

## CELEBRATED COLORED AMERICANS.

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NAT TURNER.

Written for Pine and Palm

Biography is individual history, as distinguished from that of communities, of nations, and of worlds. Eulogy is that deserved applause which springs from the virtues, and attaches itself to the characters of men. This is not intended either as a biography or a eulogy, but simply a sketch of one whose history has hitherto been neglected, and to the memory of whom the American people are not prepared to do justice.

On one of the oldest and largest plantations in Southampton County, Va., owned by Benjamin Turner, Esq., Nat was born a slave, on the 2d of October, 1800. His parents were of unmixed African descent. Surrounded as he was by the superstition of the slave quarters, and being taught by his mother that he was born for a prophet, a preacher, and a deliverer of his race, it was not strange that the child should have imbibed the principles which were afterwards developed in his career. Early impressed with the belief that he had seen visions, and received communications direct from God, he, like Napoleon, regarded himself as a being of destiny. In his childhood, Nat was of an amiable disposition, but circumstances in which he was placed as a slave, brought out incidents that created a change in his disposition, and turned his kind and docile feeling into the most intense hatred to the white race.

Being absent one night from his master's plantation without a pass, he was caught by Whitlock and Mull, the two district patrolers, and severely flogged. This act of cruelty inflamed the young slave, and he resolved upon having revenge. Getting two of the boys of a neighboring plantation to join him, Nat obtained a long rope, went out at night on the road through which the officers had their beat, and stationing his companions, one on each side of the road, he stretched the rope across, fastening each end to a tree, and drawing it tight. His rope thus fixed, and his accomplices instructed how to act their part, Nat started off up the road. The night was dark, and the rope only six or eight inches from the ground, the slave felt sure that he would give his enemies a "high fall."

Nat hearing them, he called out in a disguised voice, "Is dat you, Jim?" To this, Whitlock replied, "Yes, dis is me." Waiting until the white men were near him, Nat started off upon a run, followed by the officers. The boy had placed a sheet of white paper in the road, so that he might know at what point to jump the rope, so as not to be caught in his own trap. Arriving at the signal, he sprung over the rope, and went down the road like an antelope. But not so with the white men, for both were caught by the legs and thrown so hard upon the ground, that Mull had his shoulder put out of joint, and his face terribly lacerated by the fall; while Whitlock's left wrist was broken, and his head bruised in a shocking manner. Nat hastened home, while his companions did the same, not forgetting to take with them the clothes line which had been so serviceable in the conflict. The patrolers were left on the field of battle, crying, swearing, and calling for help.

Snow seldom falls as far South as the southern part of Virginia, but when it does, the boys usually have a good time snow-balling, and on such occasions the slaves, old and young, women and children, were allowed to go out without mercy, and with no right to retaliate. It was only a few months after his affair with the patrolers, that Nat was attacked by a gang of boys, who chased him some distance, snow-balling with all their power. The slave boy knew the lads, and determined upon revenge. Waiting till night, he filled his pockets with rocks, and went into the street. Very soon the same gang of boys were at his heels, and pelting him. Concealing his face so as not to be known, Nat discharged his rocks in every direction, until his enemies had all taken to their heels.

The ill-treatment he experienced at the hands of the whites, and the visions he claimed to have seen, caused Nat to avoid, as far as he could, all intercourse with his fellow-slaves, and threw around him a gloom and melancholy that disappeared only with his life.

Both the young slave and his friends averred that a full knowledge of the alphabet came to him in a single night. Impressed with the belief that his mission was a religious one, and this impression strengthened by the advice of his grandmother, a pious, but ignorant woman, Nat commenced preaching when about 25 years of age, but never went beyond his own master's locality. In stature he was under the middle size, long armed, round-shouldered, and strongly marked with the African features. A gloomy fire burned in his looks, and he had a melancholy expression of countenance. He never tasted a drop of ardent spirits in his life, and was never known to smile. In the year 1828 new visions appeared to Nat, and he claimed to have direct communication with God. Unlike most of those born under the influence of slavery, he had no faith in conjuring, fortune-telling or dreams, and always spoke with contempt of such things. Being hired out to cruel masters, he ran away, and remained in the woods thirty days, and could have easily escaped to the Free States as did his father, some years before, but he received, as he says in his confession, a communication from the Spirit which said, "Return to your earthly master, for he who knoweth his Master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." It was not the will of his earthly, but his Heavenly Master that he felt bound to do, and therefore Nat returned. His fellow-slaves were greatly incensed at him for coming back, for they knew well his ability to reach Canada or some other land of freedom, if he was so inclined. He says further:—"About this time I had a vision, and 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 are you called on to see; and let it come, rough or smooth, you must surely bear it!'" Some time after this, Nat had, as he says, another vision, in which the Spirit appeared and said, "The Serpent is loosened, and Christ has laid down the yoke He has borne for the sins of men, and you must take it up, and fight against the Serpent, for the time is fast approaching when the first shall be last, and the last shall be first." There is no doubt but that this last sentence filled Nat with enthusiastic feeling in favor of the liberty of his race, that he had so long dreamed of. "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last," seemed to him to mean something. He saw in it the overthrow of the whites, and the establishing of the blacks in their stead, and to this end he bent the energies of his mind. In February, 1831, Nat received his last

communication, and beheld his last vision. He said, "I was told I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons."

The plan of an insurrection was now formed in his own mind, and the time had arrived for him to take others into the secret, and he at once communicated his ideas to four of his friends, in whom he had implicit confidence. Hark Travis, Nelson Williams, Sam Edwards, and Henry Porter were slaves like himself, and like him had taken their names from their masters. A meeting must be held with these, and it must take place in some secluded place where the whites would not disturb them, and a meeting was appointed. The spot where they assembled was as wild and romantic as were the visions that had been impressed upon the mind of their leader.

Three miles from where Nat lived, was a dark swamp filled with reptiles, in the middle of which was a dry spot, reached by a narrow winding path, and upon which human feet seldom ever trod, on account of its having been the place where a slave had been tortured to death by a slow fire, for the crime of having flogged his cruel and inhuman master. The night for the meeting arrived, and they came together. Hark brought a pig, Sam, bread, Nelson, sweet potatoes, and Henry, brandy, and the gathering was turned into a feast. Others were taken in, and joined the conspiracy. All partook heartily of the food and drank freely, except Nat. He fasted and prayed. It was agreed that the revolt should commence that night, and in their own master's households, and that each slave should give his oppressor the death blow. Before they left the swamp, Nat made a speech, in which he said: "Friends and brothers! We are to commence a great work to-night. Our race is to be delivered from slavery, and God has appointed us as the men to do His bidding, and let us be worthy of our calling. I am told to slay all the whites we encounter, without regard to age or sex. We have no arms or ammunition, but we will find these in the houses of our oppressors, and as we go on, others can join us. Remember that we do not go forth for the sake of blood and carnage, but it is necessary that in the commencement of this revolution, all the whites we meet should die, until we shall have an army strong enough to carry on the war upon Christian basis. Remember that ours is not a war for robbery and to satisfy our passions; it is a struggle for freedom. Ours must be deeds, and not words. Then let's away to the scene of action."

Among those who had joined the conspirators, was Will, a slave, who scorned the idea of taking his master's name. Though his soul longed to be free, he evidently became one of the party, as much to satisfy revenge, as for the liberty that he saw in the dim distance. Will had seen a dear and beloved wife sold to the negro trader and taken away, never to be beheld by him again in this life. His own back was covered with scars, from his shoulders to his feet. A large scar, running from his right eye down to his chin, showed that he had lived with a cruel master. Nearly six feet in height, and one of the strongest and most athletic of his race, he proved to be the most unfeeling of all the insurrectionists. His only weapon was a broad axe, sharp and heavy.

Nat and his accomplices at once started for the plantation of Joseph Travis, with whom the four lived, and there the first blow was struck. In his confession, just before his execution, Nat said:

"On ascending to the roof, Hark went to the door with an axe, for the purpose of breaking it open, as we knew we were strong enough to murder the family should they be awakened by the noise; but reflecting that it might create an alarm in the neighborhood, we determined to enter the house secretly, and murder them whilst sleeping. Hark got a ladder and set it against the chimney, on which I ascended, and hoisting a window, entered and came down stairs, unbarred the doors, and removed the guns from their places. It was then observed that I must spill the first blood. On which, armed with a hatchet, and accompanied by Will, I entered my master's chamber. It being dark, I could not give a death-blow. The hatchet glanced from his head; he sprang from the bed and called his wife. It was his last word; Will laid him dead with a blow of his axe, and Mrs. Travis shared the same fate, as she lay in bed. The murder of this family, five in number, was the work of a moment; not one of them awoke. There was a little infant sleeping in a cradle, that was forgotten until we had left the house and gone some distance, when Henry and Will returned and killed it. We got here four guns that would shoot, and several old muskets, with a pound or two of powder. We remained for some time at the barn, where we paraded; I formed them in line as soldiers, and after carrying them through all the manoeuvres I was master of, marched them off to Mr. Nathaniel Francis', about six hundred yards distant.

"Sam and Will went to the door and knocked. Mr. Francis asked who was there, Sam replied it was him, and he had a letter for him; on this he got up and came to the door; they immediately seized him and dragging him out a little from the door, he was dispatched by repeated blows on the head. There was no other white person in the family. We started from there to Mrs. Reese's, maintaining the most perfect silence on our march, where, finding the door unlocked, we entered and murdered Mrs. Reese in her bed while sleeping; her son awoke, but only to sleep the sleep of death; he had only time to say, 'who is that,' and he was no more. From Mrs. Reese's we went to Mrs. Turner's, a mile distant, which we reached about sunrise, on Monday morning. Henry, Austin, and Sam, went to the still, where, finding Mr. Peebles, Austin shot him; the rest of us went to the house. As we approached, the family discovered us and shut the door. Vain hope! Will, with one stroke of his axe, opened it and we entered, and found Mrs. Turner and Mrs. Newsome in the middle of a room, almost frightened to death. Will immediately killed Mrs. Turner with one blow of his axe. I took Mrs. Newsome by the hand, and with the sword I had when apprehended, I struck her several blows over the head, but was not able to kill her, as the sword was dull; Will turning round and discovering it, dispatched her also. A general destruction of property and search for money and ammunition, always succeeded the murders.

"By this time, my company amounted to fifteen, nine men mounted, who started for Mrs. Whitehead's (the other six were to go through a by-way to Mr. Bryant's, and rejoin us at Mrs. Whitehead's.) As we approached the house we discovered Mr. Richard Whitehead standing in the cotton patch, near the lane fence; we called him over in the lane, and Will, the executioner, was

near at hand, with his fatal axe, to send him to an untimely grave. As we pushed on to the house, I discovered some one running round the garden, and thinking it was some of the white family, I pursued, but finding it was a servant girl belonging to the house, I returned to commence the work of death; but they whom I left had not been idle; all the family were already murdered, but Mrs. Whitehead and her daughter Margaret. As I came round to the door I saw Will pulling Mrs. Whitehead out of the house, and at the step he nearly covered her head from her body with his broad axe. Miss Margaret, when I discovered her, had concealed herself in the corner formed by the projection of the cellar cap from the house; on my approach, she fled, but was soon overtaken, and after repeated blows with a sword, I killed her by a blow over the head with a fence-rail. By this time, the six who had gone by Mr. Bryant's rejoined us, and informed me they had done the work of death assigned them. We again divided, part going to Mr. Richard Porter's and from thence to Nathaniel Francis', the others to Mr. Howell Harris' and Mr. T. Doyles. On my reaching Mr. Porter's, he had escaped with his family. I understood there that the alarm had already spread, and I immediately returned to bring up those sent to Mr. Doyles and Mr. Howell Harris; the party I left going on to Mr. Francis', having told them I would join them in that neighborhood. I met those sent to Mr. Doyles and Mr. Howell Harris returning, having met Mr. Doyles on the road and killed him. Learning from some who joined them, that Mr. Harris was from home, I immediately pursued the course taken by the party gone on before; but knowing that they would complete the work of death and pillage at Mr. Francis' before I could get there, I went to Mr. Peter Edwards', expecting to find them there, but they had been there already. I then went to Mr. John T. Barrow's; they had been there and murdered him. I pursued on their track to Capt. Newitt Harris'. I found the greater part mounted and ready to start; the men now amounting to about forty, shouted and hurried as I rode up; some were in the yard loading their guns, others drinking. They said Captain Harris and his family had escaped; the property in the house they destroyed, robbing him of money and other valuables. I ordered them to mount and march instantly; this was about nine or ten o'clock, Monday morning. I proceeded to Mr. Levi Waller's, two or three miles distant. I took my station in the rear, and as it was my object to carry terror and devastation wherever we went, I placed fifteen or twenty of the best mounted and most to be relied on in front, who generally approached the houses as fast as their horses could run; this was for two purposes, to prevent their escape and strike terror to the inhabitants—on this account I never got to the houses, after leaving Mrs. Whitehead's, until the murders were committed, except in one case. I sometimes got in sight in time to see the work of death completed, viewed the mangled bodies as they lay, in silent satisfaction, and immediately started in quest of other victims. Having murdered Mrs. Waller and ten children, we started for Mr. William Williams'. We killed him and two little boys that were there; while engaged in this, Mrs. Williams fled and got some distance from the house, but she was pursued, overtaken and compelled to get up behind one of the company, who brought her back, and after showing her the mangled body of her lifeless husband, she was told to get down and lay by his side, where she was shot dead. I then started for Mr. Jacob Williams', where the family were murdered.

Here we found a young man named Drury, who had come on business with Mr. Williams—he was pursued, overtaken and shot. Mrs. Vaughan's was the next place we visited—and after murdering the family here, I determined on starting for Jerusalem. Our number amounted now to fifty or sixty, all mounted and armed with guns, axes, swords and clubs. On reaching Mr. James W. Parker's gate, immediately on the road leading to Jerusalem, and about three miles distant, it was proposed to me to call there, but I objected, as I knew he was gone to Jerusalem, and my object was to reach there as soon as possible; but some of the men having relations at Mr. Parker's, it was agreed that they might call and get his people. I remained at the gate on the road, with seven or eight, the others going across the field to the house, about a half a mile off. After waiting some time for them, I became impatient, and started to the house for them, and on our return we were met by a party of white men, who had pursued our blood-stained track, and who had fired on those at the gate, and dispersed them, which I knew nothing of, not having been at that time rejoined by any of them. Immediately on discovering the whites, I ordered my men to halt and form, as they appeared to be alarmed. The white men, eighteen in number, approached us in about one hundred yards, when one of them fired, and I discovered about half of them retreating. I then ordered my men to fire and rush on them; the few remaining stood their ground until we approached within fifty yards, when they fired and retreated. We pursued and overtook some of them whom we thought we left dead; after pursuing them about two hundred yards, and rising a little hill, I discovered they were met by another party, and had halted, and were reloading their guns, thinking that those who retreated first, and the party who fired on us at fifty or sixty yards distant, had only fallen back to meet others with ammunition. As I saw them reloading their guns, and more coming up than I saw at first, and several of my bravest men being wounded, the others became panic struck and scattered over the field; the white men pursued and fired on us several times. Hark had his horse shot under him, and I caught another for him that was running by me; five or six of my men were wounded, but none left on the field. Finding myself defeated here, I instantly determined to go through a private way, and cross the Nottoway river at the Cypress Bridge, three miles below Jerusalem, and attack that place in the rear, as I expected they would look for me on the other road, and I had a great desire to get there to procure arms and ammunition."

Reinforcements came to the whites, and the blacks were overpowered and defeated by the superior numbers of their enemy. In this battle many were slain on both sides. Will, the blood-thirsty and revengeful slave, fell with his broad axe uplifted, after having laid three of the whites dead at his feet with his own strong arm and his terrible weapon. His last words were "Bury my axe with me." For he religiously believed that in the next world the blacks would have a contest with the whites, and that he would need his axe. Nat Turner, after fighting to the last with his short sword, escaped with some others to the woods near by, and was not captured for

nearly two months. When brought to trial he pleaded "not guilty," feeling as he said, that it was always right for one to strike for his own liberty. After going through a mere form of trial, he was convicted and executed at Jerusalem, the county seat for Southampton County, Va. Not a limb trembled or a muscle was observed to move. Thus died Nat Turner, at the early age of 31 years, a martyr to the freedom of his race, and a victim to his own fanaticism. He meditated upon the wrongs of his oppressed and injured people, till the idea of their deliverance excluded all other ideas from his mind, and he devoted his life to its realization. Everything appeared to him a vision, and all favorable omens were signs from God. That he was sincere in all that he professed, there is not the slightest doubt. After being defeated he might have escaped to the free States, but the hope of raising a new band kept him from doing so.

He impressed his image upon the minds of those who once beheld him. His looks, his sermons, his acts, and his heroism live in the hearts of his race, on every cotton, sugar, and rice plantation at the South. The present generation of slaves have a superstitious veneration for his name, and believe that in another insurrection Nat Turner will appear and take command. He foretold that at his death the sun would refuse to shine and that there would be signs of disapprobation given from heaven. And it is true that the sun was darkened, a storm gathered, and more boisterous weather had never appeared in Southampton County, than on the day of Nat's execution. The sheriff, warned by the prisoner, refused to cut the cord that held the trap. No black man would touch the rope. A poor old white man, long besotted by drink, was brought 40 miles to be the executioner. And even the planters, with all their prejudice and hatred, believed him honest and sincere, for Mr. Gray, who had known Nat from boyhood, and to whom he made his confession, says of him:

"It has been said that he was ignorant and cowardly, and that his object was to murder and rob, for the purpose of obtaining money to make his escape. It is notorious, that he was never known to have a dollar in his life, to swear an oath, or drink a drop of spirits. As to his ignorance—he certainly never had the advantages of education; but he can read and write, and for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, is surpassed by few men I have ever seen. As to his being a coward, his reason, as given, for not resisting Mr. Phipps, shows the decision of his character. When he saw Mr. Phipps present his gun, he said he knew it was impossible for him to escape, as the woods were full of men; he therefore thought it was better for him to surrender, and trust to fortune for his escape. He is a complete fanatic, or plays his part most admirably. On other subjects he possesses an uncommon share of intelligence, with a mind capable of attaining anything; but warped and perverted by the influence of early impressions. He is below the ordinary stature, though strong and active; having the true negro face, every feature of which is strongly marked. I shall not attempt to describe the effect of his narrative, as told and commented on by himself,

in the condemned hole of the prison. The calm, deliberate composure with which he spoke of his late deeds and intentions,—the expressions of his fiend-like face, when excited by enthusiasm,—still bearing the stains of the blood of helpless innocence about him, clothed with rags and covered with chains, yet daring to raise his manacled hands to heaven, with a spirit soaring above the attributes of man;—I looked on him,—and the blood curdled in my veins."

Well might he feel the blood curdle in his veins, when he remembered that in every Southern household there may be a Nat Turner, in whose soul God has lighted a torch of liberty that cannot be extinguished by the hand of man. The slaveholder should understand that he lives upon a volcano, which may burst forth at any moment, and give freedom to his victim.

"Great God! hasten on the glad jubilee,  
When my brother in bonds shall arise and be free;  
And our blotted escutcheon be washed from its stains,  
Now the scorn of the world—four millions in chains!  
O! then shall Columbia's proud flag be unfurled,  
The glory of freemen, and pride of the world,  
While earth's strolling millions point higher in glee,  
To the land of the brave and the home of the free!"

Fifty-five whites and seventy-three blacks lost their lives in the Southampton Rebellion. On the fatal night, when Nat and his companions were dealing death to all they found, Captain Harris, a wealthy planter, had his life saved by the devotion and timely warning of his slave Jim, said to have been half-brother to his master. After the revolt had been put down, and parties of whites were out hunting the suspected blacks, Captain Harris, with his faithful slave, went into the woods in search of the negroes. In saving his master's life, Jim felt that he had done his duty, and could not consent to become a betrayer of his race, and, on reaching the woods, he handed his pistol to his master; and said:—"I cannot help you hunt down these men; they, like myself, want to be free. Sir, I am tired of the life of a slave; please give me my freedom, or shoot me on the spot." Captain Harris took the weapon and pointed it at the slave. Jim, putting his right hand upon his heart, said:—"This is the spot, aim here." The Captain fired, and the slave fell dead at his feet.

From this insurrection, and other manifestations of insubordination by the slave population, the Southern people, if they are wise, should learn a grave lesson; for the experience of the past might give them some clue to the future.

Thirty years of free discussion has materially changed public opinion in the non-slaveholding States, and a negro insurrection, in the present excited state of the nation, would not receive the condemnation that it did in 1831. The right of man to the enjoyment of freedom is a settled point; and where he is deprived of this, without any criminal act of his own, it is his duty to regain his liberty at every cost.

If the oppressor is struck down in the contest, his fall will be a just one, and all the world will applaud the act.

This is a new era, and we are in the midst of the most important crisis that our country has yet witnessed. And in the crisis, the negro is an important item. Every eye is now turned towards the South, looking for another Nat Turner.