

Nathaniel Turner Biography

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Biography

Nathaniel Turner (1800-1831) was a black American who organized and led the most successful slave revolt in the United States.

Nat Turner was born a slave on Oct. 2, 1800, in Southampton County, Va. As a child, he exhibited notable leadership qualities and intelligence. His insight prompted friends to believe he was destined to be a prophet. Commenting on Nat's precociousness, they remarked that he "would never be of any service to anyone as a slave."

Turner had a restless, observant, inquisitive mind. He read the Bible and extracted from it useful ideas on liberty and freedom. He preached to other slaves, counseling them to seek self-respect, to fight for justice, and to resist and rebel against the institution of slavery if they were to be free men. He believed that he was chosen by God to deliver his people from bondage and "slay my enemies with their own weapons."

In February 1831 Turner received what he believed to be a sign from God (a solar eclipse) telling him that it was time for him and his companions to prepare for the revolt. On August 21 they began their attempt to overthrow the institution of slavery. In 48 hours they killed between 55 and 65 whites throughout Southampton County. A family of poor whites, who owned no slaves, was spared. On August 23 Turner's black liberation army was met and overpowered by a superior state and Federal military force. Over 100 blacks were slain in the encounter and dozens more immediately executed.

Turner, the "Black Spartacus," escaped and was not caught until October 30. On November 5 he was tried and convicted. Although he admitted to leading the rebellion, when asked how he pleaded, he said "not guilty." Six days later he was executed for trying to free his people from slavery.

This slave rebellion catalyzed the beginning of the abolitionist movement in the United States. Because Turner's motive was a desire for liberty, some regard him as cast in the same mold as the American patriots who fought the Revolutionary War and as other freedom-loving men. No less than Patrick Henry, Turner too believed that "give me liberty or give me death" must be man's guiding philosophy of life.