

Reporting on Nat Turner: The Raleigh Register, Sept. 1

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY L. MAREN WOOD

From the *Raleigh Register*, 1 September 1831, p. 3.

As you read...

This report appeared in the *Raleigh Register* on September 1, 1831, ten days after Nat Turner's Rebellion began. As you read, compare it with the report by the North Carolina Star on the same day, and see the notes on that page.

1. The author of this newspaper story blamed Nat Turner for inspiring blacks to rebel. Why did the author put so much emphasis on one person? Why would it be comforting for white readers to believe that the uprising was caused by one man instead of as a plot contrived by a group?
2. Like the author of the previous article, the author of this report believed that the black people were interested in "blood and booty." Why was this a convenient story for whites to tell each other? Why did they not write that the slaves wanted freedom?
3. Why did the newspaper publish the names of the white people who were killed? Looking at the list, which people had their names published? What does this tell the historian about the ways in which white Southerners thought about families and households?
4. Why were none of the names of the black participants, except for Turner and one other man, listed in the newspaper?
5. The newspaper story said that one of the participants was a white man "blackened as a negro." This was most likely not true. Why would the newspaper choose to include this detail in its report?
6. What words did the newspaper use to describe black violence against whites? How did the newspaper describe white violence against blacks?

Insurrection and Murder! the disagreeable rumors which were in circulation in this city, at the date of our last publication, in relation to an Insurrection of the Slaves in Southampton county, Va, and a brief notice of which we inserted in a Postscript, turns out to be but too well founded!...

From the multiplicity of reports of which this soul harrowing occurrence has given birth, we have endeavored to cull such facts as we believe to be substantiated. These we will succinctly present to our readers, without however vouching for their *precise* accuracy,

though, we have every reason to suppose them correct. — They may serve to allay the anxiety of the public, until something *official* appears.

On Sunday, the 21st ultimo, there was a *negro* preaching in the neighborhood of the Cross Keys, in Southampton county, about ten miles from the Court House, at which a black preacher (a slave) named *Nat Turner*, officiated. What the character of his discourse was, is not stated, but is a fair subject of inference from the fact that the conspiracy broke out the same evening in that neighborhood, and was headed by the *preacher himself*, in conjunction with a free man of color, called *Will Artist*. His harangue most probably was the *immediate* cause of the disturbance, for it seems from all the accounts that: the number of insurgents was few and that there existed nothing like a concerted plan, except in the narrow circle where it began. Perhaps by animating and encouraging the timid with hopes of success, removing the scruples of the religious by grossly prostituting the sacred oracles and inflaming and confirming the resolute, by all the savage fascinations of blood and booty, this mis-called preacher so worked upon the feelings of his auditors that they immediately resolved upon their bloody course. Be this however, as it may, it is certain that on the evening about fifty negroes, headed by the two persons before names, rose in open rebellion and commenced an indiscriminate slaughter of the whites, sparing in their blood thirsty infatuation, neither *age, sex, or condition*. During that night and the following day, they succeeded in killing more than SIXTY WHITES. We have been favored by a gentleman, from the vicinity of the scene of action, with the following list of the individuals butchered, which however does not comprise all, several having fallen whose names could not be procured:

Joseph Travis, wife and three children	5
Lotha Francis	1
William Reese and mother	2
Mrs. Elizabeth Turner and two others	3
Henry Bryant, wife, child & mother-in-law	4
Mrs. C. Whitehead, three daughters, two sons, and one grand son	7
Trajan Doyel	1
John Williams' wife and child	2
Nat'l. Francis two children and overseer	3
Thomas Barrow	1
Levi Waller's eight children, wife and a young lady	10
Francis Feil's two daughters	2
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Burnwell Jones' daughter	1
William Williams, wife and two others	4
Jacob Williams' wife, three children and _____ Drury	5
Caswell Worrell's wife and child	2
Mrs. Rebecca Vaughn, two sons, & niece	4
James Story and wife	2
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... By Wednesday night, the whole band of insurgents, with the exception perhaps of two or three, were either killed or captured. The two leaders were shot and their heads placed upon stakes in the public road. Though many of the accounts differ in their details, they all concur in one point, viz: that the affair is at the end. & that no suspicion is entertained of its having been a general thing. We trust, therefore, that the great excitement into which the country has been thrown, will quickly subside, whilst the prompt manner in which this outrage has been met and the example made, will deter others from making similar attempts. It is very gratifying to us to have it in our power to state, as we can do upon.

It is said that one white man, at least, was found amongst the dead conspirators, disguised and blackened as a negro.... If this be true, the fate which overtook him was almost of too mitigated a character. We can think of no crime in the whole range of human enormity so heinous as this. Circumstances *may* be adduced, by bare possibility, in extenuation of a simple murder, or even of him who should place fire brand in the midst of a populous town — but for the infernal villain who would join our slaves in such an unhallowed and diabolical crusade, there *can* be no such thing as extenuation.

In closing this hasty account, we regret exceeding to state, that Mr. Shepard Lee, an esteemed member of the *Halifax Blues* was accidentally shot during an alarm, by a brother member of the Corps. The circumstances seem greatly to have excited the sympathy and regret of the circle, where Mr. Lee was best known.

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<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/5251>

In this lesson plan, students analyze and compare four contemporary newspaper accounts of Nat Turner's Rebellion to identify bias and to try to determine the facts of the event.

Reading newspapers: Factual reporting

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4132>

This learner's guide introduces students to the use of historical newspapers as primary sources and provides key questions for reading them.

Reading newspapers: Editorial and opinion pieces

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pages/4184>

A learner's guide to identifying, reading, and understanding editorial and opinion pieces in historical newspapers.

Reading newspapers: Reader contributions

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A learner's guide to reading letters to the editor and other reader contributions in historical newspapers.

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