by God, and rightfully free. We also know that Turner fully expected that other enslaved people felt the same way that he did in 1831. And so the history that Turner spoke of was not one of white landowners but of an individual – one of many who would eventually make up the rebellion’s vanguard.

The exhaustive research Allmendinger presents greatly enriches our historical understanding of the Southampton Rebellion through the eyes of its key victims. Many accounts and historical studies of the
rebellion dwell on its broad effects, how it helped to define the antebellum period, and the ways that the rebellion inspired elite Virginians to question, if only briefly, the viability of slavery. This study starts local and remains there. It addresses the question of who and what the enslaved of Southampton were rebelling against rigorously and with exhaustive attention to detail. It also asserts how important slaveholding was to whites in the county. Slaveholding was, even on a small or mid-sized scale, was a conduit to financial security for those who lived in Southampton.

Most importantly, enslaved people were well aware of their economic significance and the dwindling likelihood of manumission. No enslaved person would have been ignorant of these financial realities and their repercussions. With this consistent assertion Allmendinger answers the question persistently asked of historians of resistance and rebellion: Why did enslaved people rebel? He answers by methodically laying out the deep generational entrenchment of the slave system and the very accurate conclusion on the part of the enslaved that whites would only become more invested in their bondage over time. An interrogation of the lives of the enslaved deserves as much depth of coverage as Allmendinger affords his white subjects. Nevertheless Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County reveals important dimensions of the rebellion’s local history and contextualizes the event, as Nat Turner did, within the context of slavery in Southampton County.

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