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Slave Rebellions [1]

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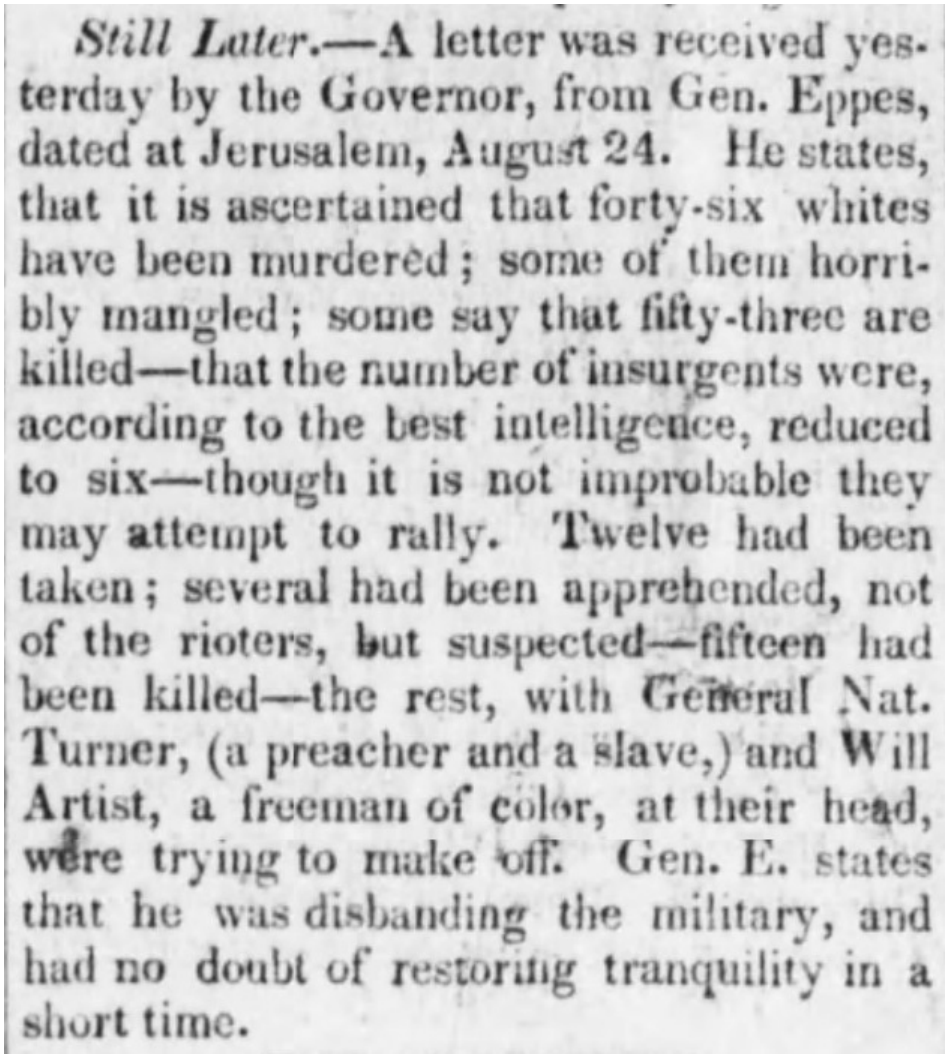
by Steven E. Nash and Thomas C. Parramore, 2006; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, November 2023

See also: Negro Head Road [2]; Violence, Group [3]



Still Later.—A letter was received yesterday by the Governor, from Gen. Eppes, dated at Jerusalem, August 24. He states, that it is ascertained that forty-six whites have been murdered; some of them horribly mangled; some say that fifty-three are killed—that the number of insurgents were, according to the best intelligence, reduced to six—though it is not improbable they may attempt to rally. Twelve had been taken; several had been apprehended, not of the rioters, but suspected—fifteen had been killed—the rest, with General Nat. Turner, (a preacher and a slave,) and Will Artist, a freeman of color, at their head, were trying to make off. Gen. E. states that he was disbanding the military, and had no doubt of restoring tranquility in a short time.

September 7, 1831 edition of the Miners' & Farmers' Journal. (Charlotte, Mecklenburg County, N.C.) discussed the events of the Nat Turner Revolt. Image courtesy of DigitalNC.org.

[4]Slave rebellions were a recurring fear in North Carolina throughout much of its early history, although the state never experienced a large-scale revolt. Instead, it responded to internal rumors and rebellions that occurred in other states. The first major shock to white North Carolinians came in 1739, when people who were enslaved in South Carolina orchestrated the Stono Rebellion [5]. Because it took place near the North Carolina border, the insurrection induced North Carolina enslavers in 1741 to restrict the ability of the people they enslaved to carry guns.

The period between 1775 and 1800 was a turbulent time for North Carolina enslavers, as the American Revolution destabilized race relations in the state. As the people won independence from Great Britain and then struggled to define the new American nation, they kept a constant watch over people who were enslaved. Many enslaved people were themselves involved in social and political pursuits. Black men fought for both sides in the Revolutionary War [6], and many supported the principles of liberty and democracy. Some had even served in place of their enslavers when mustered. During the war, white North Carolinians investigated numerous rumors of slave revolts. In 1775, the enslaving aristocracy in Wilmington [7] gained peace of mind by disarming all Black people, imposing a 9:00 p.m. curfew, and requiring an oath of allegiance from the people they enslaved. A posse of Beaufort County [8] whites concentrated more than forty Black people believed to be plotting an insurrection, including the two alleged leaders. These men reportedly planned to kill white enslavers and burn their houses on July 8, 1775 as they traveled to "black country" for weapons and a new Black-led government.

Reacting to disturbances in the West Indies, especially the successfulHaitian Revolution [9] in 1791, North Carolina restricted the influx of enslaved people from the Caribbean in 1794. A year later the law was revised, and in 1795 the General Assembly passed a law that prohibited people immigrating from the West Indies or certain areas of the southern coast of America from bringing the people they enslaved into North Carolina. An enslaved person in Granville County [10] named Quillo had organized a massive revolt

to take place in April 1794. His failed plan included holding elections for a new Black government and uniting with insurrectionists in neighboring Person County [11]. The joint group hoped to remove the enslaving aristocracy from power. In 1798, three enslaved people were arrested and found guilty in Bertie County [12] for planning a revolt of one hundred fifty enslaved people.

The alarm of a "slave conspiracy" in 1802 actually involved a series of actions taken by whites in response to threats of a revolt by people who were enslaved. Arrests, trials, and the execution of two enslaved people in Nottoway County, Virginia, in January 1802 proved to be the beginning of two successive waves of conspiracy scares. The first wave was in February and occurred primarily in southeastern Virginia, but also included the bordering North Carolina counties of Halifax [13] and Northampton [14].

The second wave began with new suspicions in Halifax County, Virginia, in April and spread rapidly to nearly all of eastern Virginia and North Carolina. In late May, the discovery of an alleged plot [15] to burn Norfolk resulted in widespread arrests, trials, and executions of enslaved people within Currituck County [16]and surrounding areas. White panic was especially evident inBertie County [12]. Panicked white residents murdered eleven enslaved people for their alleged involvement. White residents murdered other enslaved people in Hertford [17], Halifax [13], Edgecombe [18], Currituck [16], Camden [19], and Perquimans [20] Counties. Altogether, white residents murdered about nineteen people who were enslaved in North Carolina and ten in Virginia, in addition to numerous others reportedly killed by vigilantes and militia. Annapolis, Maryland, was also affected. White enslavers also whipped, cropped ears, and deported other suspected revolutionaries. Neither trials nor investigations in these states produced credible evidence of actual plots. Public tranquility did not return until mid-July. Policy makers tightened slave codes [21] as a result. However, there were no further widespread alarms in this area for nearly three decades.

Two rumors of slave rebellions, both originating in Virginia, swept through North Carolina prior to theCivil War [22]. The first rumors of revolt followed the murder of fifty-nine white people, namely enslavers and their families, in Southampton County, Virginia on August 21, 1831. These murders were carried out under the direction of Nat Turner [23], an enslaved preacher. Turner's revolt immediately incited intervention from the North Carolina militia seeking to protect the state's enslaver class from similar unrest. One group, the Governor's Guards, reportedly killed forty people who were enslaved while suppressing a rebellion in Cross Keys, Virginia. In this climate of heightened fear, white North Carolinians discovered a suspected uprising in Duplin County [24], where after hours of torture on September 5, 1831 an enslaved person confessed, true or not, to devising the plot. On October 4, the insurrectionists planned to begin marching south to Wilmington [7] and kill white enslavers and their families along the way. On the coast they would be joined by a force of about 2,000 Black people. From there, they would execute a similar mission on their return north to Fayetteville [25]. The alleged leaders-two enslaved men named Dave and Jim-were killed by a mob on September 9, 1831. Their deaths did not stop the spread of terror to Wilmington. On September 17, several other enslaved people confessed to planning an additional revolt.

Several years later John Brown, a white abolitionist, raided the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Brown wanted to procure weapons for a total revolt of all enslaved people to end slavery in the United States. In the attempt, Brown and his men were captured on October 16, 1859 by U.S. Marines under the command of Col. Robert E. Lee. The response of white North Carolinians to the raid never reached the same panic that followed the Nat Turner Rebellion. However, numerous white state newspapers clamored for a better patrol system [26] of enslaved people. Black social outlets, including churches, were restricted as white North Carolinians perceived Brown's plan as part of a larger northern conspiracy to undermine southern society. Although his mission failed, Brown inspired a backlash among whites against all things "non-southern," which intensified the sectionalism in North Carolina leading to secession and the Civil War.

Educator Resources:

Grade 8: Colonial Slave Resistance. North Carolina Civic Education Consortium.
http://civics.sites.unc.edu/files/2012/04/ColonialSlaveResistance.pdf [27]

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"Still Later." *The Miners' & Farmers' Journal* (Charlotte, N.C.), September 7, 1831. https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn84020717/1831-09-07/ed-1/seq-3/ [37] (accessed November 21, 2023).

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