
Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects

Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects

1971

An Inquiry into some aspects of Nat Turner's Rebellion

Randolph Dennis Werner
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Werner, Randolph Dennis, "An Inquiry into some aspects of Nat Turner's Rebellion" (1971). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. William & Mary. Paper 1539624741.
<https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-74q0-7541>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

AN INQUIRY INTO SOME ASPECTS OF
NAT TURNER'S REBELLION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Randolph Werner
1971

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Randolph Werner
Author

Approved, May 1971

Ludwell H. Johnson
Ludwell H. Johnson, Ph.D.

Boyd Coyner
Boyd Coyner, Ph.D.

Helen C. Walker
Helen Walker, M.A.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
THE SUPPRESSION.....	4
SOME WHITE RESPONSES TO THE REBELLION.....	28
THE REBELLION AND THE MILITIA.....	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	73

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express his appreciation to Mr. Ludwell Johnson for his guidance and criticism throughout the course of this investigation. The author is also indebted to Mr. Boyd Coyner and Miss Helen Walker for their careful reading of the manuscript. In addition a debt of gratitude is owed Mrs. Betsy Smith of the Inter-Library Loans Office of the Earl Gregg Swem Library. This thesis would have been impossible without her assistance and good-humored efforts to fill often vague requests for obscure materials.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines three aspects of the white response to Nat Turner's Rebellion of 1831; the steps taken to crush the rebellion, measures advanced to prevent future rebellions, and the attitudes of whites toward the state militia. Most of the evidence presented is drawn from the official papers of the state government and newspapers, although some private correspondence is included. The evidence examined here tends to substantiate the general interpretation that Nat Turner had an extreme effect on white Virginians.

AN INQUIRY INTO SOME ASPECTS OF
NAT TURNER'S REBELLION

INTRODUCTION

Nat Turner's Rebellion of 1831 was one of the bloodiest antebellum Negro slave revolts. Historians have generally held that Nat Turner had an important influence on white society in Virginia, one of the more significant results of the rebellion being the slavery debates in the 1831-1832 session of the Virginia House of Delegates. The following essay attempts to examine some other aspects of the public response to Nat Turner's Rebellion. Three general aspects of white society in the months following the revolt are examined: the steps taken to crush the rebellion, measures advanced to prevent future revolts, and the white attitude toward the state militia.

This concentration on a few public responses to the revolt has advantages and weaknesses.¹ One of the major weaknesses is a tendency to lose a sense of the diversity of Virginia society. One can find a wide range of private emotions generated by Nat Turner. But this diversity tends to disappear in the public statements and actions, where

¹The term "public responses" is used here to mean the various white reactions to the rebellion declared openly for all to hear and consider. These thoughts, proposals and discussions when grouped together are assumed to reflect the prevailing ideas, beliefs and aims of white Virginians collectively. Black Virginians of course had no public response to the rebellion.

opinions generally clustered around a few widely held assumptions. However, while public responses tend to play down diversity, they also provide some indication of the temper of white society that cannot be derived from private responses.

Another advantage of concentrating on public responses is that we do not place too much emphasis on the acts of individuals. White individuals murdered numerous innocent blacks, and vice-versa, during the days of the rebellion. While the taking of any human life is obviously repulsive, from the distance of 140 years these private murders are relatively unimportant. Such private acts of violence are important only if sanctioned by society, and then only because of what they tell us about that society. It is in this context that the effect of the rebellion on public attitudes toward the militia seems important, for one of the major assumptions of this essay is that only by examining what whites felt confident to say and do in public can we get some indication of the temper of white Virginia in late 1831.

This essay concentrates on the period between the revolt and the beginning of the slavery debates in the House of Delegates, roughly four and a half months. The major reason for this emphasis on a brief time period is that the public interest aroused by the revolt seems to have climaxed with the House debates. By January 1832, public discussion of the event largely passed from the mass of white citizens to their representatives in the legislature.

CHAPTER I
THE SUPPRESSION

Late on August 21, 1831, a disorganized band of approximately sixty Negroes, mostly slaves, probably led by the slave Nat Turner, staged an abortive rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, during which nearly sixty whites were murdered. Within forty-eight hours this attempted rebellion was crushed through the efforts of whites and Negro slaves. Then began a period of approximately three days during which over one hundred Southampton blacks, free and slave, were slaughtered at random. After several weeks of capturing and trying the rebels, the last of the rebellious blacks was executed on November 11, 1831, and Virginia never again experienced an event similar to the Southampton incident. But in the latter days of August, 1831, white Virginians were not altogether sure what they faced in Southampton County.

When news of the rebellion reached Richmond on the morning of August 23, 1831, Governor John Floyd predicted in his diary:

This will be a very noted day in Virginia. At daylight this morning the Mayor of . . . /Richmond/ put into my hands a notice to the public, written by James Trezvant of Southampton County, stating that an insurrection of the slaves in that county had taken place

. . . and that it would take a considerable military force to put them down.¹

Trezvant's plea is interesting because of his belief that a considerable force would be necessary to defeat the rebels. It was not until after the rebellion was crushed that most Virginians began receiving some accurate details of events in Southampton. As far as most white Virginians knew on August 23, they faced a full-scale black uprising.

Much of the men and material needed to suppress any black rebellion in southeastern Virginia had to come from Richmond and Norfolk, the population and administrative centers of the state. Apparently believing they faced a large rebellion, the authorities in these two cities acted without delay in bringing the superior numbers and arms of whites to bear in Southampton. When the Governor received Trezvant's plea, he convened the Council of State to obtain their advice as required by the state constitution. Lieutenant Governor Peter V. Daniel was the only member in Richmond and the Governor moved rapidly to dispatch troops to Southampton. Floyd ordered out the four volunteer companies of Petersburg, one volunteer company from both Norfolk and Portsmouth and the regiments of Southampton and Sussex. The Richmond Dragoons under Captain Randolph Harrison were called out and left the city on Tuesday evening (the 23rd). The Richmond Lafayette Artillery, commanded by Captain John B. Richardson, embarked

¹Charles Ambler, ed., The Life and Diary of John Floyd (Richmond: Richmond Press Inc., 1918), 155.

at 8 o'clock of the same evening for Smithfield on the steamboat "Norfolk," taking with them about one thousand stand of arms and a "good supply of ammunition." Additional arms and ammunition were despatched by wagon for Southampton and Petersburg, at the request of that city's mayor.² With the arrival of the news from Southampton, a temporary company of horsemen turned out for nightly patrol in Richmond until the two volunteer companies returned.³

Beginning on the 23rd the Governor was busy despatching arms to various counties, volunteer companies and militia regiments. Floyd forwarded those arms requests he considered valid to Blair Bolling, the Superintendent of the State Armory at Richmond. By law Bolling was to issue arms only after receiving "triplicate receipts" from groups seeking to obtain state weapons. It is indicative of the flood of requests and the urgency with which the situation was viewed that Bolling found this provision "reprehensible" under the conditions. He took receipts for arms as often as he could get them but did not refuse any arms for lack of receipts. Bolling wrote Floyd that in view of the "emergency" he was "confident that my success in accomplishing it as far as I have under all circumstances will be received as exemption from censure. . . ."⁴

²These actions are described, ibid.; Richmond Enquirer, August 26, 1831; Richmond Constitutional Whig, August 23, 1831.

³Richmond Enquirer, August 26, 1831.

⁴Blair Bolling, Superintendent of the State Armory, to Governor Floyd, November 30, 1831, Virginia Executive Communications (MSS, Box 38, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

As did Richmond, the Norfolk area responded rapidly as news of the rebellion was received on the morning of the 23rd. The Norfolk City Court, under Judge William Taylor, convened and requested Colonel Wainwright, commander of the Marine Corps in Norfolk, to attend its meeting. The Colonel obliged the Court and offered the services of his corps to the city. The Norfolk Court decided not to send these troops to Southampton but to hold them in reserve in case of an emergency in the city. In addition, Commander Warrington of the Norfolk Naval Yard offered the city arms and ammunition sufficient to equip a thousand men. The Court then ordered the Mayor of Norfolk to apply to Colonel House, the commander of Fortress Monroe, a United States government garrison, for as many United States troops as he could spare. The mayor was also instructed to appeal to the United States ships "Natchez" and "Warren" for their marines. This application was delivered to Colonel House at 3 A.M. on the morning of the 24th by an officer of the Norfolk Independent Volunteers. The Colonel ordered three companies of troops with field pieces under Colonel Worth and Major Kirby of the United States Army to Southampton. About 250 troops left Fort Monroe at 6 A.M. of the 24th on a ship, the "Hampton," provided by the city of Norfolk. From Fort Monroe the "Hampton" sailed alongside the "Natchez" and "Warren" lying in Hampton Roads to present the mayor's application. Both Captain Elliot of the "Natchez" and Captain Cooper of the "Warren" volunteered their marines,

Captain Elliot choosing to command these detachments in person.⁵

In addition to men from the Richmond and Norfolk areas, much of the armed strength of eastern Virginia, with some aid from North Carolina, converged on Southampton. Troops from Prince George, Brunswick, Nansemond, Nottoway, Greenville, Princess Anne, Halifax, Sussex, Isle of Wight, Chesterfield counties and the city of Petersburg; militia from Murfreesborough and Northampton County, North Carolina; and thirty citizens of Norfolk and Portsmouth who privately

⁵Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald, August 26, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831; Alexandria Phenix Gazette, August 27, September 1, 1831; William Forrest, Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity . . . Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1853, 193; Robert Howison, A History of Virginia . . ., II (Richmond: Drinker and Morris, 1848), 443; all provide information on events in Norfolk. In his speech to the Legislature on December 4, 1831, Governor Floyd expressed his gratitude "that the readiest aid was afforded by Commodore Elliot of the United States' Navy, and a detachment of sailors from the ship Natchez under his command, who, notwithstanding they had just returned from a long and distant cruise, repaired to the scene. . . ." Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia . . . (Richmond: T. Ritchie, 1832), 9. Both Norfolk papers found the speed with which Fort Monroe troops responded to the Southampton plea "worthy of special notice." Norfolk Herald, August 31, 1831, and American Beacon and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser, September 1, 1831. Southampton whites expressed their thanks for the prompt action by the Norfolk and Portsmouth volunteers in a letter to the American Beacon, September 2, 1831. The actions of Colonel House did not go unnoticed by his superiors. House reported his actions to the United States Adjutant General Robert Jones. The Colonel received a communication from the Adjutant General on the 26th expressing "the entire satisfaction of the President and the Secretary of War, at the promptitude with which you detached three companies of Artillery . . . at the request of the civil authority, on this lamentable and unforeseen occasion." Alexandria Gazette, September 2, 1831.

mounted and equipped themselves, arrived in Southampton before the week was out.⁶ It was reported that by Friday the 26th over three thousand troops were active in Southampton.⁷ The details of the movements of the Southampton rebels faced by these white troops have been described by three historians, and additional details can be obtained from the state's two largest newspapers.⁸ But by the evening of Tuesday, the 23rd,

⁶Richmond Whig, August 29, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, August 26, 30, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, August 27, 30, 1831 /Fredericksburg/ Virginia Herald, August 31, 1831; Rodgers Whichard The History of Lower Tidewater Virginia, II (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1959), 290; David Maydole Matteson Collection, (MSS, Box 4, Library of Congress); Francis Earle Lutz, Chesterfield: An Old Virginia County (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1954), 195; James Scott and Edward Wyatt, Petersburg's Story: A History (Petersburg, Virginia: Whittet and Shepperson, 1960), 65. F. Roy Johnson, The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection (Murfreesborough, North Carolina: Johnson Publishing Co., 1966), 136-138; William S. Drewry, The Southampton Insurrection (Washington, D. C.: Neale Co., 1900), 73-86.

⁷Norfolk Herald, August 26, 1831.

⁸Drewry, Southampton Insurrection; Johnson, Nat Turner's Slave Insurrection; Herbert Aptheker, The Nat Turner Slave Rebellion (New York: Humanities Press, 1966); Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831; and Richmond Whig, August 26, 1831. The present essay tends to substantiate much of what Drewry and Johnson wrote about the suppression of the rebellion. In contrast Aptheker took a sharply different view of the suppression, see Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion, 53-56. There is some merit in re-examining the often studied material concerning the suppression of the rebellion. Drewry's account was marred by a strong pro-slavery bias. He believed that under slavery "both races were benefited. . . . Gentle treatment rendered the slave not only more faithful and affectionate, but more intelligent Slaves were the happiest laboring class in the world. . . ." Southampton Insurrection, 110. Aptheker's account, written in 1937 and published in 1966, noted this bias and theorized that "for the truth of the Turner event it would have been better if Drewry had never published." Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion, i.

Drewry's examination has long been out of print, Johnson's narrative, which closely follows Drewry and is marred by a similar bias, is printed by a small North Carolina firm with limited circulation. Aptheker's is the only account in paperback and is the one most likely to fall into the hands of interested students of Nat Turner's Rebellion. Therefore it is significant that Aptheker, who is decidedly pro-rebel, is probably the least accurate of the three historians of the event.

the rebels were scattered and no additional whites died at their hands. However, white Virginians were unaware that the danger was past.

Prior to the arrival of large numbers of whites from the east and south, the brunt of the organized resistance on the 22nd and 23rd fell to local white militia units. As the alarm spread through Southampton, the county militia began assembling on Monday in Jerusalem, the largest town in the county. The Richmond Enquirer reported that Southampton whites were in such confusion and dismay that it was not until Tuesday night that the regiment was finally mustered. However some detachments were sent off on Monday to search for the rebels.⁹ This local militia unit, and the other early arrivals from Nansemond and Isle of Wight, complained strongly of the lack of adequate firearms and ammunition. Some white militiamen were forced to use fowling pieces and bird-shot prior to the arrival of arms from Richmond.¹⁰ The local whites did manage to defeat the rebels decisively in a confrontation at "Parker's Field" on Monday afternoon, killing about fifteen of the rebels and scattering the rest. From this point on, the whites were on the offensive and the Southampton militia in particular was "most active in ferreting out the fugitives from their hiding places. . . ." ¹¹

⁹Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

By Wednesday the mass of white forces began arriving in the county. The Richmond troop under Captain Harrison arrived about 9 A.M. on Thursday "after a rapid and most fatiguing march" only to find that the United States troops and marines from Norfolk, as well as a cavalry troop from Prince George and several militia units preceded them.¹² John Pleasants, the Senior Editor of the Richmond Whig, accompanied the Richmond force and reported that on the road from Petersburg to Southampton "we found the whole country thoroughly alarmed, every man armed, the dwellings all deserted by the white inhabitants, and the farms most generally left in possession of the blacks."¹³ Pleasants also noted that Jerusalem was crowded with between three and four hundred women from the surrounding area.¹⁴ The thoughts of one Jerusalem resident on the 24th were suggestive of the temper of many Southampton whites. "The oldest inhabitants of our county, have never experienced such a distressing time. . . . Every house, room and corner in . . . [Jerusalem] is full of women and children,

¹²Richmond Whig, August 27, 1831.

¹³Ibid.; Alexandria Gazette, September 1, 1831; Virginia Free Press and Farmers' Repository [Charlestown, Jefferson County], September 1, 1831, reprinted a letter from Petersburg which stated that "For many miles around their [the rebel's] track, the country is deserted by the women and children, but armed troops are in every mile in squads. . . ." Similarly see the Whig of September 3, 1831, and the Alexandria Gazette, September 6, 1831.

¹⁴Richmond Whig, August 27, 1831.

driven from home, who had to take the wood, until they could get to this place. We are worn out with fatigue. . . ."¹⁵

The terror and panic of many whites during the rebellion was probably indicated by rumors circulating in Southampton and vicinity which placed the number of rebels at between one thousand and twelve hundred.¹⁶

The apparent panic in Southampton surely had much to do with the slaughter of Southampton blacks in the latter days of August. Whites were in part responding to what they considered the "barbarities" of the blacks in killing and mutilating whites.¹⁷ Little is known of the massacre of blacks. The Richmond Whig of August 27 and September 3, 1831, provided most of the details. The slaughter of blacks was extremely brutal, and much of it probably committed by Southampton whites. John Pleasants told his readers of

the slaughter of many blacks without trial, and under circumstances of great barbarity. How many have thus been put to death (generally by decapitation or shooting) reports vary. . . . We met with an individual of intelligence, who stated that he himself had killed between 10 and 15. He justified himself on the ground of barbarities committed on the whites. . . . We (the Richmond troop) witnessed with surprize, the sanquinary

¹⁵Quoted in Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831.

¹⁶Richmond Whig, August 27, 1831.

¹⁷Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 157-158 (September 3, 1831); Lynchburg Virginian, September 8, 1831; Richmond Whig, August 27, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, September 1, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831. Cf. Drewry, Southampton Insurrection, 86-87 and Johnson, Nat Turner Slave Insurrection, 109-116.

temper of the population, who evinced a strong disposition to inflict immediate death, upon every prisoner.¹⁸

The slaughter of blacks was so severe that it led the commander of the military forces to take the extraordinary step of publicly condemning the "barbarity" of many whites in the country and threatening any who persisted with punishment "by the rigors of the articles of war."¹⁹ By the 24th when this slaughter of blacks began, the rebellion was crushed, and those on the scene knew it.²⁰

As early as the 25th, Governor Floyd received despatches from Brigadier General Eppes stating that the local militia sent by Floyd were more than sufficient to crush the rebels.²¹ By the 28th Eppes reported to the Governor that "there is no longer danger in this county or its vicinity, and there is not the least danger from the renewal of disturbances."²²

¹⁸Richmond Whig, September 3, 1831. Pleasants felt compelled to offer an apology for the actions of some Southampton whites. He believed "the presence of the troops from Norfolk and Richmond, alone prevented retaliation from being carried much farther." See also American Beacon, August 31, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, September 1, 6, 1831; Norfolk Herald, August 26, 1831; Richmond Whig, August 27, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, September 6, 1831.

¹⁹American Beacon, August 31, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, September 8, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, September 2, 1831.

²⁰Brigadier General Richard Eppes, Southampton County, to Governor Floyd, August 24, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 320, Virginia State Library, Richmond); Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 156 (August 25, 1831).

²¹Ibid.

²²Alexandria Gazette, September 1, 1831, and Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831.

The forces from the Norfolk area arrived back at their stations on the 30th and most of the Richmond troops departed Southampton before the first of September.²³ The Lynchburg Virginian could report on September 1, 1831, that most of the troops in Southampton had been sent home and the Jerusalem jails crowded with upwards of forty Negroes.²⁴ The trials of rebels and suspected rebels continued for weeks and it was not until November 11, 1831, that Nat Turner was executed.²⁵

While most of the trials ended in a matter of weeks, extensive discussions of the rebellion among white Virginians went on for months. These discussions are interesting, in

²³Alexandria Gazette, September 2, 1831, and Norfolk Herald, August 31, 1831.

²⁴Lynchburg Virginian, September 1, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, August 30, 1831; Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 157 (September 1, 1831), who wrote that the captives were "turned over to the courts of the County to be dealt with according to law." The Richmond Enquirer, September 20, 1831, reported, "the military force in Southampton has been disbanded, with the exception of a small force of about seventeen men, who assist in guarding the jail. . . ." There was apparently some confusion over the payment to troops that served in Southampton. See Brigadier General Richard Eppes, Palestine, Virginia, to Adjutant General Bernard Peyton, November 8, 1831, Virginia Executive Communications (MSS, Box 38, Virginia State Library, Richmond). In addition some Southampton residents were displeased with the troop withdrawals. A small group of county residents (6-8) petitioned the United States Secretary of War requesting that some U.S. troops be stationed in Southampton. This petition was referred to Governor Floyd, who declined requesting Federal troops, believing the state had sufficient resources to provide security for Southampton. Alexandria Gazette, September 19, 1831.

²⁵Information concerning these trials is available in Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 159-161; Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond). The transcript of Nat Turner's trial is available on microfilm in Southampton County Court Minutes, 1830-1835, Virginia State Library, Richmond. Cf. Drewry, Southampton Insurrection, 96-102; Johnson, Nat Turner's Slave Insurrection, 146-150.

part, because of the possible insights they provide into the temper of white Virginia. Nat Turner's Rebellion apparently caught most whites completely by surprise. The American Beacon reported with apparent candor that the first news of the uprising "was so awful and unexpected, that it was received with much hesitation and doubt by all to whom it was communicated."²⁶ Virginia newspapers seemingly regarded the Southampton event as something of a freak occurrence. Their initial comments leave one with the impression that they did not understand the meaning or cause of this "outrage."²⁷

²⁶ August 26, 1831. Most Southampton whites were apparently attending a camp meeting and were off-guard when Nat Turner struck. Drewry, Southampton Insurrection, 26. See also the Richmond Enquirer, August 26, 1831; Norfolk Herald, August 24, 1831, which reported that news of the event "for a moment staggered belief; but doubt soon gave way to painful conviction."; Richmond Whig, August 26, 1831; Petersburg Intelligencer, August 26, 1831; and Virginia Free Press, September 15, 1831. It is not unreasonable to assume that Virginia newspapers engaged in a certain amount of censorship in discussing Nat Turner's Rebellion, in part so as not to give encouragement to like-minded blacks. Such self-censorship was hinted at in two papers. The Alexandria Gazette, August 27, 1831, editorialized, "We had hoped that our editorial brethren would have suffered the late riotous movements among some of the miserable and deluded slaves. . . to have passed by without notice. . . . As, however, the disturbance has been noised in all possible directions, and statements made, everywhere almost, of different and contradictory natures, we feel it our duty to furnish our readers with the particulars. . . ." Similarly the editors of the American Beacon refrained from noticing the revolt until measures were taken to suppress it and they had "reliable" information. August 26, 1831. However on the whole the press seems to have acted with unexpected candor.

²⁷ Alexandria Gazette, August 30, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, August 29, 1831; Fredericksburg Herald, August 31, 1831; and Norfolk Herald, August 29, 1831, which referred to the rebellion as an "extraordinary movement."

But this apparent lack of understanding did not in any way dampen the interests of white Virginians in the event. If newspaper accounts are any indication, the "public curiosity" following in the wake of the rebellion gave rise to some exaggerated rumors. For example as previously mentioned whites near Southampton believed the rebels numbered between one thousand and twelve hundred. Despite such rumors Virginia editors tended to discount most information concerning the rebellion. As the Lynchburg Virginian commented, "the public curiosity is so much excited--we are all anxious to learn what has taken place in Southampton. . . . But our endeavors to ascertain the truth have been almost unavailing. There are reports in abundance--but where are the facts to be relied on?"²⁸

It seems that newspaper editors were primarily interested in giving accurate information about the event and therefore discounted most rumors. Other important considerations were probably the desire not to further agitate white Virginians and the aforementioned effort to discourage potential Nat Turners. One implication of much of the discussion of the rebellion was a realization that blacks were a real threat to the dominant white society.

²⁸September 1, 1831. No Virginia newspaper gave any credence to the more catastrophic rumors of black rebellion and all tended to emphasize the small size and importance of the rebellion. Most editors appeared to hold an editorial policy similar to that of the Richmond Whig. "We are warned, in the present excited state of the public mind, not to give currency to any rumors of insurrection we may hear. Our readers are assured that we will publish the earliest authentic information, and will spare no pains in procuring it." September 19, 1831.

This threat was not immediately recognized by all. Initially the rebellion was apparently seen by many as a looting expedition. Most early published reports characterized the rebels as runaway slaves out for plunder. The Whig was typical in reporting, "We understand that the insurrection in Southampton is little more than the irruption of 150 or 200 runaway slaves from the Dismal Swamp, incited by a spirit of plunder and rapine."²⁹ The large majority of early published reports agreed as to the size (under 200), purpose (looting), and composition (runaway slaves) of the Southampton rebels. There was some initial public speculation that this band was aided by white men.³⁰

However it was not long before white Virginians began to realize that their initial image of the Southampton event was inaccurate. As this realization spread white Virginians began to emphasize the racial aspects of the rebellion.³¹

²⁹August 25, 26, 1831. Similarly see the Staunton Virginia Spectator, September 9, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, August 26, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, August 27, 1831; Norfolk Herald, August 29, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, August 29, 1831; Virginia Free Press, September 1, 1831; and American Beacon, August 26, 1831.

³⁰Alexandria Gazette, August 30, 1831, reported that white men assisted the rebels, as did Richmond Enquirer, August 26, 1831. The pointed denial of the presence of white men in a letter reprinted in the Lynchburg Virginian of September 8, 1831, (see note 32) probably indicated that this rumor initially had a considerable following.

³¹If the rebels were merely public outlaws, runaways or whites, whose aim was robbery, they posed no fundamental threat to the status-quo of Virginia society. However when the event was seen in a racial sense, the rebels were a threat to the very foundations of white society.

The increasing concern with the racial aspects of the revolt is indicated by the emphasis given to the racial and status solidarity of the rebels. One Southampton resident wrote of the rebels that "only one free negro was in arms with them, and no white person. Several free negroes, however, have been taken up under strong suspicion of having been engaged in the conspiracy. . . . There was not more than one runaway slave known to be among them; and their apparent force never exceeded forty or fifty."³²

The acknowledgement that freedom was a goal of the rebels followed hard on the heels of the realization that the rebels were slaves and not runaways. Nat Turner allegedly claimed freedom was his goal in a pamphlet given wide circulation in Virginia, and the slavery debates in the legislature make it obvious that white Virginians perceived the nature of the rebels and this goal.³³ It seems likely that many white Virginians were initially unwilling to believe that bondsmen would stage a rebellion with freedom as one of its goals. As a result, the initial reaction of some whites was that this trouble was the work of runaways, chronic malcontents out to plunder the country-side.

³²Lynchburg Virginian, September 8, 1831, reprint of letter dated Southampton, August 31, 1831. (emphasis in original)

³³Thomas R. Gray, The Confessions of Nat Turner . . . (Richmond: T. W. White, 1831) and Joseph C. Robert, The Road from Monticello: A Study of the Virginia Slavery Debate of 1832 ("Historical Papers of the Trinity College Historical Society," XXIV [Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1941/7]), passim.

With the realization that blacks were willing to attack white society, there were perceptible changes in the attitude of white Virginians toward blacks.

There are indications that in the wake of Nat Turner's Rebellion, some whites became leery of gatherings of large numbers of blacks. Governor Floyd received two extended communications on this subject from the Richmond area. One letter from some "Citizens" of Richmond was particularly urgent. It requested that the Governor use his influence to halt a "numerous meeting of the blacks from this city and the surrounding country . . . for the purpose, as they allege, of Religious worship . . . in order to prevent blacks from conspiring against the state."³⁴ As far as these correspondents were concerned, the mere gathering of blacks indicated an imminent rebellion. Similarly "A friend to the City," informed the Governor that he "would be astonished to see the vast number of Negroes assembled . . . on Sabbath mornings. . . . It is very probable that all the worst and most aspiring of them from fifteen to twenty miles around congregate there for the purpose of talking about and organizing insurrections."³⁵

Closely connected with a desire to prevent large congregations of blacks was a tendency to blame black preachers

³⁴"Citizens," Richmond, to Governor Floyd, August 28, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 320, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

³⁵"A friend to the City," Richmond, to Governor Floyd, November, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 322, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

for servile discontent. There was a widespread belief among white Virginians that Nat Turner was a Baptist preacher. This led some Virginians to see a connection between black preachers and rebellion. The Alexandria Gazette probably held a representative editorial position when it argued that the entire Southampton event "was arranged by the negro preachers, who have been suffered to hold their meetings at pleasure, by day and by night, and it seems these scoundrels have poisoned the minds of the negroes."³⁶ The willingness of white Virginians to place part of the blame for the revolt on black preachers had important consequences. Some Virginia churches stopped actively seeking to bring blacks into their fold.³⁷ This move may have reduced the frequency of black-white communication. White Virginians also believed it necessary to curb the activities of black preachers. One of the lessons some whites claimed to draw from the event was the necessity of enforcing existing laws limiting black freedom of actions.³⁸ The rebellion led some influential

³⁶Alexandria Gazette, August 31, 1831. Similarly see the Gazette, September 6, 1831; American Beacon, September 30, October 20, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, September 5, 1831; Ambler, Ed., Diary of John Floyd, 159 (September 9, 1831); Richmond Enquirer, September 2, 1831; Richmond Whig, September 3, 26, 1831; and George Blow, Blow Family Papers, [August or September, 1831] (MSS, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary). Cf. Johnson, Nat Turner's Slave Insurrection, 56-77; Drewry, Southampton Insurrection, 113.

³⁷Luther Jackson, "Religious Development of the Negro in Lower Virginia from 1760 to 1860," Journal of Negro History, XVI (April, 1931), 206.

³⁸Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831, and Alexandria Gazette, September 3, 16, 22, 1831.

white Virginians, such as the Governor and many legislators, to realize the potential danger to white society in permitting black preachers to move about without enforced legal restrictions.³⁹

In addition to the law enacted in 1832, the apparent attitudes of some whites toward blacks following the rebellion reveal something of the ambiguous position held by the black man in Virginia. There are some indications that whites feared the potential power of Virginia blacks. The rumors of black revolts that seemingly swept Virginia in the weeks following Nat Turner's Rebellion are indicative of this fear. Reports of fresh rebellions appeared in Virginia newspapers for weeks following the Southampton event.⁴⁰ Some of these

³⁹See the provisions of a law passed in 1832 that dealt mainly with free Negroes and black preachers in Acts Passed at a General Assembly of . . . Virginia . . . 1831-1832 . . . (Richmond: T. Ritchie, 1832), 20-21. This act provided in part that "no slave, free negro or mulatto . . . shall hereafter undertake to preach, exhort or conduct, or hold any assembly or meeting, for religious or other purposes. . . ." Ibid., 20. There are some indications that for some time prior to Nat Turner's Rebellion Virginia blacks had considerable freedom of movement. For example see I. Finch, Travels in the United States of America . . . (London: Longman Co., 1833), 237 and 239; Alexandria Gazette, November 16, 25, 1830; and W. D. Weatherford, American Churches and the Negro (Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1957), 122. Similarly John Pleasants noted that it was "an aggravation of the crimes perpetrated, that the owners of slaves in this country [Southampton County] are distinguished for lenity and humanity. Cotton and corn are the staples here, and the labor is trifling with what is necessary in other parts of the State." Richmond Whig, September 1, 1831.

⁴⁰Alexandria Gazette, September 19, October 20, 24, 31, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, September 1, 1831; American Beacon, September 17, 1831; Norfolk Herald, September 16, 1831; Virginia Free Press, September 29, 1831; Petersburg Intelligencer, September 16, 1831; and Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 158-159. Cf. Johnson, Nat Turner's Slave Insurrection, 117-135 and Drewry, Southampton Insurrection, 75-79.

rumors and suspicions resulted in the jailing of innocent blacks. It was reported that in Prince George County "a slave by the name of Christopher . . . a blacksmith by trade and a preacher by profession, was tried by the Court on a charge of being concerned with the Southampton conspirators, and condemned to death.⁴¹ As indicated by the charge against the slave Christopher, there was some concern that a conspiracy existed among Virginia blacks. Governor Floyd obtained two letters which seemed to imply the existence of a conspiracy aimed at rebellion.⁴² The specific denials of any black conspiracy by Virginia newspapers and some private communications may be an indication that such a theory had some popularity.⁴³

Despite denials of a black conspiracy many white Virginians continued to believe there was a danger of further

⁴¹Fredericksburg Herald, September 21, 1831, and Richmond Whig, September 19, 1831. (emphasis in original). In the same issue the Herald reported a black preacher roaming Prince William County, who managed to escape before he was apprehended. Similarly see Virginia Free Press, September 15, 1831, and Alexandria Gazette, September 30, 1831.

⁴²John Floyd, Slave and Free Negro Letter Book (unbound, no pagination, Virginia State Library, Richmond). On August 31, 1831, Floyd noted in his diary that "many negroes have been taken up in the county of Nansemond . . . some of whom inform us of its being intended as a general uprising of the negroes." Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 157. See also Richmond Whig, August 27, 1831, and Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831.

⁴³Norfolk Herald, August 26, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, August 30, September 20, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, September 5, 1831; John T. Brown, Petersburg, to Henry Brown, September 26, 1831, Brown-Coalter-Tucker Papers (MSS, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary). The existence of a conspiracy was pointedly denied by a Southampton resident in the Richmond Whig, September 26, 1831.

uprisings. The general uneasiness of much of the white population is indicated by a description of the situation in Leesburg following Nat Turner's Rebellion. A Leesburg resident wrote Governor Floyd that as a result of the rebellion "the people are very much alarmed, many owners of slaves say that they have seen considerable change in the conduct of the servants in the last six or twelve months and that they are much more insolent than formerly, in Leesburg a strong patrol has been ordered out . . . and the citizens are purchasing every shot gun that is to be found."⁴⁴ This sense of alarm was not confined to any one area of the state (see pp. 53-55). A careful reading of Virginia newspapers and the correspondence received by Governor Floyd illustrate clearly that many white Virginians were severely shaken by Nat Turner's Rebellion.

While there was much fear and alarm in the wake of the event, there was also a sense of relief: relief that Nat Turner did not spark a mass uprising of blacks.⁴⁵ In fact

⁴⁴B. Sheve, Leesburg, to Governor Floyd, September 18, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond). Similarly see Jane Randolph, Albemarle County, to Sarah Nichols, [Fall, 1831], Edgehill-Randolph Papers (MSS, Alderman Library, University of Virginia); Virginia Trist, Charlottesville, Virginia, to Nicholas Trist, September 15, 19, 1831, Nicholas Trist Papers (MSS, University of North Carolina Library, University of North Carolina); Thomas Hoskins, Edenton, North Carolina, to Thomas Ruffin, September 2, 1831, in J. G. de Roulhac Hamilton, ed., The Papers of Thomas Ruffin, II (Raleigh, North Carolina: Edwards and Broughton, 1918), 48.

⁴⁵Southampton County had a black population of c. 9,500 in 1831. Of this number, less than 100 joined Nat Turner. Population statistics are available in Works Projects Administration, comp., Southampton County, Virginia, Archives (Richmond: Virginia Historical Records Survey Project, 1940), 8.

it was partially through the efforts of Southampton blacks that Nat Turner was defeated. The actions of the majority of Southampton blacks is ignored in the most widely-known history of the rebellion, although it is emphasized in the accounts by Johnson and Drewry.⁴⁶ Nat Turner might have held out longer than thirty-six hours if his band had the support of a significant segment of the black population that would shelter and aid the rebels. Instead they found almost no support in Southampton. A frequent scene was described in a letter to Thomas Ruffin. "Three negroes that has left two plantations and joined the Murderers returned after they were Dispersed and thought not to be discovered they were however Tied by the Negroes and kept in that State till the whites visited them when they where given up. . . ." ⁴⁷ Similar situations were described by others.⁴⁸

White Virginians praised those blacks who opposed the rebels. The Lynchburg Virginian probably spoke for many whites when it wrote that "it deserves to be said to the

⁴⁶Apthecker, Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion; Johnson, Nat Turner's Slave Insurrection, 85-106; Drewry, Southampton Insurrection, 158-160.

⁴⁷E. P. Guion, to Thomas Ruffin, August 28, 1831, in Hamilton, Ed., Papers of Thomas Ruffin, II, 46.

⁴⁸Alexandria Gazette, August 30, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, September 22, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831; Ambler, Ed., Diary of John Floyd, 159 (September 3, 1831); E. M. Capehart, to William Nicholls, August 23, 24, 25 and 26, 1831, cited in F. Roy Johnson, The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection, 111; Fredericksburg Herald, September 3, 1831; American Beacon, August 29, 1831; Norfolk Herald, August 26, 1831.

credit of many of the slaves, whom gratitude has bound to their masters, that they had manifested great alacrity in detecting and apprehending many of the brigands.--They had brought in several, and a fine spirit had been shown in many of the plantations of confidence on the part of the masters, and gratitude on that of the slaves."⁴⁹ Some Virginia newspapers emphasized that threats were employed by the rebels to force some blacks to join their band.⁵⁰ But white Virginia was unwilling to depend solely on the continued "loyalty" of most blacks.

The rebellion seems to have forced some whites to take a close look at the positions of the two races in the state and realize the potential consequences of these relations. As one white Virginian wrote to a northern newspaper:

We can now conceive that the murders at Southampton, could not have been so much an affair of runaways, as was at first supposed; and the question arises, if the slaves in that county would [sic] murder the whites, whether they are not ready to do it in any other county in the State; and whether the report that may spread among the slaves in other parts of the State, may not excite those to insurrection that never thought of such a thing before. We are of opinion that these occurrences will cause considerable excitement among our citizens for some time. . . .⁵¹

⁴⁹Lynchburg Virginian, September 5, 1831. Similarly see the newspapers cited in note 48.

⁵⁰Richmond Enquirer, September 23, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, September 20, 1831; Norfolk Herald, September 16, 1831. See also Ambler, Ed., Diary of John Floyd, 161.

⁵¹Richmond Whig, September 6, 1831. (emphasis in original) Reprint of a letter to New York Journal of Commerce, dated Richmond, August 28, 1831.

This increased awareness of the danger to whites inherent in the structure of Virginia society is evident in the calls for increased vigilance that followed Nat Turner's Rebellion.

Within a matter of days following the bloodshed in Southampton, some Virginia newspapers were announcing that all cause for alarm was past.⁵² However it was many weeks until much of the state shared these sentiments. The opinion of many white Virginians was seemingly captured by a newspaper column that declared, "vigilance . . . becomes necessary for perfect security."⁵³ If the comments in newspapers, correspondence to the government and the 1831-1832 session of the legislature are any indication, there was a strong public demand for action to prevent a recurrence of the Southampton event. While some newspapers claimed to see no further danger of revolt, none denied the need for increased vigilance against rebellions. As the Richmond Whig argued:

When the country is on its guard and under arms; when an attempt at insurrection has just been crushed without the smallest difficulty; when the negroes see and feel the hopelessness, the madness of all such efforts, and the speedy and condign punishment which is sure to follow that we say, is the very last season which would be selected for rebellion, It is when there has been a long interval of quiet, when suspicion and

⁵²American Beacon, August 27, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831; and Lynchburg Virginian, September 1, 1831.

⁵³Virginia Free Press, September 22, 1831.

vigilance are asleep, that there is any danger. . . .⁵⁴

But urging vigilance was a rather nebulous means of dealing with potential rebellion. Most white Virginians seemingly demanded more specific measures.

⁵⁴Richmond Whig, September 5, 1831. See also Lynchburg Virginian, September 12, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, September 5 and 9, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, September 2, 1831. It is worth speculating about whom such editorials were addressed to. In reading the Virginia newspapers for late 1831, one is continually struck by how conscious whites were that all they said and did was examined by blacks. In their comments about how easily the blacks were crushed, the newspapers seem to be warning other blacks. For example it was widely publicized that "20 resolute men, fairly confronted in the day-light with these Banditti, could have put them down." Richmond Enquirer, August 30, 1831, and Lynchburg Virginian, September 1, 1831. While such comments may have been bragbadocio, or attempts at calming whites, they also seem to have been aimed partially at blacks. Similarly, calling the rebels "miserable and deluded" may have been intended, perhaps unconsciously, to discourage potential rebels. In a more explicate reference to the watchfulness of blacks a resident of Southampton wrote the following thoughts for the Richmond Whig after the suppression of the rebellion. "It becomes us as men to return to our duty. Without manifesting a fear of the blacks . . . let us adopt a more efficient plan, by keeping up for some time, a regular patrol, always under the command of a discreet person, who will not by indiscriminate punishment, goad these miserable wretches into a state of desperation." September 26, 1831. See also Lynchburg Virginian, September 5, 1831; American Beacon, August 30, 1831, which spoke of a "salutary lesson" taught the blacks, as did the Richmond Whig, August 25, 26, 1831.

CHAPTER II

SOME WHITE RESPONSES TO THE REBELLION

While it appears that nearly all white Virginians saw the need for increased vigilance against black rebellions, this common denominator dissolved before specific proposals. The diversity of opinion among white Virginians became apparent in the weeks following Nat Turner's Rebellion. Some white Virginians, most notably Governor Floyd in his speech of December 4, 1831, to the legislature, laid much of the blame on fanatics, white and black. In contrast the editor of the Alexandria Gazette tried to get beyond this simplistic catch-all. In doing so he hit upon the "lenity" of Virginia society and probably came as close as any of his white contemporaries to describing the dilemma of many white Virginians. These whites feared it was no longer possible to compromise between their humanity and responsibility:

That a proper discipline should be preserved among . . . a portion of our population, recent events have sufficiently proved. It is an erroneous estimate of true humanity to think otherwise; for lenity to them might be cruelty to us. . . . all must agree with us that it is unsafe to slack the reins or permit the bounds which the laws, society, and nature itself, have interposed, to be transcended. We are cursed with the evil-- it is not our fault that it is entailed upon us--and we must bear it as we best may. It is our duty to protect ourselves and our families, and not to jeopardize the safety of those who are to come after

us. . . . Providence has placed us in the condition of masters, and we must sustain that position.¹

The diversity of white society in Virginia is apparent when these comments are compared with those of "Justitia" in the Gazette two days later. Justitia charged the Gazette's editor with having "too decided a learning to unmixed severity." Placing the blame for the rebellion on the "fiends" who published the Liberator, he rebuked the Gazette for claiming that Virginians were not responsible for the presence of slavery in Virginia. Justitia insisted that "we cannot abate . . . the force of the truths that they are much injured people--that the entail was no act of theirs." Rather than calling for increased discipline, Justitia urged better treatment and increased education to make slaves "conscious of the impossibility of escaping punishment" for attempts at revolt.² Another white Virginian had a unique, and undoubtedly effective, means of preventing future revolts save one. If another rebellion took place, a gentleman writing to the Whig advocated putting the entire black population of the South "to the sword."³ The Whig was not enthusiastic. Other white responses were the previously mentioned call

¹Alexandria Gazette, September 1, 1831. (emphasis in original)

²Ibid., September 3, 1831.

³Richmond Whig, September 15, 1831. The opinion of this man was misrepresented in one abolitionist pamphlet. Joshua Coffin claimed it was the editorial stance of the Whig, which it was not. See Joshua Coffin, An Account of Some of the Principal Slave Insurrections . . . (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1860), 31-32.

for strict enforcement of existing laws concerning blacks⁴ and stronger patrols and armed forces (see pp. 52-57).

Despite the seeming diversity of white public reactions, one historian of Nat Turner's Rebellion concluded that the rebellion helped bring about an open and decisive split between the North and South.⁵ Whatever the long-term effects, this was probably not the case in the months immediately following the rebellion. If anything the revolt seems to have brought North and South closer together. Virginia newspapers expressly thanked the northern press for its support during the rebellion. The Alexandria Gazette was especially pleased at the "burst of generous sympathy, an unequivocal expression of horror at the scenes enacted by the deluded wretches. We have no doubt, that should it ever be necessary, the citizens of the Northern States would promptly fly to the assistance of their Southern brethren. . . ." ⁶ While satisfied with the attitude in most of the North, some Virginia editors flung

⁴The lax enforcement of some existing laws was indicated by an article in the September 16, 1831, issue of the Alexandria Gazette. The Gazette called for enforcement of laws prohibiting the selling of goods and liquor to slaves. The paper pointed out that "although there is a law prohibiting the whites from trafficking with slaves, yet it has so long lain dormant and been a complete dead letter, that nothing short of the most rigorous measures can put down what has been so long tolerated by custom and general usage." See also ibid., September 22, 1831.

⁵Herbert Aptheker, Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion, 57.

⁶Alexandria Gazette, September 9, 1831. Similarly see ibid., September 23, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, September 26, 1831; Norfolk Herald, September 5, 1831.

barbs at "fanatics" who sought to arouse "dissatisfaction" among blacks.⁷

The fears of some white Virginians that northern "fanatics" were at work in the South were not entirely fabrications growing out of anxiety. Influential whites received some information that implied (at least to white Virginians) the support of northern abolitionists for Nat Turner-styled rebellions. Postmasters in Cairo, Chancellorville, Columbia, Portsmouth, Petersburg, Richmond, and Fluvanna County, received a proclamation in September and October from a Sherlock Gregory of Albany, New York, demanding the abolition of slavery in Virginia.⁸ Considering the mental uneasiness and fear of many white Virginians during latter-1831, it is not surprising that such proclamations were viewed with considerable suspicion. In addition Governor Floyd received an anonymous letter from a northern city warning

that the conspiracy and insurrection of the negroes in the South is much more extensive than some of you gentlemen in the South can form [?] any idea. That it is openly encouraged by the two fiends William L. Garrison and Isaac Knapp of Boston. . . . The negroes of this city are previously from the South . . . and they are busily employed in distributing these pamphlets.⁹

Similarly J. C. Harris, the postmaster of Orange County,

⁷Lynchburg Virginian, September 22, 26, 1831, and Alexandria Gazette, October 29, 1831.

⁸John Floyd, Slave and Free Negro Letter Book, no pagination.

⁹Ibid. In the same book see a letter from U.U.Q., Philadelphia, to Governor Floyd, October 24, 1831, who is sympathetic to white Virginians, anti-Liberator, and anti-black.

wrote Governor Floyd "in behalf of our village citizens and neighbours" to urge the prohibition of the Liberator in Virginia, because it was one of the "manifestoes of Insurrections."¹⁰ At least among some influential white Virginians abolitionists were seen as a threat. But the state's whites were also aware that abolitionists were condemned even in the North.

White Virginians were even capable of praising some northern antislavery sentiment. The Norfolk Herald warned blacks to

listen to the admonition of a Northern editor, who though a professor of religion and an enemy of slavery . . . holds the following language: . . . 'We cannot imagine what infatuation could have seized the mind of those negroes, that they should even dream of success in attempting to recover their freedom by violence and bloodshed. . . . a million of men could be marched on short notice, from the non-slaveholding States to defend their brethren of the South? and that they not only could be but would be marched. For much as we abhor slavery . . . there is not a man of us would not run to the relief of our brethren of the South when surrounded by the horrors of servile insurrection.'¹¹

White Virginians in 1831 seemingly had little to fear from the North.

¹⁰Postmaster J. C. Harris, Orange County, to Governor Floyd, September 25, 1831, Slave and Free Negro Letter Book. The extent to which some whites were prepared to go to halt what they considered revolutionary publications was indicated by Harris. "I know that our Laws, happily do, and . . . ought to protect the rights of the Press, and the means of decimating knowledge; Yet in times like these, such seditious incen-
tives to insurrection and murder, ought, with sound discretion, to be prohibited." Ibid. (emphasis in original)

¹¹September 5, 1831.

Despite assurances from the North and the rapid and total destruction of the rebels, white Virginians seemed to be deeply moved by Nat Turner's Rebellion. The suspicions of many whites remained keen enough to support the wave of rumors that followed in September and October. However once Nat Turner was captured in late October, published rumors of black attacks on whites almost ceased.¹² The link between these two occurrences was perhaps coincidental. But it seems more likely that the seizure of Nat Turner calmed some white Virginians. Requests to the state for arms dropped off sharply in November compared with the previous two months, and the tone of the comments in newspapers concerning blacks also seemed to shift in November. Rather than concentrating on stop-gap measures to prevent rebellion, such as patrols, many whites now took a longer view of the situation and considered ways to eliminate the cause of the black threat. Many whites probably felt more secure knowing that Nat Turner was no longer free to lead new revolts.¹³

¹²Some of these rumors and arrests were mentioned on pp. 17-19. Others included arrests for arson and murder, and insurrection. Alexandria Gazette, October 20, 24, 31, 1831, and Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 159.

¹³This of course is largely speculation. It may be that by November all the white groups desiring arms had received them and any determination of shifts in the "tone" of public statements is a personal judgement. However one Virginian did speak directly to the question of the importance of Nat Turner's capture. In early September Governor Floyd received an anonymous letter urging that a reward be offered for the capture of Nat Turner. This correspondent concluded by remarking that, "it is perhaps idle to think that this insurrection is ended until the leader is killed." Anonymous, Petersburg, to Governor Floyd, August 28, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 320, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

Equally important was the sense of relief that at the time of his capture Nat Turner "acted very little like a Hero;" relief that he "seemed . . . one of the most miserable objects . . . ever beheld--dejected, emaciated and ragged."¹⁴ One might speculate that many white Virginians perhaps felt some psychic need to see Nat Turner humiliated: to reassure themselves that he was only a wild fanatic and not a careful, calculating Toussaint L'Ouverture. Once assured that there was "not a feature in his conduct, which bespeaks the character of a General and a leader,"¹⁵ many whites possibly began to regain some of their confidence. The decline of the persistent rumors and suspected insurrections so close to home suggests as much. It was seemingly more than a coincidence that most published rumors stopped when Nat Turner was captured. More normal times resumed with his capture.

While antislavery discussions were probably not the norm in antebellum Virginia, this is what occurred as a degree of calm returned to white communities. In the months prior to the 1831-1832 slavery debates in the legislature, some anti-slavery Virginians sought to use colonization as a vehicle of persuasion. In December, 1831, a correspondent to the American Colonization Society wrote:

'The horrible affair of Southampton has given rise to new and decided feelings in the breasts

¹⁴Lynchburg Virginian, November 19, 1831, and Alexandria Gazette, November 7, 1831.

¹⁵Lynchburg Virginian, November 10, 1831. Similarly see Norfolk Herald; November 4, 1831, and American Beacon, November 4, 1831.

of Virginians from every part of the State, in regard to the black population. And the friends of Colonization, (I almost said of emancipation) may now find willing and anxious agents, to push to the utmost practicable extent their philanthropic wishes.¹⁶

Colonization was the beneficiary of the resources of many white Virginians following Nat Turner's Rebellion. Some colonizationists apparently sought to educate whites to the possible consequences for Virginia society if the colonization movement was not successful. A colonizationist clergyman in Romney, Virginia, predicted that the rebellion "'will form a grand subject of appeal."¹⁷ The board of managers of the American Colonization Society publicly declared that "'without the most strenuous efforts, the late afflicting scenes, flagrant and calamitous as they are, will be followed by events still more appalling."¹⁸ Many new auxiliaries to the society sprang up in Virginia. A member of the Richmond society reported that many former opponents now supported the society's cause. John McPhail, the Norfolk agent of the American Colonization Society, believed the Norfolk and Portsmouth auxiliaries

¹⁶Quoted in Early Lee Fox, The American Colonization Society, 1817-1840 ("John Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science," XXXVII [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1919]), 26-27.

¹⁷Quoted in P. J. Staudenraus, The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 179.

¹⁸Ibid. Richmond Whig, November 24, 1831, and American Beacon, November 30, 1831, carried the full text of this speech.

alone could raise one thousand dollars.¹⁹ Most Virginia newspapers, too, supported colonization. On October 6, 1831, the Richmond Whig expressed a fairly typical attitude. "The Commonwealth ought to send off at least two thousand /blacks/ every year. A drain like that would put a stop to insurrections and rumors of insurrections." Colonization apparently received such widespread support that one white Virginian exclaimed, "'I am . . . sure that there is not an enemy of the cause of Colonization in Virginia at this time.'"²⁰

The colonization forces apparently took advantage of the public support for their goals and made some widely publicized moves aimed at implementing their program. In a letter to the treasurer of the Virginia Colonization Society, John McPhail reported that he was "busily engaged in fitting the fine Ship

¹⁹Ibid. The Lynchburg Virginian, September 19, 1831, reported that one New York resident donated two thousand dollars to the American Colonization Society. The Virginian agreed with remarks in the African Repository: "'what might not be effected for America and mankind, were all our wealthy men to imitate so honorable, so Christian, and so splendid an example.'" While Nat Turner's Rebellion no doubt gave the colonization cause a considerable boost, it was not the only factor at work. In the months prior to the rebellion colonization was becoming increasingly popular and donations to the Virginia Colonization Society rose steadily. See Lynchburg Virginian, May 5, July 11, August 19, and August 22, 1831; Staunton Spectator, July 22, 1831; Norfolk Herald, January 5, March 28, 1831; American Beacon, March 23, June 23, 1831.

²⁰Quoted in Fox, American Colonization Society, 25, Lieutenant Governor Peter Daniel openly supported colonization and some slaveholders in Hanover County even urged a state tax to pay for the removal of slaves and free blacks. Staudenraus, African Colonization, 139.

James Perkins, to take in 300 emigrants for Liberia. I have already received lists of about one hundred families, all prepared to depart in three days notice. . . ."21 Virginia newspapers expressed unrestrained pleasure at this development. The Virginia Free Press observed that "we rejoice to see this good work progressing so rapidly."²²

As news of the Colonization Society's plans for the "James Perkins" spread in late October and November, some white Virginians warmed to the idea and sang the praises of Liberia. The Richmond Whig of October 28, 1831, published a long descriptive article on the wonders of Liberia, candidly admitting their purpose was "to stimulate the exertions of its friends, and at the same time to excite a disposition in the free colored people to emigrate." The Norfolk papers were particularly enthusiastic about Liberia, describing it as the proverbial land of milk and honey.²³ But it was not for the ears of Negro slaves that white Virginians praised Liberia. A correspondent in the Alexandria Gazette seemed to speak for many when he wrote, "the colony of Liberia is now the nucleus around which a free, and happy, and virtuous community may grow; and all that is required of our people

²¹American Beacon, November 9, 1831. (emphasis in original)

²²Virginia Free Press, December 8, 1831. Similarly see American Beacon, November 25, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, December 1, 1831; Richmond Whig, October 6, 1831.

²³See the American Beacon, October 28, 1831, and Norfolk Herald, October 19, 26, and especially October 31, 1831.

is to transport our free colored population thither."²⁴ It is probably accurate to note that in the final months of 1831, colonization in Virginia was primarily directed at free Negroes.

White Virginians did exert pressure on potential colonizers. "A Subscriber" of the American Beacon in Southampton pointed out that "since the late Insurrection, a number of families of Free People of colour, amounting in all to about 100 individuals, have determined, in consequence of the annoyance they have suffered by the frequent visits and rigid treatment of the Patrols, to emigrate to Liberia, by the first opportunity which may be afforded them."²⁵ It seems that some whites were not content to trust to the wisdom of the free blacks. The American Beacon prefaced the letter of "A Subscriber" with the comment that the "free colored people of Southampton have had the wisdom to discern their true interest, and we trust their example will be followed by the free Blacks in all parts of the State; but should it not, the faithful administration of the laws already provided will go far to effect the salutary change, which such a course would produce;

²⁴Alexandria Gazette, November 7, 1831.

²⁵American Beacon, October 5, 1831. "A Subscriber" went on to relate that "this intention had existed with many of them previous to the late unhappy occurrences. . . . all are considered as persons of good character, and I think their wisdom and discretion if strongly manifested in the course they have adopted. They have, for the purpose of temporary security and protection, entered into a written engagement, had their names registered, and have chosen Mr. Henry Lenow as their Agent." (emphasis in original)

and the approaching Legislature . . . will supply whatever may be wanting to give effect to their intentions."²⁶ Such comments accurately captured the tone of much of white Virginia regarding colonization and free blacks.

There is every indication that the plight of free Negroes in the months following Nat Turner's Rebellion was extremely hard. One noted historian of Virginia found that there was a considerable migration of free blacks from the state as a result of the rebellion.²⁷ This migration, lasting until 1835, was particularly intense in the Southampton region in late 1831. One Richmond newspaper reported that "The Citizens of Southampton are very desirous of getting clear of the free people of color--Several of whom are equally anxious on their part to leave the country. . . ."²⁸ In the wake of the rebellion Southampton whites branded free blacks "'a most prolific source of evil.'" They resolved to discharge all free Negro employees and to evict free Negro families from rented houses and lands.²⁹ When the "James Perkins" was taking on passengers for its journey to Liberia, the overwhelming number of applicants came from Southampton. Three hundred and thirty nine emigrants sailed with the "James Perkins" on December 9, 1831, and of this number over two hundred were free blacks from Southampton

²⁶Ibid. (emphasis in original) Similarly see Alexandria Gazette, November 21, 1831, and Lynchburg Virginian, October 13, 1831.

²⁷Luther Jackson, Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860 (New York: Appleton-Century, 1942), 112.

²⁸Richmond Enquirer, October 7, 1831.

²⁹Staudenraus, African Colonization, 180.

County.³⁰ Free blacks from Southampton were probably given first chance at the available space on the "James Perkins." John McPhail, who outfitted the ship, admitted that he gave Southampton residents preferential treatment because "the situation of these free people of colour in Southampton is truly distressing. . . . Those from Southampton are valuable people; most of them have been in the habit of cultivating small farms on their own account; amongst them are some very valuable mechanics, and all that are registered, are of good characters. . . ."31

While some free blacks in Southampton may have been "of good characters," free blacks as a class had almost the opposite reputation among most white Virginians. The Anniversary Address to the Lynchburg Auxiliary Colonization Society, delivered on August 19, 1831, neatly summed up the reasons for much of the white support for colonization. "We believe that the free blacks form the most dissolute, dissatisfied and wretched population of our country--that their condition is even more abject and degraded than that of the slaves. . . ."32

³⁰The African Repository and Colonial Journal, VII (November, December, 1831), 285, 320; Richmond Enquirer, October 7, November 4, 1831; Richmond Whig, October 6, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, November 3, 1831; Robert, Road from Monticello, 13, mentions the series of "nocturnal whippings" to force free blacks out of Southampton.

³¹American Beacon, November 9, 1831. See also Alexandria Gazette, October 18, 1831, and Patricia Hickin, Antislavery in Virginia, 1831-1861 (University of Virginia: unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1968), 111.

³²Lynchburg Virginian, August 19, 1831.

White Virginians apparently shared the common belief of the antebellum South that free Negroes made slaves disorderly.³³ Whatever their real threat to slavery, the symbolic threat of free blacks cannot be denied. The mere presence of free Negroes was a denial that slavery followed naturally from Negro parentage.³⁴ Though no more than five or six free blacks were ever connected with the Southampton revolt, a free Negro, Billy Artis, was portrayed as a leader.³⁵ In the months following the rebellion many white Virginians were probably of the opinion that they would be safer without their free Negro population.

It is probable that Nat Turner's Rebellion was the catalyst for most of the discussions of free blacks among whites in latter 1831 and early 1832. As with the slavery issue, the rebellion apparently forced many whites to confront this sensitive issue. The Virginia Free Press implied as much when it stated that "public attention seems to have been awakened in Virginia, to the necessity of getting rid of the Free Negroes. . . ."³⁶ The Whig was more explicit in urging "public attention" to the issue of Virginia free blacks; and hoping that "a simultaneous movement will speedily effect . . . the removal of a

³³Ulrich Phillips, "Slave Crime in Virginia," American Historical Review, XX (January, 1915), 340.

³⁴Wilbert Moore and Robin Williams, "Stratification in the Ante-Bellum South," American Sociological Review, VII (June, 1942), 348-349.

³⁵American Beacon, August 30, 1831, and Alexandria Gazette, September 10, 1831.

³⁶October 27, 1831.

canker on the body politic, which now threatens to eat to the core."³⁷ Having come to the general conclusion that something must be done with the free black population, it fell to white Virginians to act on their beliefs.

The most nebulous of these plans were the petitions to the legislature. Petitions concerning free Negroes generally merely called on the legislators to do something. A petition circulated in Lynchburg was typical. Rather than urge specific action, the petitioners

leave to the wisdom . . . of the General Assembly, the conception, adoption and prosecution of the best practicable scheme-- but they would respectfully and earnestly ask that the action of the laws passed to this effect be decisive, and the means energetic-- such as shall, with as much speed as may be, free our country from this bane of its prosperity, morality and peace.³⁸

In contrast Northampton County whites drew up a very precise and specific petition to the legislature concerning the free blacks. These whites presented for consideration a detailed fourteen point program designed to remove their "anomalous population" of free Negroes.³⁹

³⁷Richmond Whig, October 12, 1831. See also Lynchburg Virginian, October 13, 1831, and January 12, 1832; American Beacon, November 5, 1831; Richmond Enquirer, October 21, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, November 7, 1831.

³⁸Lynchburg Virginian, October 10, 1831. (emphasis in original) Reprinted in Richmond Whig, October 13, 1831, and Alexandria Gazette, October 15, 1831. This memorial described free Negroes as degraded, profligate, vicious, turbulent and discontented. It concluded that free blacks were "incompatible with the tranquility of society . . . their locomotive habits fit them for a dangerous agency in schemes, wild and visionary, but disquieting and annoying." (emphasis in original)

³⁹Reprinted in Richmond Enquirer, November 11, 1831; American Beacon, November 8, 1831; Norfolk Herald, November 7, 1831.

It may be that the differences between these petitions are important. Most petitions to the legislature concerning free blacks in 1831-1832 were similar to the vague Lynchburg appeal. Such appeals really gave the legislature little to focus on and no point of departure for its deliberations. They did communicate to the General Assembly the sense of urgency with which the white population seemingly viewed the free blacks; but the legislators probably were already aware of this sentiment. On the other hand the Northampton petition proposed specific steps. The citizens of Northampton took certain steps and in effect told the legislature to approve them, which it did.⁴⁰ One can speculate that had other localities been as specific as Northampton, the results of the 1831-1832 legislature might have been quite different.

But regardless of the wording of their various memorials, whites appeared to be nearly unanimous in believing that the

⁴⁰In part the Northampton petitioners authorized a local committee to borrow up to fifteen thousand dollars to pay for the removal of free blacks from the county. This borrowed sum was to be repaid through an annual tax on the county's citizens. The petitioners instructed their delegates to vote for any measures designed to remove free blacks from the state and pledged not to employ or rent to any free Negroes. These Northampton whites also urged the legislature to pass a law making the actions of their meetings legal. The General Assembly recognized the sovereignty of this gathering of Northampton whites to deal with free blacks as they saw fit. On March 5, 1832, the General Assembly passed "An act concerning the county of Northampton." This act declared that the Northampton "public meetings and the acts done, or to be done . . . are hereby declared to be valid and obligatory, so far as the same may not violate or contravene any law of this commonwealth." Acts Passed . . . 1831-1832
23.

elimination of free blacks from Virginia would be a positive step. However, white Virginians were also extremely conscious of the attitudes of black Virginians. While desiring to eliminate a potential threat to white society, some felt a certain compassion for free blacks. When the elimination of free Negroes was discussed in Virginia newspapers, whites expressed concern that the removal be as painless as possible for blacks. For example the Richmond Enquirer, committed to the removal of free Negroes, nevertheless worried that "In what way it is to be most effectually accomplished with the least practicable injury to the present free people of color is a problem of delicate and difficult solution."⁴¹

While aware of the hardship they would be visiting on free Negroes, white Virginians were prepared to press for a solution to their problem. Many white Virginians turned to the legislature sitting in Richmond. In addition to those previously mentioned, the House of Delegates received petitions concerning free blacks from Loudoun, Powhatan, Washington, Nelson, Augusta, Frederick, Isle of Wight, Amelia (two) and

⁴¹Quoted in the American Beacon, November 5, 1831. (emphasis on original) Similarly see Alexandria Gazette, November 7, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, October 13, 1831, which urged its readers "not /to/ forget what is due to the rights and feelings of this unfortunate class of people, whose condition appeals at least as strongly to our sympathies as to our fears." and Richmond Enquirer October 21, 1831. The Virginia Free Press, October 27, 1831, took a somewhat harsher line, believing "self-defense will fully justify and palliate any ingredient of harshness which may seem to be mingled with the policy /of forced removal/"

Fauquier (two).⁴² These petitions, usually lacking in specific proposals, fell into two general categories. Those from Lynchburg and the counties of Amelia, Frederick, Loudoun, Powhatan, Fauquier, Washington, and Isle of Wight called on the legislature to devise some means of removing the free black population from the state.⁴³ The petitioners from Nelson, Augusta and the second Fauquier petition were more imaginative. They called on the legislature to press for an amendment to the United States Constitution that would give Congress the power to appropriate money to transport free blacks to Africa.⁴⁴

The House of Delegates responded to these pleas. While there was little apparent support for the proposed constitutional amendment, the "select committee on the colored population" began to draft a bill concerning free blacks early in the session. The first draft of this proposed legislation (House of Delegates Bill No. 7) was extremely harsh. Committee members were seemingly well in tune with their constituents. The preamble of this bill stating that "it manifestly appears to the general assembly of Virginia, that the welfare

⁴² Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia . . . 1831-1832 . . ., 16, 21, 37, 51, 65, 75, 80. (December 7, 9, 17, 23, 28, 31, 1831, and January 3, 1832).

⁴³ The Loudoun petition also urged the removal of slaves from Virginia.

⁴⁴ The Augusta and Nelson petitions also wished to give Congress the power to purchase slaves for transportation to Africa.

of the state, and the happiness and prosperity of every class of its inhabitants, even of the free persons of colour within its borders . . . require the separation of the latter from the community, and their removal beyond the limits of the United States. . . ."45 This bill provided for the establishment of a Central Board of Commissioners for the removal of free people of color. This board was to establish in each county and corporation quotas of free blacks for removal every year. If the quota in a county or corporation was larger than the number of free Negroes volunteering for transportation, then the locality was required to choose additional free blacks for compulsory transportation. This selection process was to be performed through the county or corporation courts. The courts would appoint between three and seven "discreet persons" whose duty it was "whenever any compulsory regulation of a given number of free persons of colour for deportation, shall be made . . . to select, as expeditiously as may be practicable . . . the number demanded . . . and . . . deliver them to such agent or agents . . . to conduct the said emigrants to a desired port of embarkation"46

But Bill No. 7 was never reported out of committee. Instead a less severe compromise measure (House of Delegates Bill No. 12) was adopted by the committee and reported to the full house on February 11, 1832. Bill No. 12 dropped entirely

⁴⁵House of Delegates, Rough Bills, Session of December 5, 1831 to March 21, 1832 (MSS, Box 59, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

⁴⁶Ibid.

the preamble and quota provisions of Bill No. 7. Much of the pressure for the easing of some provisions of this bill possibly came from colonizationists. Records of the House of Delegates are sketchy, but the Lynchburg Virginian, a strong supporter of colonization, carried some suggestive comments pertaining to Bill No. 7:

We do not like some of the provisions of this bill, either as friends of justice, or as advocates of the Colonization Society. We cannot bring ourselves to believe that measures ought to be used to force the free negroes to emigrate to Liberia or anywhere else, any more than we can justify a similar policy towards our Indian neighbors. The principle in both cases is the same, and is equally oppressive, tyrannical and unjust.⁴⁷

While it is little more than speculation to suggest that some colonizationists pressed the legislators to relax some of the strictures on deportation, the legislature did adopt the less stringent of the free Negro bills.⁴⁸ Even in its more militant movements the House of Delegates did not completely ride rough-shod over all the rights of free blacks. Bills Nos. 7 and 12 both provided that no free Negro could be forced to emigrate so long as a sufficient number volunteered for transportation. Both bills also provided that

⁴⁷Lynchburg Virginian, February 2, 1832. (emphasis in original) The Virginian commented further that "the Southampton tragedy, though clearly proved to have been brought about solely by a fanatical slave, and in which it is certain they [free blacks] had no agency, has been made to bear almost exclusively upon them. . . ."

⁴⁸Acts Passed . . . 1831-1832 . . ., 20-21.

families of free blacks were not to be split by transportation and that no male over 45, or woman over 40, could be involuntarily transported.⁴⁹

The deliberations concerning free blacks were only one aspect of the well-known slavery debates during the 1831-1832 session of the Virginia House of Delegates. These unique debates have been the subject of considerable examination, both by historians and contemporaries.⁵⁰ One could almost hear the trumpets sound as the Alexandria Gazette proclaimed, "The seals are broken. . . . We publish speeches in the H. of Delegates, to-day, which, at no other period, would have been delivered but in closed doors. In the same spirit the press fearlessly speaks its own sentiments--unawed by the tocsin of denunciation or the menaces of proscription."⁵¹ These debates aroused extensive public excitement and interest. Numerous petitions arrived in the House of Delegates. In addition to those concerning free blacks, others urged the adoption of a plan of gradual emancipation. Virginia Quakers were among the first to urge a plan to abolish slavery. The

⁴⁹House of Delegate Rough Bills, Box 59.

⁵⁰Robert, Road from Monticello, provides a comprehensive view of these debates and additional information is presented in Hickin, Antislavery in Virginia. For the contemporary discussion see Thomas R. Dew, Review of the Debate on the Abolition of Slavery (Richmond: T. W. White, 1832) and Jesse Burton Harrison, Review of the Slave Question by a Virginian (Richmond: [n.p.], 1833).

⁵¹Alexandria Gazette, January 23, 1832. (emphasis in original)

yearly meeting of Quakers in Charles City County adopted an antislavery petition that was forwarded to the legislature and it was a Quaker petition that sparked the beginning of the slavery debate in 1832.⁵² John McCue, a delegate from Augusta County, presented a memorial to the legislature in December signed by 215 ladies of the county praying for emancipation and removal.⁵³ Similar petitions were received from Buckingham, Prince William and Loudoun counties.⁵⁴ A mass meeting in Loudoun resolved for emancipation and removal as "the continuation of slavery is forbidden by the true policy of Virginia, repugnant to her political theory and christian [sic] professions; and an opprobrium to our ancient and renowned Dominion."⁵⁵ However not all whites shared these sentiments and the diversity of opinion in the state is indicated by the proslavery petitions to the House of Delegates. Mecklenberg, Hanover, Essex and Northampton counties all registered their displeasure with the sentiments expressed in antislavery

⁵²The Charles City County Petition was reprinted in Tyler's Quarterly Magazine, II (January, 1921), 167-170. The role of a Quaker petition in beginning the debate is described in Robert, Road from Monticello, 16.

⁵³Joseph Waddell, Augusta County, Virginia. From 1726 to 1871 (Staunton, Virginia: Russell Caldwell, 1902), 414.

⁵⁴J. H. Johnston, comp., "Antislavery Petitions Presented to the Virginia Legislature by Citizens of Various Counties," Journal of Negro History, XII (October, 1927), 675-686.

⁵⁵Quoted in Charles Ambler, Sectionalism in Virginia from 1776 to 1861 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910), 189.

petitions.⁵⁶

Other white Virginians expressed dissatisfaction with the petitioning process, believing it was ineffective. "A Native of Eastern Virginia" argued that memorials to the legislature concerning slaves and the removal of free Negroes did not carry enough weight and had no authority. Instead he urged voters to assemble and vote on a course of action. It was hoped this would "stamp upon a law enacted in obedience to such an act of sovereignty, a character that . . . would elevate it far above any exceptions that might lie against an ordinary act of Legislation."⁵⁷ Still most whites were seemingly content to rely on the legislature to formulate a solution to the slavery issue. But there was considerable public discussion partially aimed at influencing the deliberations of the House of Delegates.

Many white Virginians outside the legislature expressed an opinion concerning the slavery issue. A. E. O. of Preston County, a west Virginia county about five percent slave, believed the rebellion proved the state must concentrate its energies on stopping the growth of slavery. "No one thinks the negroes could ultimately triumph over us. But on what part of the State their vengeance might fall is unknown. One life is as dear to the loser, as all the rest, and one would be unwilling to offer himself a martyr to their

⁵⁶Hickin, Antislavery in Virginia, 133-134.

⁵⁷Richmond Whig, November 17, 1831. Similarly a call for a mass meeting in Loudoun, ibid., November 28, 1831.

vengeance. . . ."58 Similarly P. Q. O. of Hanover County in eastern Virginia argued for the ultimate removal of all blacks. He criticized those concerned only with removing free Negroes. Noting that only two free blacks were involved in Nat Turner's Rebellion, despite the "considerable number" of free Negroes in Southampton, and that it was free blacks who disclosed the existence of previous slave plots to whites, P. Q. O. desired the continued residence of free blacks in Virginia as a "security" measure against servile rebellion.⁵⁹ In contrast "Old Virginia" defended the slavery system, denounced all plans aimed at terminating the institution, but did believe it desirable to have all free blacks leave the commonwealth.⁶⁰

The slavery debates were an extremely divisive factor in Virginia in late 1831 and early 1832.⁶¹ But while whites divided over whether the elimination of blacks was the best road to security, there was near unanimous agreement that so long as blacks, remained, security required vigilance. One of the major beneficiaries of the desire for increased security was the state militia.

⁵⁸ Ibid., September 29, 1831. The comments of A. E. O. are indicative of the fear of blacks present even in those areas of Virginia having small black populations.

⁵⁹ Ibid., November 17, 1831.

⁶⁰ Richmond Enquirer, November 25, 1831, and the reply of P. Q. O., ibid., December 10, 1831.

⁶¹ Robert, Road from Monticello, passim; Hickin, Antislavery in Virginia, 132-246; Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 174-177; Alexandria Gazette, December 5, 1831, January 27, 30, 1832; "Common Sense" in Richmond Whig, December 1, 1831.



CHAPTER III

THE REBELLION AND THE VIRGINIA MILITIA

Much of the surviving evidence suggests that one of the most surprising aspects of the rebellion was the general lack of preparedness among white Virginians; especially their lack of a sufficient number of weapons. Many whites probably agreed with one commentator who found the lack of firearms and ammunition among the state militia "truly lamentable."¹ Similarly, the Petersburg Intelligencer expressed what seemed to be a widespread sentiment when it bemoaned the city's inability "to send any assistance to our unfortunate neighbors, not having had arms more than sufficient to supply our own wants."² A partial explanation for this state of affairs will be discussed below, but there seems little doubt that in the weeks following Nat Turner's Rebellion, white Virginians were extremely upset over the lack of arms in their localities. The extent of their eagerness to correct this deficiency is evident from Governor Floyd's diary.

Much of the Governor's working time from September through late November was occupied by his efforts to get arms to the

¹Lynchburg Virginian, September 1, 1831, quoting the Richmond Compiler.

²Richmond Whig, August 26, 1831, quoting the Petersburg Intelligencer, August 26, 1831.

various units of the state militia. Entire days were occupied in these efforts and Floyd noted the "constant application" for arms.³ Between December 1, 1830 and November 30, 1831, the state of Virginia supplied arms to fifty-eight counties or militia regiments. Of these fifty-eight shipments, fifty-seven were made between August 23, 1831, and November 30, 1831.⁴ In addition to these shipments, the Governor received some requests which for one reason or another were not filled.⁵ Despite occasional rejections, the state government apparently filled most requests for arms as promptly as possible. However the governor's willingness to distribute arms passed much more rapidly than did his constituents' desire to receive them. But mid-October Floyd was "disgusted with the cowardly fears" of Norfolk in applying for additional arms. In late November he confessed that "I could not have believed there was half the fear amongst the people of the lower country in respect to their slaves."⁶

While recognizing the fear in lower Virginia, Floyd perhaps underestimated the impact of the revolt on all areas of

³Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 160-161 (September 22, 1831), 156 (August 26, 1831).

⁴"Return of Arms and accoutrements Issued commencing the 1st of December 1830 and ending 30 November 1831," Virginia Executive Communications (MSS, Box 38, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

⁵Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, especially boxes 321 and 322, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

⁶Ambler, Ed., Diary of John Floyd, 165 (October 17, 1831) and 170 (November 21, 1831).

the state. As discussed below, it seems likely that this fear permeated the entire state and was not directed at the slaves alone. It was the black man, not just the slave who was feared. This white fear seems to have been present on two general levels.

One level of this fear, the more passive level, was expressed by those who requested arms out of a "sense of precaution." A more intense fear was expressed by whites who believed they were faced with an incipient black revolt. There was no apparent difference between these two groups over what had to be done to prevent a recurrence of black revolt. Both felt that only a better armed white population would insure domestic tranquility. All existing arms requests express some degree of fear of the black man, whether a general uneasiness or a more pointed fright. It is probable that white Virginians saw the issue as much in terms of a relationship between races as a clash between constituted authority and unconstituted rebels. For example, one militia commander requested arms for the local militia regiment stating that "we have in this county [Westmoreland] more colored than white people.--and among the former, an unusual proportion of Free Negroes. Further remark is unnecessary."⁷ This characterization was not peculiar to any one area of the state. The issue was posed in terms of black versus white just as

⁷J. W. Hungerford, Leedstown, Westmoreland County, to Governor Floyd, September 22, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond). (emphasis in original)

strongly in areas with large black populations as in areas with few blacks.⁸

While the arms requests received by the governor suggest that the danger was seen as a clash between races, there was a difference in the degree to which whites feared such a clash. Some requested arms for local militia or volunteer corps, believing that the late melancholy occurrences . . . call for measures of precaution and preparation."⁹ Many

⁸For example see a Petition from the Citizens of Luray, Page County (in the northern Shenandoah Valley of Virginia), to Governor Floyd, December 24, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 322; Colonel John B. Crule/[?], Parkersburg, Wood County (in present day West Virginia), to Governor Floyd, November 26, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 322; Asa Dupuy, Farmville, Prince Edward County, to Governor Floyd, September 19, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; J. E. Joynes, Mount Prospect, Accomac County, to Governor Floyd, September 30, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; [?], Halifax County, to Governor Floyd, September 24, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; all are in Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

⁹Warner Roane, Middlesex County, to Governor Floyd, September 26, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond). See also the previously mentioned John Crule to Governor Floyd, November 26, 1831; J. Gibson/[?], Culpeper County, to Governor Floyd, September 19, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; Memorial of the Citizens of Danville, Pittsylvania County, to Governor Floyd, ^{n.d.}, Executive Papers, Box 322; J. A. Brancham, Richmond, to Governor Floyd, October 1, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; V. Conway, Kilmarnock, Lancaster County, to Governor Floyd, September 9, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; J. W. Hungerford, Westmoreland County, to Governor Floyd, September 22, 1831; William Wilson, Cumberland County, to Governor Floyd, September 19, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; William Cahill, Danville, to Governor Floyd, September 20, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; and the previously mentioned Petition from Citizens of Luray, Page County, to Governor Floyd, December 24, 1831; all are in Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

localities claimed not to be in any immediate danger of armed conflict, but their uneasiness was obvious. Whites in Culpeper, like the citizens of some other counties, were "not prepared to say that any overt acts of Rebellion have been detected in Culpeper, but as our county adjoined counties where good cause of apprehension exists [n.d.] some alarm is here felt and as a measure of precaution we wish to have the means of self defense."¹⁰ There is no way of knowing exactly how many whites shared these sentiments, but the numbers appear large.

The frequency with which those requesting arms as a precaution mention their proximity to black men is also interesting. For example a number of citizens in Danville believed that their "wives, children and property . . . are daily and hourly exposed . . . to the same destruction that has unhappily, overtaken their brethren in Southampton. . . . The blacks in town and in the neighborhood are numerous--and there are several strong settlements of free blacks in the County, and some of them in a few miles of the town."¹¹ These whites, like many others, apparently had no concrete evidence to suggest the likelihood of a black revolt.

¹⁰ J. Gibson, Culpeper County, to Governor Floyd, September 19, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers.

¹¹ Memorial of the Citizens of Danville, to Governor Floyd, [n.d.] and also William Cahill, Danville, to Governor Floyd, September 20, 1831. Similarly see V. Conway, Lancaster County, to Governor Floyd, September 9, 1831; J. W. Hungerford, Westmoreland County, to Governor Floyd, September 22, 1831; Petition from Citizens of Luray, to Governor Floyd, December 24, 1831; The Colonel of the Militia Regiment for Leesburg, Loudoun County, to Governor Floyd, August 29, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 320, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

Instead they relied largely on their fears that the mere presence of blacks in any substantial numbers was reason for extreme caution. One gets the impression from reading their correspondence to the governor, that many whites, perhaps for the first time, took a hard look at the racial situation in their locality and realized the consequences ultimately possible if they were not prepared. As a result, whites began to insist on the application to the state for arms and many seemingly came to believe that it was "the part of wisdom to take all proper precautions."¹²

While many whites claimed to act out of a desire to be prepared for any eventuality, others felt the danger was of a more immediate nature. It was not unusual for the governor to receive news of imminent black revolts. One correspondent reported the "considerable alarm" in Middleburg caused by the Nat Turner Rebellion and went on to request arms, adding that "from statements made by persons having overheard conversations amongst blacks upon the subject: we are apprehensive that something of the kind might be in agitation here."¹³ While their evidence of black plans was often nothing more than second- or third-hand hearsay, many of Floyd's correspondents seemed to feel black revolts were inevitable. Such

¹²J. A. Brancham, Richmond, to Governor Floyd, October 1, 1831, and William Wilson, Cumberland County, to Governor Floyd, September 19, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers.

¹³Lloyd Noland, Middleburg, to Governor Floyd, September 19, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

was the implication of Brigadier General George Cooke's letter to Governor Floyd requesting arms for the militia.

The excitement produced in this portion of the County by the late occurrences . . . has made it my duty to bring to your notice the defenceless condition of the white population and the danger to which they are exposed.

The militia are without arms in every County of my Brigade, comprising the Counties of Fauquier, Prince William, Stafford and King George in all which there is an overgrown slave population: in the County Stafford we are particularly saturated in reference to that people.

Since the affair in Southampton we conceive, that in the deportment of our slaves a manifest degree of impudence is to be discovered.¹⁴

¹⁴ Brigadier General George Cooke of the Fifth Brigade, Second Division of the Virginia Militia, to Governor Floyd, September 13, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321. Similar communications were received by the governor from Asa Dupuy, Prince Edward County, September 19, 1831, who noted that there were an unusually large number of blacks in Farmville; "with apparent dispositions to remain in bodies about the street. This may proceed from accidental causes rather than design, but it has attracted attention and it is thought expedient to keep an eye upon them."; David Garland, New Gleason, Amherst County, to Governor Floyd, October 6, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; William Hubard, Buckingham County, to Governor Floyd, November 7, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 322; William Christian, Northampton County, to Governor Floyd, September 1, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; Joseph Tompkins, Tappahanock County, to Governor Floyd, October 15, Executive Papers, Box 321, who believed the rumors of slave rebellions made it imperative that the local militia receive arms since "there is such an excitement that I believe there will be nothing like allaying or pacifying the citizens without them."; Rice Moore, Charlottesville, Albemarle County, to Governor Floyd, September 20, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; J. E. Joynes, Accomac County, to Governor Floyd, September 30, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; Petition from the Citizens of Amelia County, to Governor Floyd, September 17, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321, demanding arms for the militia because of rumors of an insurrection among the blacks in adjoining Dinwiddie County; Thomas Spencer, King and Queen County, to Governor Floyd, September 1, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; the Petition of 25 Citizens of Westmoreland County, to Governor Floyd, October 3, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; [?], Bowling Green, Caroline County, to Governor Floyd, September 13, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; P. Woolfolk, Bowling Green, to Governor Floyd, September 22, 1831, Executive Papers, Box 321; all are in Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Virginia State Library, Richmond); and Ambler, ed., Diary of John Floyd, 156-159.

In the aftermath of the rebellion, some whites, at least among those communicating with the governor, became increasingly suspicious of the relationship between the races in Virginia. These suspicions apparently gave rise to rumors that many whites believed to be fact, or at least a strong indication of what was afoot. These rumors of black rebellion or plans for rebellion had a great influence on some whites. The commander of one militia regiment observed that there was "no fact . . . which has induced me to believe, that there is existing, or has been lately any plot amongst the slaves. . . . But I consider that the rumors afloat, and the alarm with which the people have been so unfortunately harassed [*sic*] for some time past, and therefore which . . . does not escape the notice of the slaves that many persons are under great apprehensions, must of necessity bring the slaves to think on the subject, and are unfortunately too much calculated to encourage them to make such attempts. . . ." ¹⁵ Rumors of black rebellion were widespread. Even those who believed the rumors were little more than fabrications recognized that until whites believed they had sufficient arms, the alarm would

¹⁵ Colonel Jonas Pierce, Amherst County, to Governor Floyd, October 10, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond). See also N. E. Sutton, Bowling Green, to Governor Floyd, September 21, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

continue.¹⁶ As far as many whites were concerned, the arming of the militia was the best means of insuring the return of tranquility.

Nat Turner's Rebellion came at a time when many whites were dissatisfied with the Virginia militia. The rebellion erupted in a period of considerable public neglect and apathy toward the militia and volunteer units. Only months before the Southampton affair the General Assembly session of 1830-1831 passed a revised militia law calling for a general disarming of the state militia.¹⁷ This move aimed at de-emphasizing the armed forces of Virginia met with little apparent public opposition. Whites generally seemed to acquiesce to the state's decision.

Faced with this new militia law, the state government began the rather complicated task of locating and recalling state arms held by the various regiments and companies of the militia. In order to expedite this process in the face

¹⁶ Ibid. and Benjamin Cabell, Danville, to Governor Floyd, October [?], 1831, who wrote that "vile fabrications are propagated in every direction. Last Thursday 1200 persons, men, women and children, collected at Capt. Estes's toward the upper part of this County, leaving their homesteads. There was not the shadow of foundation for the reports circulated . . . that 600 slaves had attacked the people and killed 16 persons, at the Camp Meeting, at the Court House. Every possible measure is adopted to calm the public mind-- but it is too much agitated to be tranquilized, till they are asurd [sic] that the means of defence are in hand." See also Colonel S. Diggs, Mathews County, to Adjutant General Bernard Peyton, September 26, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

¹⁷ Acts Passed at a General Assembly of . . . Virginia . . . 1830-1831 . . . (Richmond: T. Ritchie, 1831), 16-17.

of apathy or reluctance to cooperate on the local level, Adjutant General Bernard Peyton issued a public statement reminding "the Commandants of Regiments, of the necessity of increased attention to the standing General Orders . . . requiring the scattered arms, ordinance, accoutrements, etc. . . . belonging to the Commonwealth, to be collected, and forwarded to the Armory . . ." in Richmond.¹⁸ Despite such efforts the state received only about five hundred muskets between December 1, 1830, and the outbreak of Nat Turner's Rebellion.¹⁹ This left slightly more than two thousand muskets and rifles in the hands of the militia when the revolt broke out in Southampton.²⁰

¹⁸Norfolk Herald, May 2, 1831 and the American Beacon, May 4, 1831.

¹⁹"Return of Arms and Accoutrements Received, Commencing on the first day of December 1830 and ending 30 November 1831," Adjutant General Bernard Peyton, Executive Communications (MSS, Box 38, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

²⁰This figure is a rough estimate and the actual numbers are impossible to determine. On November 13, 1831, Adjutant General Peyton reported 2,006 muskets and 345 rifles in the hands of the militia. But in a separate report concerning arms issued, the Adjutant General detailed arms shipments to various areas. According to this report, 3,615 muskets were issued between August 23 and November 30, 1831. However, the figures given in Peyton's report of November 13 is probably a fairer representation of the arms actually held by the militia on August 23, Peyton's latter report detailed arms issued, and it was usually days, or even weeks, between the time arms were issued to a regiment and the actual arrival at their destination.

The number of arms held by militia units is fairly important in understanding the initial fear and feeling of defenselessness and insecurity felt by whites after the revolt. The state officially listed 101,488 men as actively enrolled in the militia. Roughly 80% of this number served as foot soldiers in 941 infantry companies. This means that, according to Peyton's figures, the average militia company of about 900 infantrymen had only two, or a maximum of four, public muskets or rifles. Of course in actual terms some companies had far more and some had none. This state of affairs surely did not

Even if this number is a fair representative of the arms held by local units, it is no guarantee that all of these arms were operational.

The degree of neglect of arms maintenance in Virginia is surprising. In late November, 1831, it was reported that 35,896 muskets were on hand in the state armory in Richmond. Of this number, 11,606, or nearly one-third, were considered out of order and non-operational.²¹ There is evidence that this neglect extended to local militia units. It seems that one of the primary factors motivating the state's decision to disarm the militia was the inability of the various regiments to maintain their arms. In his address to the legislature on December 4, 1831, Governor Floyd explained that the "policy of disarming the militia . . . was pursued as a measure of economy, as the men and officers had been culpably negligent in their attention to their preservation, so that many were

inspire the general white public with a sense of confidence in the ability of the militia to protect them. See "Abstract of the Annual Return of the Militia of the State of Virginia for the Year 1831." Adjutant General Bernard Peyton, November 13, 1831, and "Return of Arms and Accoutrements Issued commencing the 1st of December 1830 and ending 30 November 1831," Virginia Executive Communications, (MSS, Box 38, Virginia State Library, Richmond). Information of the delay in shipping arms to militia regiments is available in Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Boxes 321 and 322, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

²¹"Report of Arms and Accoutrements at the Armory on the 30th day of November 1831," Virginia Executive Communications (MSS, Box 38, Virginia State Library, Richmond). Further indication of this neglect is the fact that all the artillery swords accounted for in the armory (745) were described as out of order. Ibid.

lost, or by neglect became unfit for service."²² While the governor placed most of the blame on the militia units, at least one militia commander believed the state was partly responsible for the poor condition of some public arms. Colonel Botts/²⁷ of the Volunteer Corps of the 10th regiment informed Lieutenant Governor Peter Daniel that the arms received by the company as early as 1827 "were good for nothing, and cost the company as much for repairs as would have purchased new ones. . . ."²³

There is also some indication that the reputation of the militia in 1831 was not particularly exemplary. Discipline among the militia and volunteer companies seems to have been rather lax. The Norfolk American Beacon noted this on August 26, 1831, when it editorialized, "we cannot too severely reprehend the conduct of persons turning out as patrols, under present circumstances, firing guns and pistols in the streets.--- It is contrary to all Military usage, and calculated to excite

²²Journal of the House of Delegates . . . 1831-1832 . . . ,
10 (December 4, 1831).

²³Colonel Botts/²⁷, Spotsylvania County, to Lieutenant Governor Peter Daniel, August 3, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 320, Virginia State Library, Richmond). The colonel went on to point out one of the difficulties in adhering to the government's policy of collecting arms. Botts directed his Adjutant to collect the companies arms, but the Adjutant made "little progress--they are scattered all over the County, and I fear, that some time will elapse before they can be got together, if ever." Ibid. The poor condition of arms held by the militia is also mentioned in N. P. Tatem, Norfolk County, to Governor Floyd, August 27, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers, (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

alarm and distrust, instead of confidence in them as protectors."²⁴ Internal dissension and charges of fraud in the election of officers were also evident and in one company "produced great disorder."²⁵ All of these factors, the lack of, or neglected state of, the public arms, the lack of discipline, the poor leadership, and the lack of public confidence in the militia, were noticed in the weeks following Nat Turner's Rebellion.

In their requests to the Governor for arms, many spokesmen noted the inability of militia units to deal effectively with threats of race war. One of the points frequently stressed was the necessity of adequately arming the militia. The Lynchburg Virginian seemingly spoke for many when it stated that the rebellion "will, we hope, be productive of two beneficial consequences--we mean, the general arming of the Militia; and the formation, particularly in towns, of effective volunteer companies."²⁶ Support for effective

²⁴American Beacon, August 26, 1831. (emphasis in original) Similarly a Norfolk resident, "Caution," was incensed that the night patrol in the city arrested one of his slaves, even though the slave had a pass to be in the streets. "Caution" asked, "are the officers of the guard aware that they openly violate the law . . . in arresting servants with their Master's permission in their hands. . . . I should regret that any discharge of what they conceive to be their duty, should prove an infringement of the rights of their fellow citizens." Ibid., October 1, 1831.

²⁵Captain John Bowyet, [n.p.], to Adjutant General Bernard Peyton, July 30, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 320, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

²⁶September 8, 1831. The Virginian went on to explain the reasons for its position. "The mere sight of arms in the hands of the Militia, would strike terror into the minds of

rearmament also came from General Eppes. In a public letter to the Richmond Compiler Eppes wrote that "we have felt the want of arms throughout the lower counties--the mistaken policy of the State in taking away the arms from the militia, will now, we hope, be apparent."²⁷ In the wake of Nat Turner's Rebellion, many whites, including the Governor and State Legislature, probably concluded that disarmament had been a mistake. But merely arming the militia was not sufficient. As indicated by many individuals, additional reforms were required.

One of these reforms was the formation of numerous volunteer associations. Students at the University of Virginia formed a volunteer association to guard against slave insurrections; the volunteer patrol system in Chesterfield County was revitalized; and volunteer companies were formed in Norfolk, Fredericksburg, Petersburg, Danville, Powhatan County and Rockingham County.²⁸ A new attitude toward the militia

the slaves, while their unarmed condition absolutely invites insurrection. The cost to the State would be comparatively trifling. . . ." Similarly see the Richmond Enquirer, September 13, 1831.

²⁷Letter of August 24, 1831, reprinted in the Lynchburg Virginian, September 1, 1831. Much of the discussion of the militia which follows is based on correspondence from military men. As implied in the quoted portion of Eppes' letter, these military men may have opposed the disarming of the militia prior to the rebellion. One can speculate that the state ignored the advice of these men in its decision to disarm the militia.

²⁸R. M. Patterson, Chairman of the Faculty of the University of Virginia, to Governor Floyd, October 24, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 322, Virginia State Library, Richmond); Lutz, Chesterfield, 195; Lynchburg Virginian, September 19, 1831; Fredericksburg Herald, September 14, 1831; Scott and Wyatt, Petersburg's Story, 65; John Price, Danville, to Governor Floyd, September 21, 1831, Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia

was alluded to by one Southampton resident in a letter to Adjutant General Peyton requesting arms. "The late events in this county have rendered us quite military. Many of the most respectable citizens have united themselves for the purpose of forming a volunteer corps. . . . We intend to place ourselves in complete uniform."²⁹

Parker's letter was typical of the attitude of many whites. Much was made of the fact that "respectable" citizens were now joining the militia and volunteer companies. The need for uniforms to improve morale was stressed, as was the ability of the companies to provide satisfactory maintenance for the public arms. The point was consistently made that the militia companies were now respectable and dependable. Spokesmen for groups requesting arms apparently realized the reputation of some corps and made the point that their company could be trusted. For example one spokesman from Bowling Green in Caroline County requested that the Governor forward arms for the county to the two regular militia companies. "The volunteer company being very much despised [sic], it would not be advisable, to

State Library, Richmond); William Ligon, Powhatan County, to Governor Floyd, September 24, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond); and the Officers of the Infantry Volunteers, Rockingham County, to Governor Floyd, October 13, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

²⁹William Parker, Southampton County, to Adjutant General Bernard Peyton, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

forward arms, to them. . . ."30 However, such division among white Virginians was relatively rare. In the weeks following the revolt whites seemed eager to obtain arms and concentrated their energies on this goal.

As noted previously the state government moved to grant most requests for arms as rapidly as possible. The governor also issued new commissions for additional officers in units of the state militia.³¹ In addition some units of the militia were to be strengthened and kept "continually in a state of readiness, for efficient service."³² The state government received numerous assurances that any arms issued to the militia would receive adequate care. In order to obtain arms, "many respectable citizens" of Rockingham County,

³⁰ [?], Bowling Green, Caroline County, to Governor Floyd, September 13, 1831; "An old citizen of Portsmouth" wrote the Governor that it was "with much satisfaction that many of the citizens of this town have learnt of your refusal to commission the company caling [sic] themselves Granidiers [sic] of this town; there are already attached to this place five volunteer companies. . . . [two of which are not] efficiently filed [sic]; they but barely having the number which is required by law involved and often are compeled [sic] to make use of names over 45 years merely to keep their numbers up." "An old citizen of Portsmouth," Portsmouth, to Governor Floyd, October 6, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond). Additional complaints are aired by [?], Portsmouth, to Governor Floyd, September 28, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Virginia State Library, Richmond) and "Caution" in the American Beacon, October 1, 1831.

³¹ John Hope Franklin, The Militant South, 1800-1861 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), 185.

³² Adjutant General Bernard Peyton, to the Commandant of the 41st Infantry Regiment, September 30, 1831, Carter Family Papers (MSS, Folder 104, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary) and Franklin, Militant South, 185-186.

were "willing to furnish the govern. with any sufficient guarantee for the safe keeping and return of the said stand of arms. . . ." ³³ There were also numerous assurances that militiamen and their leaders were responsible, prudent or reliable individuals. ³⁴

In spite of such assurances many whites were not entirely satisfied that the militia was the answer to their security problems. Some whites favored circumventing the militia entirely and placing the security of the community in the hands of newly organized patrols. "A Friend of Precaution" in the Richmond Enquirer urged formation of armed, well-paid patrols to operate in counties with a black majority. ³⁵

³³Officers of the Infantry Volunteers, Rockingham County, to Governor Floyd, October 13, 1831; Benjamin Cabell, Danville, to Governor Floyd, October 19, 1831.

³⁴William Tatem, Norfolk County, to Governor Floyd, November 12, 1831; G. N. Cole, Chesterfield County, to Governor Floyd, September 23, 1831, who gave his assurances that the arms "when received will be placed in the hands of prudent, discreet men, who may be relied upon in any exigency."; Allen Temple, King George County, to Governor Floyd, September 13, 1831; Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond); Robert Hill, Madison County, to Governor Floyd, September 2, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond); L. Dade, Orange County, to Governor Floyd, September 11, 1831 (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond); and William Ligon, Powhatan County, to Governor Floyd, September 24, 1831, who reported the "strong sentiment" for forming a cavalry troop. Ligon believed that "from the attendance today, both as to numbers and personal respectability, I feel fully assured, that a reliable Troop will be fully organized. . . ." (emphasis in original)

³⁵September 15, 1831, and American Beacon, September 20, 1831. Similar opinions were expressed in Richmond Whig, September 26, 1831; Alexandria Gazette, September 5 and 9, 1831; Lynchburg Virginian, September 12, 1831.

but these sentiments were not universally held. One correspondent in the Enquirer opposed the plan of "A Friend of Precaution" as too expensive, inefficient and likely to attract men of "worthless character." Instead he favored a vigilant local volunteer, i.e., inexpensive, corps in areas desiring patrols. To facilitate this he wanted the militia laws amended to remove restrictions against creation of new corps.³⁶ The cost of maintaining a constant alert against black revolts was an important consideration among some white Virginians. "A Citizen" favored nothing beyond volunteer units, fearing that "any plan much more expensive would soon go down after the first excitement had in a measure passed."³⁷

Despite these possible alternatives, it seems most white Virginians turned to the militia to guarantee their security. The 1831-1832 session of the House of Delegates concentrated much of its energy on the discussion of militia reforms. Early in its deliberations the House resolved that the Committee on Militia Laws inquire "into the probable cost of arming the militia . . . and whether it is not expedient to

³⁶Richmond Enquirer, September 30, 1831.

³⁷American Beacon, September 26, 1831. Others argued that the cost of maintaining an efficient paid militia "would be inconsiderable when compared with the good that would inevitably result from it." William Kemper, Warrenton, Virginia, to Governor Floyd, September 21, 1831, Virginia Executive Papers (MSS, Box 321, Virginia State Library, Richmond); John Floyd's address to the legislature, Journal of House of Delegates . . . 1831-1832 . . ., 10 (December 4, 1831).

put into active operation the armory for that purpose. . . ."³⁸
 The House also considered a bill to establish a camp of instruction for each militia brigade to be held annually for six successive days, "for the purpose of being trained and instructed agreeably to the mode of discipline."³⁹ While this bill was rejected, the House did pass "An Act Concerning the Public Guard" on March 17, 1832. On the final day of the session two additional laws were passed dealing with armed forces, "An Act Concerning Patrols" and "An Act providing for the encouragement of volunteer companies in this commonwealth."⁴⁰ The first of these laws increased the size of the public guard in Richmond and brought the pay, rations, clothing, term of service and mode of trial for offences into conformity with the strict law for public guards passed on January 22, 1801, in the wake of the Gabriel Prosser Conspiracy. The act concerning patrols established regular patrols in all towns east of the Alleghanies, but perhaps the most important and far-reaching act was the one for the encouragement of volunteer companies.

The preamble of this law was indicative of the temper of official thinking in the months following Nat Turner's

³⁸Journal of House of Delegates . . . 1831-1832 . . .,
 43 (December 22, 1831).

³⁹House of Delegates, Rough Bills, Session of December 5, 1831 to March 21, 1832 (MSS, Box 59, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

⁴⁰Acts Passed . . . 1831-1832 . . ., 16, 17, and 19.

Rebellion:

it is desirable that the state of Virginia should have at its command an efficient corps, at all times in readiness to meet any sudden emergency; and as it is manifest that such an object can be best attained by the organization of volunteer companies, with appropriate military uniform, to be frequently trained and disciplined, and to be well provided with suitable arms and accoutrements. . . .⁴¹

Nat Turner's Rebellion was perhaps the only factor at work to cause the state to embrace so completely this attitude toward militia units. This change in attitude was reflected in the arms shipments made in 1832. Adjutant General Peyton reported on November 15, 1832, that 8,393 muskets and rifles were in the hands of militia regiments, an

⁴¹Ibid., 19. In drafting its revised militia law the legislature sought the advise of three militia commanders, Thomas Chapline of Wheeling, William Ligon of Powhatan County and Richard Pollard of Nelson County. The views of these men were remarkably similar and they apparently had much influence on the legislators since nearly all of their advice was written into the militia law. All three of these men saw the militia solely as a means of preventing "servile war." Brigadier General Chapline noted this clearly. "I consider the existing Militia System of this state as . . . grossly inadequate to the protection of a people obnoxious to a servile war. . . . The people of the United States have nothing to fear from foreign invasion nor from rebellion nor insurrection except in the Slaveholding States, among which a fatal apathy and sense of security has hitherto existed. . . . from their actual condition or supposed state of security the people of Virginia have not been induced by the strong motive of fear to perfect themselves in military discipline." Chapline believed that to create an efficient militia it was necessary to "effect a radical change in the present System." All three men agreed that this change required the arming of the militia, issuing uniforms, more discipline and frequent musters, and the upgrading of the leaders. Thomas Chapline, Wheeling, Brooke County, to Governor Floyd, October 10, 1831; Richard Pollard, Nelson County, to Governor Floyd, October 11, 1831; William Ligon, Powhatan County, November 14, 1831, all in Virginia Executive Communications (MSS, Box 38, Virginia State Library, Richmond).

increase of about 400% over the previous year.⁴²

The revised militia law of March 21, 1832, was only the first step in a reconsideration of the place of the militia in Virginia society. White Virginians continued to take an interest in the militia even after the 1831-1832 session of the legislature. As Governor Floyd noted nearly a year and a half after Nat Turner's Rebellion, "the present militia laws are deemed so defective, that complaints have been heard from every quarter, and come with so much weight and earnestness that they ought not to be disregarded. In order to inspire the necessary confidence . . . it will be necessary carefully to revise all the enactments on that subject."⁴³ Such was the legacy of Nat Turner's Rebellion.

⁴² "Abstract of the Annual Return of the Militia of the State of Virginia, for the Year 1832." Journal of the House of Delegates . . . 1832-1833 . . . (Richmond: T. Ritchie, 1833), 211. It is interesting to note that there was no corresponding increase in the number of men enrolled in the militia, the total for 1832 being 102,971. Ibid.

⁴³ Journal of House of House of Delegates . . . 1832-1833 . . ., 8 (December 4, 1832).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Contemporary Newspapers

Alexandria Phenix Gazette.

American Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser.

The /Fredericksburg/ Virginia Herald.

The Lynchburg Virginian.

The Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald.

The Petersburg Intelligencer.

The Richmond Constitutional Whig.

The Richmond Enquirer.

Staunton Virginia Spectator.

Virginia Free Press and Farmers' Repository.

Contemporary Pamphlets, Documents, Books and Journals

Acts Passed at a General Assembly of . . . Virginia . . . 1831-1832 . . . Richmond: T. Ritchie, 1832.

The African Repository and Colonial Journal. VII (November and December, 1831).

Ambler, Charles, Ed., The Life and Diary of John Floyd. Richmond: Richmond Press, Inc., 1918.

"Charles City County Petitions," Tyler's Quarterly Historical Magazine, II (January, 1921), 167-170.

Dew, Thomas R. Review of the Debate on the Abolition of Slavery. Richmond: T. W. White, 1832.

Finch, I. Travels in the United States of America. . . . Longmans, 1833.

Floyd, John, Slave and Free Negro Letter Book. Unbound, no pagination. (copy located in Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia)

Gray, Thomas R. The Confessions of Nat Turner. . . . Richmond: T. W. White, 1832.

Harrison, Jesse Burton. Review of the Slave Question by a Virginian. Richmond: [n.p.], 1833.

Johnston, J. H., Comp. "Antislavery Petitions Presented to the Virginia Legislature by Citizens of Various Counties," Journal of Negro History, XII (October, 1927), 675-686.

Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia . . . 1831-1832 . . . Richmond: T. Ritchie, 1832.

Contemporary Correspondence

Blow Family Papers, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

Brown, Coalter, Tucker Papers, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

Carter Family Papers, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

Edgehill-Randolph Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

Executive Communications of John Floyd, Virginia State Library.

Executive Papers of John Floyd, Virginia State Library.

Hamilton, J. G. de Roulhac, ed. The Papers of Thomas Ruffin. 4 vols. Raleigh, North Carolina: Edwards and Broughton, 1918.

House of Delegates, Rough Bills, Session of December 5, 1831 to March 21, 1832, Virginia State Library.

Nicholas Trist Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.

County Histories

Forrest, William. Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity. . . . Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1853.

- Lutz, Francis. Chesterfield: An Old Virginia County. Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1954.
- Scott, James and Edward Wyatt. Petersburg's Story: A History. Petersburg, Virginia: Whittet and Shepperson, 1960.
- Waddell, Joseph. Annals of Augusta County Virginia, from 1726 to 1871. Staunton, Virginia: Russell Caldwell, 1902.
- Whichard, Rodgers. The History of Lower Tidewater Virginia. 3 vols. New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1959.
- Works Projects Administration. Southampton County, Virginia, Archives. Richmond: Virginia Historical Records Survey Project, 1940.

Histories of Nat Turner's Rebellion

- Aptheker, Herbert. Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion. New York: Humanities Press, 1966.
- Drewry, William. The Southampton Insurrection. Washington: The Neale Co., 1900.
- Johnson, F. Roy. The Nat Turner Slave Insurrection. Murfreesboro, North Carolina: Johnson Publishing Co., 1966.

Selected Historical Narratives Containing Information about Nat Turner's Rebellion

- Ambler, Charles. Sectionalism in Virginia From 1776 to 1861. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1910.
- Franklin, John Hope. The Militant South, 1800-1861. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956.
- Matteson, David Maydole. Collection of Papers. Library of Congress, accession 9556.
- Robert, Joseph. The Road from Monticello: A Study of the Virginia Slavery Debate of 1832, Historical Papers of the Trinity College Historical Society, XXIV. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1941.

Historical Interpretations of Topics Relevant to Nat Turner's Rebellion

Fox, Early Lee. The American Colonization Society, 1817-1840. Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, XXXVII. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1919.

Hickin, Patricia. Antislavery in Virginia, 1831-1861. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1968.

Howison, Robert. A History of Virginia. . . . 2 vols. Richmond: Drinker and Morris, 1848.

Jackson, Luther. Free Negro Labor and Property Holding in Virginia, 1830-1860. New York: Appleton-Century Co., 1942.

_____. "Religious Development of the Negro in Virginia from 1760 to 1860," Journal of Negro History, XVI (April, 1931), 168-239.

Phillips, Ulrich. "Slave Crime in Virginia," American Historical Review, XX (January, 1915), 336-340.

Staudenraus, P. The African Colonization Movement, 1816-1865. New York: Columbia University Press, 1961.

Weatherford, W. D. American Churches and the Negro. Boston: Christopher Publishing House, 1957.

VITA

Randolph Werner

Mr. Werner was born in Lebanon, Pennsylvania on May 29, 1947. He attended Ithaca College, Ithaca, New York and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in June, 1969. In September, 1969, he entered the graduate program in history at the College of William and Mary.