

Fires of jubilee- nat turner's fierce rebellion

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



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August 21, 1861 proved to be a day of sorrow, pain and lessons learned. The Fires of Jubilee is a historical account of the events that led to the bloodiest slave rebellion in southern history. Nat Turner is painted as a fairly intelligent and prophetic slave who believed he was chosen to free his people from their slave bondage. Nat's rebellion last almost two whole days before being halted by militia men from the state of North Carolina, leaving upwards of 50 whites murdered in the aftermath. Although it took some time to fully accomplish, the rebellion of Nat Turner ultimately led to the freeing of the slaves some years later.

The history of the south and slaves was forever changed by the events of the rebellion. Nat Turner's name will forever be a symbol of black terror and violet retribution and at the same time, a legendary black hero. In the Old South, it was understood that Christianity was not only used to save heathen souls, but also to keep the slaves suppressed and kept them from striking back against their masters. (Page 14) Southern white slave owners would pick and choose only certain bible lessons for the slaves to be shown.

The owners felt that by restricting the knowledge of the slaves, they would be able to keep them inhibited. Words of the bible were twisted to mean different things to the slave population. Slaves were told that if they did not obey their masters and perform their allotted tasks that God would burn them in the flames of an eternal hell. To be good children of God the slaves were to accept their lot, be meek and faithful, patient and submissive, even if their masters were cruel. Slaves were taught to leave it to God to punish.

And if they behaved great would be their reward in heaven. Page 14) Nat Turner was a very special slave. From a very young age it was obvious that

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Nat was intelligent and others around him knew it. People around Nat always thought he would grow up to be a prophet. " He was like a powerful angel whose wings were nailed to the floor. " (Page 69) As Nat grew older he also grew in his faith, he believed himself to be in full favor of God. He prayed daily and spent time in devotion and fasting to his heavenly father. In an attempt to gain more following Nat performed a baptism in the river of a white man.

The result was not as he hoped, however it only helped to push him closer to his God. Nat began having visions for a time before the rebellion came into full plan. His visions were often bloody and violent, being described as blacks and whites fighting in battle under a darkened sky while thunder rolled in the heavens. Rivers of blood flowed free about and voices spoke from heaven saying " Such is your luck, such you are called to see, and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bare it. " Nat was captivated by these visions and prayed fervently for a revelation.

After some time had passed, the Spirit called out to Nat from the heavens saying " Behold me as I stand in the heavens. " Nat looked up and saw the saviors hands stretched forth from east to west, even as they were on the cross on Calvary for the redemption of sinners. " (Page 36) Slave owners and others around town either passed Nat off as crazy or simply did not bother to believe him because he was not an ordained minister. In his own way, Nat was one of the most renowned prophets of his day. He was revered and trusted by many fellow slaves.

Nat also claimed to have powers of healing and such. Several men became close confidants of Nat. He had full trust and confidence in his " lieutenants"

as he called them. Four men Hark Travis, Nelson Williams, Jack Reese and Sam Edwards were Nat's leading men in the rebellion. They were responsible for many things but spent a lot of time spreading discontent within the slave communities keeping them ready and on edge at any moment for the rebellion to begin. Nat's lieutenants did not know a specific plan; he was quite secretive about the dates and details surrounding the rebellion.

One of Nat's visions gave him the final push he needed to bring the plan into full swing. At one point, a black spot appeared on the surface of the sun, for Nat this symbolized a black hand over the sun. This was his sign that God wanted him to rise up against his white enemies. Jehovah was commanding Nat to rise and move. Nat's trusted generals stayed by his side as this revolt happened without warning. The violence raged on for more than twenty four hours. Many were left dead and dismembered in the aftermath.

The consequences of the rebellion were very well known in the state and county. Immediate consequences were obviously the lost lives of the fifty-something whites. Many other slaves lost their lives as the militia began to fight and shut down Nat's group. The entire county and state was on alert for any suspicious activity coming from any slaves. There was no way to tell if this was just the beginning or the ending. Rumors spread quickly throughout the state that Nat's rebellion was only the beginning and that many other slaves outside of his county were planning to revolt as well.

These rumors proved to not be true, but because the residents of the state were on high alert, many innocent, free blacks and slaves were killed simply for being suspicious. There were trials and hangings publicly in Virginia and North Carolina. The lives lost due to this rebellion went far beyond the men

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and women killed on the first two days by Nat and his crew. Eventually abolitionists were blamed for the rebellion because of their provocative material on flyers and in articles that were in circulation. Many whites believed that the reason for Nat's rebellion was because of said flyers.

No evidence has ever been found showing knowledge of the flyers being associated with Nat. It has come to be known that the true reason is because of Nat's visions and callings from God; however whites did not want to believe that their God would allow this to happen. On a nationwide level the consequences began to affect many in the north as well. Abolitionists were to blame for all of these problems according to southern whites. Some of the more famous ones such as William Lloyd Garrison and Issac Knapp boldly stated that slaves should be freed immediately.

They were believers that "Negros deserved life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness just like white people." (Page 129) Many southerners did not agree with the abolitionists' standings on slavery, in fact a vigilance association in South Carolina offered a \$1, 500 reward for any agitator convicted of distributing any of the abolitionist flyers or documents. No matter what anyone said, Southerners became increasingly anxious after the rebellion looking for someone to blame for Nat's stand other than themselves. Things became increasingly hostile towards abolitionists in the weeks and months after Nat's revolt.

Many in the south blamed the "Yankees" and made it difficult for people to express freedom of speech. (Page 135) Liberation of the slaves seem to be the only way to guarantee no further uprisings or revolts from the slaves but it was not easy to convince all of the whites of that. After all, they still had

much work to be done on their farms and other items needed tending to on their plantations. Many southerners increasingly proclaimed that slavery was an institution and a positive and unequivocal good, condoned by the bible and ordained by God from the beginning of time. Page 143)

A senator from Washington, John C. Calhoun made several statements on the subject of slavery. He went on to justify slavery on historical grounds insisting that " there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other. " (Page 143) There were many other reasons for not immediately freeing the slaves, on a nationwide level, many in the north were afraid that a radical freeing would cause a rush of newly free African Americans to rush into northern states.

Much research and planning was put into the writing of The Fires of Jubilee. Reading the book it is hard to get a feel for exactly what Stephen B. Oates feelings are on slavery and the rebellion. This book has forever changed my opinion on slavery. I have studied about slavery as much as any other college student that is not a history major. Before reading this book, I knew and understood basic events leading up to the emancipation proclamation. This story seems so personal. You really get to know Nat on a personal level.

As a Christian myself, I can relate with Nat on wanting to be close to God. I have never had a prophetic vision but I believe it when others tell me of their experiences. I do not feel Nat was right by revolting the way he did but then again, I have never been in his shoes being suppressed by others around me. Nat was a very strong, god fearing man and I believe he felt his revolt

was the only way to bring attention to the problem of slavery. Stephen B. Oates does a wonderful job with his descriptions in the novel.

The work is very vivid and I can almost see the pictures in my head playing out like a movie, especially when Nat's visions are described. I especially liked the ending chapter in the book when Stephen discusses his trip to the 1973 version of Southampton County. Reading his details makes me want to take a road trip just to see the things he seen for myself. I am not sure what would still be standing over 40 years after this book was written but it seems to be worth the trip. This book has given me a new opinion on slavery and how it affected the world that we live in today.

I was not expecting to have such a different view on slavery and oppression at the beginning of this reading assignment. The story was quite touching even though there were parts that could have been avoided. Nat Turner will be a name I never forget when it comes to slavery. We still have lasting affects in today's society of slavery. Even though most of the modern day African Americans that exist in my life did not have to deal with slavery, I can understand how they may still be affected by the idea of it.