

A Clear Signal for Change: Multiple Interpretations and Nat Turner's Rebellion

* Lesson used with permission from: Lesh, Bruce. *Primary Sources in United States History: Jacksonian America, 1820-1840*. The Center for Learning, pgs. 12-17.

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Duration: One 45 minute period

Core Learning Goals: None

BCPS Indicator:

Objectives:

- Identify the facts surrounding Nat Turner's Rebellion
- Determine the various interpretations of Nat Turner's Rebellion
- Construct an historical argument regarding how Nat Turner's Rebellion should be memorialized

Historical Thinking Skills:

The main emphasis of the lesson is for students to gain insight into how historical figures and their actions are open to multiple interpretations from both contemporary observers and historians. Students will actively engage in Historical Comprehension as they analyze a series of artistic representations of Nat Turner and textual description of the man and his actions. In addition, students will employ the Historical Thinking Skills of Analysis and Interpretation as they consider competing historical narratives, and evaluate various potential interpretations of Nat Turner and his rebellion.

In this lesson students will examine several primary resource drawings depicting Nat Turner and the Southampton Rebellion in order to determine what the controversy is regarding Turner as an historical figure. Next, students will evaluate primary and secondary source readings to gather facts regarding the historical interpretations of Turner. Finally, students will develop an inscription for an historical marker representing Nat Turner and his rebellion.

Procedures:

1. Initiate the lesson, by asking students why we would commemorate an historical event with a marker, sign, statue, or plaque. Read the following description and ask students if they believe the actions or the person should be commemorated:

“A principled, man of faith, organized and led a rebellion against people that supported an activity that was deemed immoral and a crime against God. His leadership skills created a small band of followers that took up arms and defended their beliefs.”

Solicit student’s responses to the description and have them justify their answers. Ask students to hypothesize on who the person may have been or what event is depicted. Inform the class that you will be displaying several pictures of a person and an event that took place in 1831, and closely resembles the description of the person they just discussed.

2. Review the who, what, when, where, and why of Nat Turner’s Rebellion by discussing the homework found on **Resource Sheet 1**. Introduce students to the basics of Nat Turner’s rebellion. Be sure to identify the factors may have been the impetus for Nat’s actions. Consult the notes to the teacher for any background information.
3. Display **Resource Sheets 2A-E** and lead students through an evaluation of the messages conveyed by the sources. Further the classes examination of Nat Turner, by asking the following questions:

- a. Why would artists produce two dramatically different interpretations of Nat Turner?

Answers should mention that pieces could have been created during different time periods, the artists may have a bias or point they wanted to make, or it could represent a particular historical interpretation.

- b. What contradiction regarding democracy and freedom might Nat Turner’s actions symbolize?

Nat Turner’s rebellion brings to the forefront the fact that the United States was formed to protect freedom and yet harbored within its borders an institution that was designed to restrict freedom.

- c. Should Nat Turner be considered an American hero?

Student answers will vary depending upon their feelings regarding the rule of law, morality, and the use of violence as a political tool.

4. Provide each student with a copy of **Resource Sheet 4** and one of the primary or secondary sources from **Resource Sheet 3**. Ask students to read their source and answer the questions on **Resource Sheet 4**. Remind students that they are reading to determine the type of person that Nat Turner was described to be by the author.
5. Have students reorganize themselves into groups of six and share what they found in their respective sources. Students should record the information that is shared on their worksheet.
6. Come back together as a full class and share the information that was gleaned from the documents and from discussion. As students share their findings record the information on the board or the overhead. Further the classes understanding of Nat Turner by asking:
 - a. As a southern slaveholder, how would you react when you discovered the information about Nat Turner's Rebellion?

Answers should mention a fear over a wide spread slave revolt, concern for the impact of a slave revolt on economic productivity, anger over what they see as an undue role of northern abolitionists in agitating slaves, and a renewed desire to stop manumission in border states.

- b. What impact might Turner's Rebellion have on the developing Abolitionist movement in the north?

Turner's rebellion would serve as a focal point for abolitionists as they point out the injustice of slavery and the humanity of slaves as the rebel against the system. In addition, Nat Turner's rebellion brings to the forefront the fact that the United States was formed to protect freedom and yet harbored within its borders an institution that was designed to restrict freedom.

- c. Why, in 1831, would it be more likely for a successful slave rebellion to occur in Virginia rather than Alabama or Mississippi?

Answers should mention the movement of the largest number of slaves into the Deep South, discussions of manumission in the Border States, Virginia's geographic proximity to abolitionist sentiment in the north, and the lack of population density throughout the south.

7. Return to the pictures displayed at the outset of the lesson. Ask the students which picture they feel best represents the accurate historical Nat Turner. Prompt students to defend their choices with information gleaned from documents and discussion. Focus students back on the question of whether or not Nat Turner should be considered a hero. Ask:

- What do we know about the sources of information and how that might impact the interpretation we develop?

Project a copy of Resource Sheet 5 and discuss how the background of the sources authors might impact our interpretation. Discuss the interpretive nature of history and how authorship of documents impacts the interpretations of past events, people, or ideas.

Assessment:

Assess students understanding of the lesson, distribute **Resource Sheet 6**, and instruct students complete the activity.

Extension Activities:

1. Have students compare Turner's rebellion to those of Denmark Vessey and Gabriel Prosser.
2. Have students visit the Africans in America website (www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia), review the documents there pertaining to Turner's rebellion, and summarize the interpretations presented about Turner and his Rebellion.

Source 1: John W. Cromwell-“The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection”

“Whether Nat Turner hastened or postponed the day of the abolition of slavery, . . . considered in the light of its immediate effect upon its participants, it was a failure, an egregious failure, a wanton crime. Considered in its necessary relation to slavery and as contributory to making it a national issue by deepening and stirring of the then weak local forces, that finally led to the Emancipation Proclamation...the insurrection was a moral success and Nat Turner deserves to be ranked with the greatest reformers of his day.

This insurrection may be considered an effort of the Negro to help himself rather than depend on other human agencies for the protection which could come through his own strong arm; for the spirit of Nat Turner never was completely quelled. He struck ruthlessly, mercilessly, it may be said in cold blood, innocent women and children; but the system of which he was the victim had less mercy in subjecting his race to the horrors of the “middle passage” and the endless crimes against justice, humanity, and virtue, then perpetrated throughout America. The brutality of his onslaught was a reflex of slavery, the object lesson which he gave brought the question home to every fireside until public conscience, once callous, became quickened and slavery was doomed.”

Source 2: Herbert Aptheker-*American Negro Slave Revolts*

“In the absence of any evidence of equal weight to the contrary, one must conclude that Turner possessed the characteristic of great leaders in that he sensed the mood and feelings of the masses of his fellow beings, not only in his immediate environment but generally. The years immediately preceding his effort had been marked by a great rumbling of discontent and protest. Turner’s act itself carrying that rumbling to a high point caused an eruption throughout the length and breadth of the slave south—which always rested on a volcano of outraged humanity.”

Source 3: William S. Drewery-*The Southampton Insurrection*

“Thus the insurrection was not instigated by motives of revenge or sudden anger, but the result of long deliberation and a settled purpose of mind, the offspring of gloomy fanaticism acting upon materials but too well prepared for such impressions,” and of love of self importance, encouraged by the efforts of Negro preachers, who were influenced by external affairs, and employed in circulating inflammatory and seditious periodicals. Those who have received most are the most jealous and ready to complain. Nat Turner, as the Southampton slaves in general, was like a spoiled child, who, having been allowed too many privileges in youth, soon thinks he ought to be master of all he surveys. The calling of a Constitutional Convention to meet in October, 1829, inspired in the slaves of Matthews Isle of Wright, and the neighboring counties hopes of emancipation, and in case of failure of such declaration to rebel and massacre the whites. Doubtless Nat had heard the same subjects discussed, and, being conscious of the results of the convention, which not only failed to emancipate slaves, but limited the right of suffrage to the whites, he considered it time to carry out his threats. He was undoubtedly inspired with the hope of freedom, and the mere discussion of emancipation by a convention may have led him to believe that many of the whites would sympathize with his schemes. He is said to have passed the home of some poor white people because he considered it useless to kill those who thought no better of themselves than they did of the Negroes.”

Source 4: *The Richmond Whig*-September 17, 1831 and *The Richmond Whig*-September 3, 1831

“Our insurrection, general, or not, was the work of fanaticism-General Nat was no preacher, but in his immediate neighborhood, had acquired the character of a prophet...he traced his divination in characters of blood, on leaves alone in the woods; he would arrange them in some conspicuous place, have a dream telling him of the circumstance; and then send some ignorant black to bring them to him, to whom he would interpret the meaning. Thus, by means of this nature, he had acquired an immense influence, over such persons as he took into his confidence. He, likewise pretended to have conversations with the Holy Spirit; and was assured by it, that he was invulnerable... I have been credibly informed, that something like three years ago, Nat received a whipping from his master, for saying that the blacks ought to be free...

“...We therefore incline to the belief that he acted upon no higher principle than the impulse of revenge against the whites, as the enslavers of himself and his race; that being a fanatic, he possibly persuaded himself that Heaven would interfere; and then he may have convinced himself as he certainly did his deluded followers to some extent, that the appearance of the sun some weeks ago prognosticated something favorable to their cause. . .”

Source 5: *The Richmond Enquirer*-August 1831

“...What strikes us as the most remarkable thing in this matter is the horrible ferocity of these monsters. They remind one of a parcel of blood-thirsty wolves rushing down from the Alps; or rather like a former incursion of the Indians upon white settlements nothing is spared; neither age nor sex is respected-the helplessness of women and children pleads in vain for mercy. The danger is thought to be over-but prudence still demands precaution. The lower country should be on alert-the case of Nat Turner warns us. No black man ought to be permitted to turn a preacher through the country...

...A fanatic preacher by the name of Nat Turner (Gen. Nat Turner) who had been taught to read and write, and permitted to go about preaching in the country, was at the bottom of this infernal brigandage. He was artful, impudent, and vindictive, without any cause or provocation that could be assigned. He was the slave of Mr. Travis. He and another slave of Mr. T.. a young fellow, by the name of Moore, were two of the leaders. Three or four others were first concerned and most active...They had 15 others to join them. And by importunity or threats they prevailed upon about 20 others to cooperate in the scheme of massacre...

...Nat, the ringleader, who calls himself General, pretends to be a Baptist preachers great enthusiast—declares to his comrades that he is commissioned by Jesus Christ, and proceeds under his inspired directions—that the late singular appearance of the sun was the sign for him...”

Source 6: *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the leader of the late insurrection, in Southampton (county), by Thomas R. Gray, VA...Baltimore, 1831*

"I was thirty-one years of age the second of October last, and born the property of Benjamin Turner, of this county. In my childhood a circumstance occurred which made an indelible impression on my mind, and laid the groundwork of that enthusiasm which has terminated so fatally to many, both white and black, and for which I am about to atone at the gallows. It is here necessary to relate this circumstance. Trifling as it may seem, it was the commencement of that belief which has grown with time; and even now, sir, in his dungeon, helpless and forsaken as I am, I cannot divest myself of. Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother, overhearing, said it had happened before I was born. I stuck to my story, however, and related some things which went, in her opinion, to confirm it. Others being called on, were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say, in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shown me things that had happened before my birth. And my mother and grandmother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying, in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast. . . .

By this time, having arrived to man's estate, and hearing the Scriptures commented on at meetings, I was struck with that particular passage which says, "Seek ye the kingdom of heaven, and all things shall be added unto you." I reflected much on this passage, and prayed daily for light on this subject. As I was praying one day at my plough, the Spirit spoke to me, saying, "Seek ye the kingdom of heaven, and all things shall be added unto you.,'... and then again I had the same revelation, which fully confirmed me in the impression that I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty.

Knowing the influence I had obtained over the minds of my fellow-servant (not by the means of conjuring and such like tricks-for to them I always spoke of such things with contempt), but by the communion of the Spirit, whose revelations I often communicated to them, and they believed and said my wisdom came from God, -- I now began to prepare them for my purpose, by telling them something was about to happen that would terminate in fulfilling the great promise that had been made to me.

...about this time I had a vision- and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened-the thunder rolled in the heavens, and blood flowed in streams-and I heard a voice saying, "Such is your luck, such you are called to see; and let it come rough or smooth, you must surely bear it."

And on the 12th of May, 1828, I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first. I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons. And immediately on the sign appearing in the heavens, the sea] was removed from my lips, and I communicated the great work laid out for me to do, to four in whom I had the greatest confidence..."

Nat Turner's Rebellion: Evaluating Historical Opinions

Use the following worksheet to record information from the various primary and secondary sources. When deciding the term that best describes the document's position regarding Nat Turner consider hero, villain, fanatic, religious, insane, leader, manipulative, brave, etc

SOURCE 1: John W. Cromwell-"The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection"

Adjectives

Quote

Term

SOURCE 4: *The Richmond Whig*

Adjectives

Quote

Term

SOURCE 2: Herbert Aptheker-*American Negro Slave Revolts*

Adjectives

Quote

Term

SOURCE 5: *The Richmond Enquirer*

Adjectives

Quote

Term

SOURCE 3: William S. Drewery-*The Southampton Insurrection*

Adjectives

Quote

Term

SOURCE 6: *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

Adjectives

Quote

Term

The Richmond Enquirer and Richmond Whig, 1831

Both newspapers were published in a southern city and were read widely by planters throughout the region. Tended to promote the political views of the upper-class planters who paid to subscribe to the paper.

Thomas R. Grey, *The Confessions of Nat Turner, 1831.*

After his capture and arrest on October 30, 1831, Nat Turner was imprisoned in the Southampton County Jail, where he was interviewed by Thomas R. Gray, a Southern physician. Grey stated that only Turner's words were recorded but in several instances Grey's words appear in the "Confessions."

William S. Drewery, *Slave Insurrections in Virginia, 1900.*

A white Virginian who grew up near the area of the rebellion. Read lots of primary sources, interviewed whites and blacks that knew people alive in 1831. He believed that slavery was a good thing that slaves were happy, and that slaves rarely rebelled.

John W. Cromwell-"The Aftermath of Nat Turner's Insurrection," *The Journal of Negro History, 1920.*

An African American teacher, writer, and political activist. Was one of the first to write in what will eventually be called African American History.

Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts, 1943.*

Hated segregation and racial stereotypes, believed that slavery was exploitive and that slave rebellions occurred frequently. Was a committed socialist and believed that class antagonisms were important to understanding the past.

Nat Turner's Rebellion

Read the following description of Nat Turner's Rebellion and list your answers to: Who, what, when, where, and why.

Nat Turner was born on October 2, 1800, in Southampton County, Virginia, the week before Gabriel Prosser was hanged for attempting to lead a slave rebellion in Richmond. While still a young child, Nat was overheard describing events that had happened before he was born. This, along with his keen intelligence, and other signs marked him in the eyes of his people as a prophet "intended for some great purpose." A deeply religious man, he "therefore studiously avoided mixing in society, and wrapped [him]self in mystery, devoting [his] time to fasting and praying."

In 1821, Turner ran away from his overseer, returning after thirty days because of a vision in which the Spirit had told him to "return to the service of my earthly master." The next year, following the death of his master, Samuel Turner, Nat was sold to Thomas Moore. Three years later, Nat Turner had another vision. He saw lights in the sky and prayed to find out what they meant. Then "... while laboring in the field, I discovered drops of blood on the corn, as though it were dew from heaven, and I communicated it to many, both white and black, in the neighborhood; and then I found on the leaves in the woods hieroglyphic characters and numbers, with the forms of men in different attitudes, portrayed in blood, and representing the figures I had seen before in the heavens."

On May 12, 1828, Turner had his third vision: "I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first... And by signs in the heavens that it would make known to me when I should commence the great work, and until the first sign appeared I should conceal it from the knowledge of men; and on the appearance of the sign... I should arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons."

At the beginning of the year 1830, Turner was moved to the home of Joseph Travis, the new husband of Thomas Moore's widow. His official owner was Putnum Moore, still a young child. Turner described Travis as a kind master, against whom he had no complaints.

Then, in February, 1831, there was an eclipse of the sun. Turner took this to be the sign he had been promised and confided his plan to the four men he trusted the most, Henry, Hark, Nelson, and Sam. They decided to hold the insurrection on the 4th of July and began planning a strategy. However, they had to postpone action because Turner became ill.

On August 13, there was an atmospheric disturbance in which the sun appeared bluish-green. This was the final sign, and a week later, on August 21, Turner and six of his men met in the woods to eat a dinner and make their plans. At 2:00 that morning, they set out to the Travis household, where they killed the entire family as they lay sleeping. They continued on, from house to house, killing all of the white people they encountered. Turner's force eventually consisted of more than 40 slaves, most on horseback.

By about mid-day on August 22, Turner decided to march toward Jerusalem, the closest town. By then word of the rebellion had gotten out to the whites; confronted by a group of militia, the rebels scattered, and Turner's force became disorganized. After spending the night near some slave cabins, Turner and his men attempted to attack another house, but were repulsed. Several of the rebels were captured. The remaining force then met the state and federal troops in final skirmish, in which one slave was killed and many escaped, including Turner. In the end, the rebels had stabbed, shot and clubbed at least 55 white people to death.

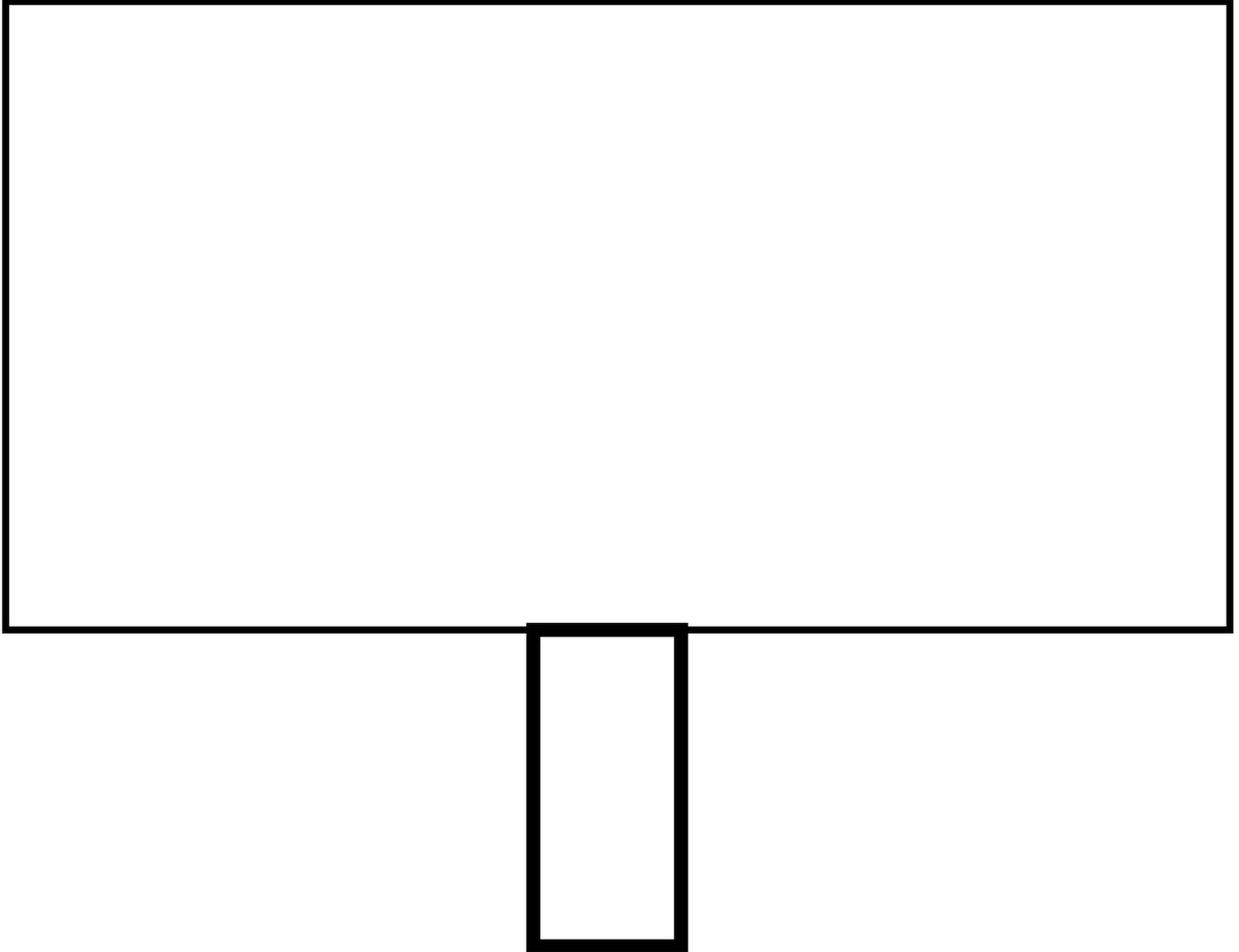
Nat Turner hid in several different places near the Travis farm, but on October 30 was discovered and captured. His "Confession," dictated to physician Thomas R. Gray, was taken while he was imprisoned in the County Jail. On November 5, Nat Turner was tried in the Southampton County Court and sentenced to execution. He was hanged, and then skinned, on November 11.

In total, the state executed 55 people, banished many more, and acquitted a few. The state reimbursed the slaveholders for their slaves. But in the hysterical climate that followed the rebellion, close to 200 black people, many of whom had nothing to do with the rebellion, were murdered by white mobs. In addition, slaves as far away as North Carolina were accused of having a connection with the insurrection, and were subsequently tried and executed.

Nat Turner's Rebellion: A Historical Marker

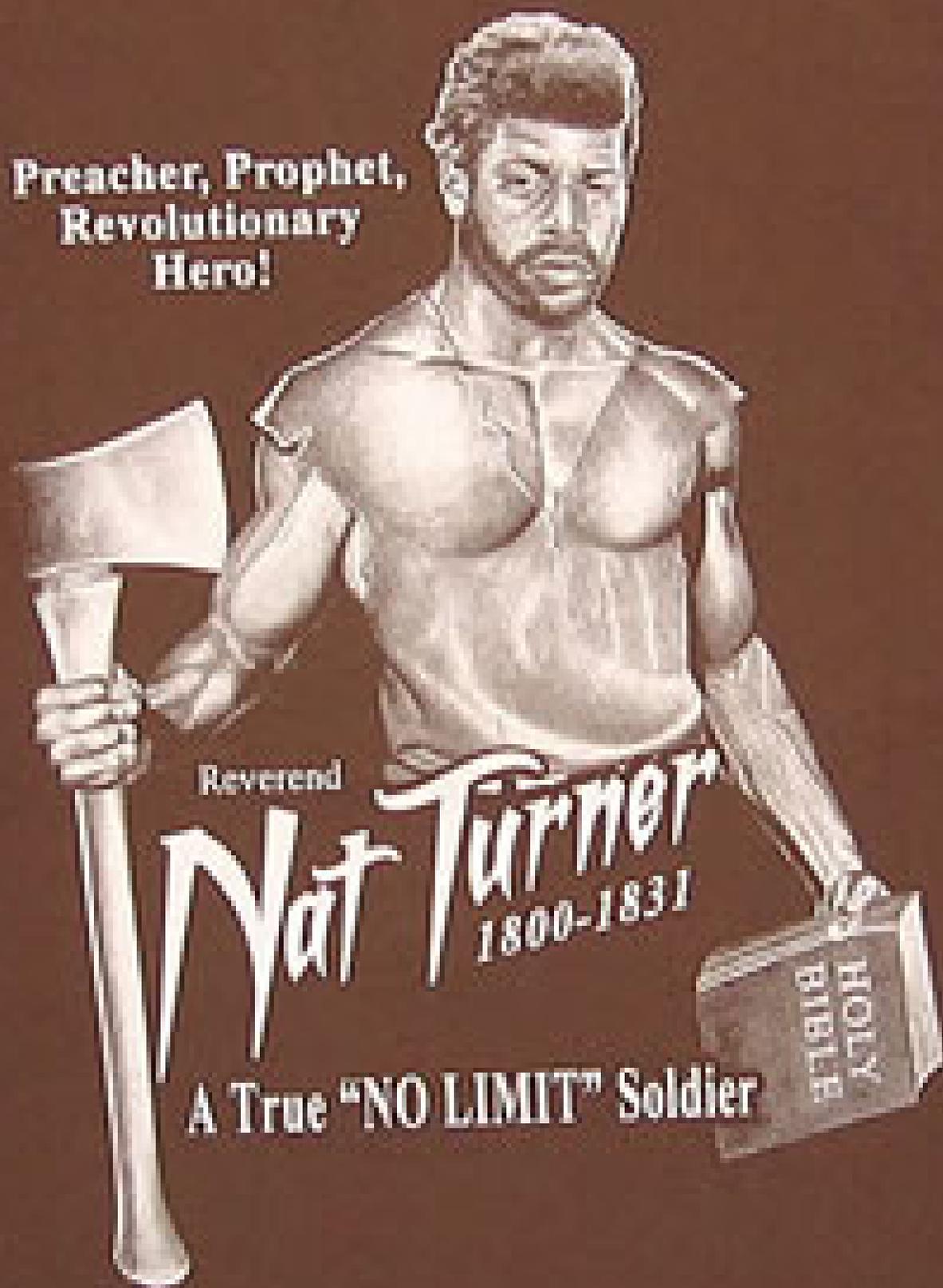
You have been commissioned by the state of Virginia Historical Trust to develop an historical marker that will be placed along the roadside adjacent to the area to the area impacted by Nat Turner and his followers. Your task is to develop the inscription for the marker that describes your interpretation of Nat Turner and his actions. Your inscriptions should take into account:

- The specific factors involved in the event
- The various reactions to Nat Turner (artistic, and other)



Why I came to this decision (What documents most impacted your decisions and why): _____

**Preacher, Prophet,
Revolutionary
Hero!**



Reverend

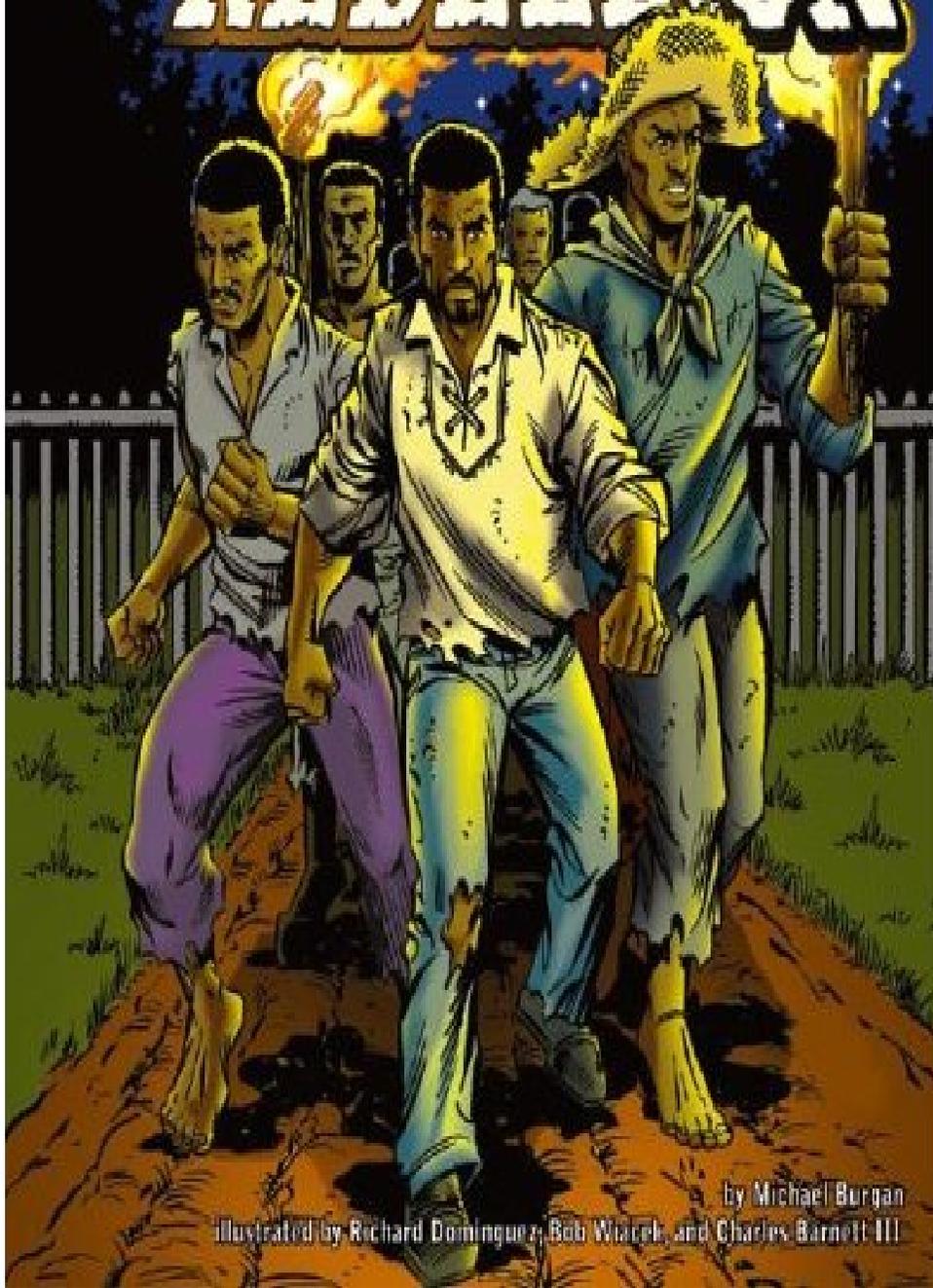
Nat Turner
1800-1831

A True "NO LIMIT" Soldier

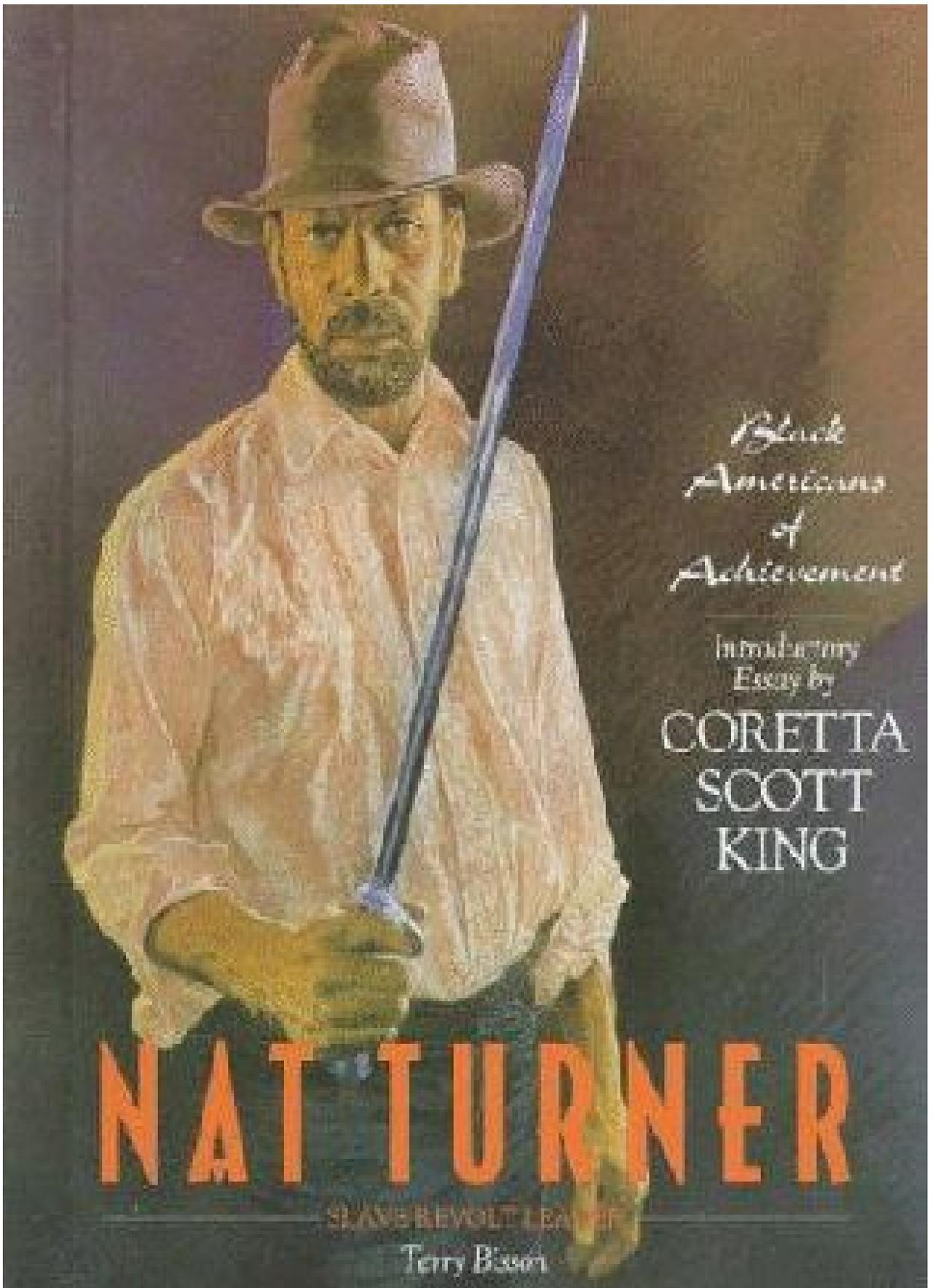
HOLY
BIBLE



NAT TURNER'S SLAVE REBELLION



by Michael Burqan
illustrated by Richard Dominguez, Bob Wiacek, and Charles Barnett III



*Black
Americans
of
Achievement*

Introductory
Essay by
**CORETTA
SCOTT
KING**

NATTURNER

SLAVE REVOLT LEADER
Terry Brown





HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA.



The Scenes which the above Plate is designed to represent, are—Fig. 1. a Mother intreating for the lives of her children.—2. Mr. Travis, cruelly murdered by his own Slaves.—3. Mr. Barrow, who bravely defended himself until his wife escaped.—4. A comp. of mounted Dragoons in pursuit of the Blacks.



HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA.

