

4 Struggles for control

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Abstract

It took persistent effort on the part of slave owners and their allies to keep slavery in place, to make people work without pay, and to sustain the arguments that justified the forced labor of other human beings. ‘Struggles for control’ outlines the range of mechanisms deployed by white elites to gain and maintain control over enslaved people, including violence, legislation, slave patrols, religion, paternalistic demeaning behavior, and racist proslavery ideology. Enslaved people drew from a reservoir of strategies including literacy, religion, escape, malingering, and rebellion, to resist enslavement and its attendant hardships. Key influences on the enslaved were the *Appeal* of free man David Walker and preacher Nat Turner's 1831 rebellion in Virginia.

Keywords: [literacy](#), [religion](#), [slavery](#), [violence](#), [Virginia](#), [David Walker](#), [work](#)

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It took persistent effort on the part of slave owners and their allies to keep slavery in place, to make people work without pay, and to sustain the arguments that justified the forced labor of other human beings. It required such great effort because enslaved people did not always simply submit to the demands of their owners; many struggled in ways large and small against owners' plans, orders, and attempts to dominate them. Not every enslaved person resisted, and no one resisted all the time, but from the start—from the slave ships crossing the Atlantic to the beginnings of slavery in Virginia, New York, and Massachusetts—Africans and African Americans fought against those who endeavored to control every aspect of their lives. White elites deployed a vast range of mechanisms to gain and maintain control over enslaved people, including, violence, legislation, slave patrols, religion, paternalistic demeaning behavior, and racist proslavery ideology. And enslaved people drew from a reservoir of strategies that included literacy, religion, escape, malingering, and rebellion, to resist enslavement and its attendant hardships.

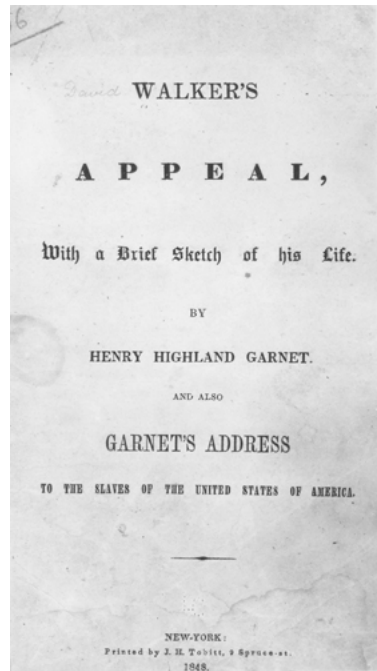
Slave owners clearly held much more power than enslaved people, but even the most oppressed were never completely powerless: they could assert their objections by withholding their labor by pretending to be sick, or by breaking the tools necessary for carrying out the owner's tasks. Despite the grave imbalance of power, slavery was to some degree a negotiated relationship, and slave owners and others with political power had to constantly shift and reinforce their strategies to counter the actions of the enslaved among them. Slaves most often dared not express their objections to being enslaved or refuse to obey any particular command, yet enough of them resisted to produce a relentless struggle between the dominant and the subordinate.

The words of two men from North Carolina, written in 1829, elucidate the tensions that existed between owners and slaves, between blacks and whites, and between domination and resistance. In an opinion, which upheld the actions of a white man who shot the enslaved woman whom he had hired, the chief justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court Thomas Ruffin wrote: “The power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect.” In contrast, David Walker, a free black man, declared in a pamphlet, “The whites want slaves, and want us for their slaves, but some of them will curse the day they ever saw us. As true as the sun ever shone in its meridian splendor, my colour will root some of them out of the very face of the earth. They shall have enough of making slaves of, and butchering, and murdering us in the manner which they have.” Ruffin expressed a belief that an owner or his agent had the right to exert absolute power over a slave, and that with the infliction of enough violence enslaved people could in fact be subdued. Walker, on the other hand, conceded that violence had indeed forced people to submit, but he was certain that such power could neither be absolute nor enduring. In his view, slave owners would have to recompense for their brutality. The social positions and the rhetoric of these two men could not have been any more at odds, nor could their beliefs about the legitimacy of slavery. Still, they agreed that violence underpinned the power of slave owners. Unlike Ruffin,

though, Walker predicted that violence on the part of black people was necessary to undermine and ultimately destroy whites' power. ⁴

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David Walker wrote this *Appeal* in which he denounced slave holders as violating the strictures of the Bible, and challenged enslaved and free African Americans to rise up against slavery. Some southern states responded by imposing harsher restrictions on African American mobility and literacy.

p. 54 Thomas Ruffin and David Walker occupied starkly different spheres within antebellum America. Ruffin, a wealthy white man, wrote his opinion about power and submission from the lofty perch of the judicial bench in the case of *State v. Mann*. In that case, Lydia, a woman owned by a minor child named Elizabeth Jones, was hired out to John Mann by Elizabeth's guardian. Mann had financial problems and was likely unable to purchase slaves of his own, so he hired Lydia for one year. Mann testified at his trial that he had become tired of Lydia's insolence, and when he attempted to punish her, she ran, and he shot her. Lydia continued running and made it back to the home of Elizabeth's guardian, who convinced the state's attorney to charge Mann with assaulting Elizabeth's property. A grand jury in Chowan County, North Carolina, indicted Mann, and a jury of twelve white men convicted him of assault and battery upon Lydia. In the state supreme court, however, Justice Ruffin, himself a slave owner who was deeply entrenched in the political, social, and economic life of the state, found differently. He overruled the jury's decision, finding instead that owners and their agents had the absolute right to control slaves. Although he claimed to think that slavery was an abomination and looked forward to its demise, Ruffin nonetheless took this opportunity to uphold the violence that was essential to keeping slavery in place. The aim of slavery, he reasoned, "is the profit of the master, his security and the public safety." A slave, in contrast, was doomed forever to "live without knowledge and without the capacity to make anything his own, and to toil that another may reap the fruits." The slave, he said, could not be expected to submit voluntarily to doing this unpaid labor, rather, "such obedience is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body." This violently enforced obedience, Ruffin argued, was an inherent element of slavery, because for the slave to remain a slave, the owner must have full dominion.

p. 55 David Walker, in contrast, although free, was by no means wealthy. He was born in Wilmington, North Carolina, and ⁴ inherited the free status of his mother, despite the fact that his father was enslaved. He made his way to Boston, where he operated a store that sold used clothing. Nonetheless, Walker considered himself threatened by slavery, and he urged other free black people to challenge the institution because in a country that practiced racial slavery, every free black person's liberty was vulnerable. In his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America*, Walker vehemently denounced slavery and slave owners, and he beseeched both free and enslaved African Americans to rise up against their oppressors.

Literacy enabled these two men with opposing values and stakes in slavery to advance their ideas, but while white southerners received Ruffin's ability to write as legitimate, they perceived Walker's as the threat he intended it to be. Not only were Walker's incendiary words deemed dangerous, whites in the South viewed literacy among black people

and particularly enslaved people as threatening and frightening. The ability to read was deemed dangerous in a society in which slavery relied on domination by whites and subordination of blacks. Walker reflected on this fear on the part of whites when he claimed, “for coloured people to acquire learning in this county, makes tyrants quake and tremble on their sandy foundation. Why, what is the matter? Why, they know that their infernal deeds of cruelty will be made known to the world. . . . The bare name of educating the coloured people scares our cruel oppressors almost to death.” Not only could literacy expose the cruelty of slavery to the world, but having literate black people would render it more difficult to sustain the Jeffersonian claims of black intellectual inferiority. Literacy, then, was one of the many grounds on which owners and slaves contended.

p. 56 This tension became palpable in legislation that most southern slave states enacted to prohibit teaching enslaved people, and in some instances, any person of color, to read or write. The South Carolina colony was the first to inscribe the fear of black literacy into legislation. In 1740, prompted by the growth of the black population in the colony as well as the Stono Rebellion in 1739, the Negro Act outlawed teaching slaves to read or write because literacy would bring “great inconveniences.” The antiliteracy provision was part of a larger “Act for the Better Ordering of Negroes and Other Slaves,” which regulated behavior and prescribed punishments. In 1800, the state enacted new legislation that stated, “Whereas the law heretofore enacted for the government of slaves, free Negroes, mulattoes, and mestizos, have been found insufficient for the keeping them in due subordination,” and imposed new prohibitions and punishments for anyone who taught slaves to read or write and for the enslaved students themselves.

In 1834 the South Carolina legislature again saw the need to ban literacy among enslaved people and free people of color. Legislatures in several other colonies and states passed similar laws, and as South Carolina did, they connected literacy to unrest and declared that keeping black people subservient to whites was necessary to prevent uprisings. The North Carolina legislation, for example, said that teaching slaves to read and write “has a tendency to excite dissatisfaction in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion, to the manifest injury of the citizens of the State.” These laws sought to prevent black literacy and they used the threat of imprisonment and state sanctioned violence to force adherence. Legislatures authorized legions of law enforcement officers including magistrates, sheriffs, constables, militia officers, and officers of the slave patrols to break down doors, imprison, whip, and or fine black people who were caught learning to read or write, as well as anyone who taught them.

p. 57 David Walker’s *Appeal* prompted more legislation. The prospect of thousands of enslaved people reading or listening to Walker’s injunction to rise up is exactly what terrified owners and other whites. In December 1829, just months after it was published, the *Appeal* made its way to Savannah, Georgia, smuggled there on a ship by black sailors. The Georgia legislature quickly crafted a response that outlawed teaching “any slave, negro, or free person of colour” to read. It also p. 58 punished any black or other person who brought “any printed or written pamphlet, paper or circular, for the purposes of exciting to insurrection, conspiracy or resistance among the slaves, negroes or free persons of color” into the state. One month later, Louisiana banned any publication that, like Walker’s *Appeal*, had a “tendency to produce discontent among the free coloured population of the state, or insubordination among the slaves,” and punished the writer or distributor with either death or imprisonment at hard labor for life. The statute also punished any public discourse against slavery, prohibited teaching slaves to read or write, and provided imprisonment for up to one year for anyone caught teaching them. In August, David Walker died suddenly in his home in Boston. Whites from the South had offered a monetary reward for his death, and even more for delivering him to the South alive, but there was no conclusive evidence that he had been murdered.

The Georgia anti-literacy law, 1829

An Act to be entitled an act, to amend the several laws now in force in this State, regulating quarantine in the several sea ports of this State, and to prevent the circulation of written or printed papers within this State calculated to excite disaffection among the coloured people of this state, and to prevent said people from being taught to read or write.

Section 10. *And it be further enacted*, That if any slave, negro, mustizzo, [sic] or free person of colour, or any other person, shall circulate, bring or cause to be circulated or brought into this state or aid or assist in any manner, or be instrumental in aiding or assisting in the circulation or bringing into this state, or in any manner concerned in any printed or written pamphlet, paper or circular, for the purposes for exciting to insurrection, conspiracy or resistance among the slaves, negroes, or free persons of colour, of this state against their owners or the citizens of this state, the said person or persons offending against this section of this act, shall be punished with death.

Section 11—*And be it further enacted*, that if any slave, negro, or free person of colour or any white person shall teach any other slave, negro, or free person of colour, to read or write either written or printed characters, the said free person of color, or slave, shall be punished by fine and whipping, or fine or shipping at the discretion of the court; and if a white person so offending, he, she or they shall be punished with fine, not exceeding five hundred dollars, and imprisonment, in the common jail at the discretion of the court before whom said offender is tried.

Despite legal prohibitions and threats of severe punishment, many African Americans placed a high value on literacy and, just as their owners did, some made linkages between literacy and freedom, and literacy and power. Although the majority of enslaved people never learned to read and write, many took great risks to become literate. They wanted access to information, and they wanted to be able to communicate with family members who were sold away from them. In a regime that required any black person to have written permission from an owner, or in the case of free people, a white guardian, to move about, some wanted to be able to forge their passes. Many wanted to be able to read the Bible for themselves in order to have direct access to the lessons contained in the scripture. Some wanted proof of what they suspected: that the minister whom the slave owner provided for them really could find other passages on a Sunday than the often repeated, “Servants obey your master.”

p. 59 Given the laws and regulations, many former slaves spoke of having to “steal” an education, and they employed a range of strategies to become literate. Some learned the rudiments of reading from an owner’s wife who believed that everyone should be able to read the Bible. Frederick Douglass’s slave mistress had this goal in mind when she began to teach him to read as a young boy, but his owner soon intervened, proclaiming that being literate would spoil him for slavery. Some people taught themselves by using Noah Webster’s *Blue Back Speller*, which offered basic reading lessons. Enslaved men and boys often got help in this endeavor by asking, challenging, or bribing white men or boys whom they encountered while doing errands for their owners. Women who worked in the owner’s house sometimes surreptitiously received help with spelling from the children in their care. Men spoke of hiding the speller under their hats; women hid it in their bosoms awaiting an opportune moment for a lesson from the white children in their care. Those who gained rudimentary literacy skills taught others to read and write, sometimes in their cabins, or out in the woods at night, or on Sundays when owners left the plantation to attend church or to visit socially. In more urban areas such as Hampton and Norfolk, Virginia, and Savannah, Georgia, enslaved children attended secret, illegal schools held in the black teacher’s home.

As owners feared, enslaved people’s literacy undermined owner’s authority. In Baltimore, while hired out to work on the docks, Frederick Douglass read a newspaper and learned for the first time of an abolitionist movement in the North, which aimed to destroy slavery. Douglass thus used his literacy to expand his knowledge of a world beyond his owner’s control. He also used his skills to forge a pass in which he pretended to be his owner. By writing that pass, Douglass was able to break away from the physical bonds of his owner. Learning about the existence of the abolition movement also helped him to develop a belief that freedom was possible.

p. 60 Some literate slaves used the ability to read the Bible to challenge the dominant white ideology that black people were inferior and suited only to be slaves. Indeed, Christianity proved to be both a method for enforcing subordination as well as a means for challenging oppression as slave owners and enslaved people alike interpreted the Bible to suit their conflicting desires and purposes. Even after colonial laws made it clear that slaves’ acceptance of Christianity would not free them, many slave owners refrained from encouraging Christianity among enslaved people. They feared the implications of the New Testament teaching that all humans are equal in the sight of God. In response, some ministers promised that Christianity would render Africans and African Americans better slaves because they would be taught to serve their earthly masters out of a sense of Christian duty and to live in fear of judgment in the next life.

Perhaps not surprisingly, for the first one hundred years in the American colonies, most Africans and their descendants did not embrace Christianity. Their owners did not encourage or force it; it did not free them but in fact aimed to make them more submissive, and its rituals were unfamiliar. Instead, they held on to their own rites and practices that included drumming, dancing, spirit possession, and sometimes animal sacrifice—activities Europeans considered heathen.

This resistance to Christianity began to change with the religious revivals of the First Great Awakening in the 1740s, when such evangelical preachers as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield preached messages of salvation and immediate conversion. In addition to white men, many black people, white women, and Native Americans attended and participated in large outdoor revivals and camp meetings at which some professed salvation and even became exhorters, taking on the role of preachers. Enslaved people understood the messages of the evangelists and could claim a connection to Christ, therefore according to doctrine, rendering them equal to whites.

p. 61 The evangelical form of worship attracted African Americans and Africans who appreciated its expressive nature, its clear and direct ↪ path to Christ, and its promise of equality under God. Still, although some enslaved people became evangelists, sometimes even proselytizing to white people, this sense of a broadening sphere did not result in their physical freedom. Indeed, as more slaves accepted Christianity, owners moved to restrict gatherings of slaves and other black people for religious services, and some tried to use Christianity to subdue enslaved people, preaching messages of submission and obedience.

To regulate the messages that enslaved people drew from the Bible, some states prohibited gatherings of blacks—without a white man present—for church services. But when these laws or the rules of owners attempted to control the messages of black religious worship, enslaved people held secret services and meetings. People met in the woods at night or in cabins far from the owner’s house, and worshipped in ways they saw fit.

Enslaved people not only found ways to worship out of the sight and hearing of whites, they also adapted Christianity to meet their own needs and interpreted lessons from the Old Testament to apply to their lives in bondage. In the book of Exodus, God sent Moses to lead the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt, and some enslaved African Americans shaped the story to mean that God would send a Moses to liberate *them* from slavery in America. They preached these stories to one another and shaped the promises into songs that they sang while at work and during worship. Songs with lyrics such as “Go Down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land; Tell old Pharaoh, to let my people go,” reaffirmed for them the belief that they would not always be slaves.

p. 62 Some whites, of course, interpreted the Bible very differently. They contended that both the Old and New Testaments supported slavery. Some claimed, for example, that according to the book of Genesis, Africans and their descendants were intended to be slaves. Africans, they said, were descended from Ham, who had looked upon his drunk and naked father, Noah, without turning ↪ away. Noah cursed Ham’s son Canaan and his descendants, saying, “servants of servants shall they be to their brethren.” Canaan, this interpretation reasoned, was black and lived in Africa: therefore all Africans were condemned to be slaves forever. From the New Testament, theologians who supported slavery took the words of Paul to support their enslavement of people and to demand obedience and subservience from them. They preached these lessons over and over. From Colossians: “Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but in singleness of heart, fearing God.” And from Ephesians: “Servants, be obedient to them that are *your* masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.” The message to enslaved people was that God approved of their enslavement and that they should work faithfully for their owners, even when the owner was not watching, because God would see and judge them.

Although some slaves thought that it must have been a part of God’s plan that they should suffer in slavery for a time, many enslaved people and former slaves tired of hearing these lessons about obedience and subservience. They complained that the white ministers seemed unable to find any other messages in the Bible, and understood that these lessons were intended to uphold the power of their owners. Other African Americans believed that God would judge whites harshly for having enslaved them. Some thought that the avowed Christianity of slave owners and those who supported slavery was inauthentic and corrupt, and that it misused and misrepresented the Bible. Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, both former slaves, claimed that some of the worst slave owners called themselves Christians.

p. 63 Douglass wrote, “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of the land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest ↪ of all libels. I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me.” And David Walker asked, “Is not God a God of justice to all his creatures? [I]f he gives peace and tranquility to tyrants, and permits them to keep our fathers, our mothers, ourselves and our children in eternal ignorance and wretchedness, to support them and their families, would he be to us a God of justice?” Walker’s questions suggested that because God is a God of justice, it was not possible that he would condone the mistreatment of one group of his “creatures.”

Efforts to regulate and control slaves emanated from legislatures, ministers, and of course from individual owners who had a great deal of discretion to keep their slaves in “due subordination.” One planter in Georgia recommended that every plantation should have a code of laws, written or unwritten, to regulate slaves and to make clear to them that “the master will sit in righteous judgment and visit with just and certain punishment all transgressions.” The “master” in this owner’s words, sounded a great deal like the God of the Bible.

Owners employed a mixture of violence and paternalism to keep the people they owned in their places of servility. Even as they exercised control, they also wanted to be perceived by both their slaves and outsiders as firm and caring masters with dominion over their slaves. Some planters paternalistically spoke of the people they owned as part of their large outside family, in contrast to their inside family that consisted of a wife and children. They said that they fed, clothed, and protected their slaves, and in return the slaves labored for them. In this schema, there should have been no need for violence, but despite some whites’ claims that enslaved people were servile by nature and perfectly suited to be slaves, and despite assertions that owners took good care of their slaves, most planters agreed with Justice Ruffin that violence was a necessary measure to extract labor and obedience from enslaved people.

p. 64 Planters who could afford to employ help often distanced themselves from physical violence by delegating punishment to overseers or to jailers who punished other people’s slaves for a living. These owners sought to make a fine distinction between “correction” and “punishment,” sometimes urging their employees and delegates to administer whippings only for correction and prevention. They urged overseers not to administer punishment out of anger or with passion, as this would lead slaves to run away. Additionally, they thought that passion revealed a lack of control and that mastery demanded self-control. Owners also warned that punishment should not leave scars. Although expressed as emanating from a sense of concern about the slaves, this view was also in the owner’s self-interest: scars signaled to potential purchasers that this slave might be a troublemaker, therefore reducing his or her value in the market.

To avoid administering whippings, or when corporal punishment was not effective, owners employed a vast array of “corrections” and “punishments.” They locked people up at night; they denied passes to leave the plantation, a particularly painful punishment for men whose wives and children lived on other plantations. Despite all of their power, owners and overseers knew that their punishments might meet with resistance; “a violent and passionate threat,” one owner cautioned, “will often scare the best disposed negro to the woods.” Running to the woods was an undesirable consequence because this action deprived owners of the enslaved person’s labor. Timed well, the absence of even one slave could have serious consequences for an owner’s finances.

p. 65 For some slaves, absconding from a plantation temporarily was not enough, nor was negotiating or resisting the wishes and demands of owners. Raising intellectual challenges to their domination and subjugation was not enough. Breaking tools that could be repaired was not enough. While some believed that God would have vengeance, others thought vengeance was theirs and took matters into their own hands. Owners gave themselves the right to use ↪ physical violence to discipline and control slaves, but some slaves challenged this right and asserted their own right to self-defense and to autonomy. These enslaved people, who were always in the minority among enslaved populations, returned violence for violence or struck preemptively; violence existed on a spectrum ranging from fighting back or resisting punishment to premeditated murder or arson to outright rebellion. When Frederick Douglass’s owner hired him out to a Mr. Covey, whose task was to break his rebellious spirit, Douglass refused one day to submit to any more whippings and fought back, successfully subduing Covey. When Ellen Turner’s owner attempted to punish her for hanging an image of Abraham Lincoln on her bedroom wall, Turner refused to be whipped and fought back. In daring to physically challenge the authority of these white men, Douglass and Turner risked being whipped even more harshly, being sold, or killed.

Some people rose up and took action in efforts to escape from slavery or to bring slavery to an end. The first revolts took place on the ships that brought Africans to the New World, and uprisings, large and small, occurred over time in the colonies and states. In New York on a Sunday morning in April 1712, a group of enslaved men and two enslaved women set fire to the outhouse of the owner of two of them. Historians suggest that many who participated in the rebellion had recently arrived in the colony and found the constrictions and limitations to be much more severe than the sort of slavery with which they were familiar in their communities in Africa, where there was more room for ↪ movement out of slavery and the possibility of gaining some freedoms even while enslaved. Now under English rule, and well beyond the charter generation of slavery, New York did not offer any of the limited flexibility that the first eleven slaves in Dutch New Amsterdam had been able to negotiate. After setting the fire, the slaves killed nine and wounded seven of the white residents who responded to put out the fire. As they faced capture, six of the rebels committed suicide. Colonial

p. 66 authorities arrested as many as seventy blacks, convicted twenty-six, and executed twenty-one. As ↪ frequently occurred following uprisings, the legislature put even more restrictive rules in place to control enslaved as well as free black people in the colony; the law imposed stricter curfews for slaves; it became more difficult for owners to manumit slaves; and any slave freed after 1712 could not own real estate. Finally, the law had the potential effect of not only restricting blacks but also elevating whites, as any white person could arrest any slave who violated the curfew rules and whip him or her.

In South Carolina, where by 1710 there were more enslaved Africans and African Americans than whites, owners lived with anxiety and fear of insurrection. This only worsened when in 1733 enslaved people received encouragement from the Spanish colony of Florida through an edict that promised freedom to any slave who made it to the garrison at St. Augustine, Florida. At first those who escaped were disappointed when the Spanish themselves enslaved them, but in 1738 the colony began to live up to its word, freed the former runaways, and established a settlement for them north of St. Augustine in the Pueblo de Gracia Real de Santa Terese de Mose, also known as Fort Mose or Moosa. This settlement became a sanctuary and intended destination for enslaved people in South Carolina. The Spanish and English governments were at odds, and Spain hoped to gain help to defend against and attack the English colonies.

On September 9, 1739, a group of twenty slaves gathered early in the morning near the Stono River about twenty miles from Charleston. It was a Sunday, the one day of the week on which most enslaved people were not expected to work. Led by an enslaved man named Jemmy, the group broke into a store that sold firearms and gunpowder, killed the storekeepers, and left their heads on the front steps. Now armed, they robbed a house, killing the owner and his two children. The group was clearly interested in revenge as well as escape. They headed to a tavern where they spared the life of the tavern keeper because he was known to be a good man and kind to his slaves. The group attacked several other homes, killing whites. In at least one instance, slaves hid their owners and were later rewarded for their loyalty. As the group moved, they added more enslaved people, some forcibly so as to reduce the chances of betrayal, some voluntarily.

At about 11:00 o'clock, the lieutenant governor and four other men happened to be riding in the direction of the rebels. Realizing the situation they turned, rode away, and sounded the alarm. Within hours, a militia company consisting of planters, arrived on horseback at the open field where the rebels had stopped to drum and dance, evidently in hopes of calling other slaves to join them. The two groups exchanged fire, but in the end the white men proved to be far more heavily armed and skilled, and won this skirmish. The planters decapitated the slaves and placed their heads on mileposts in the area. Some of the slaves escaped in small groups with plans to carry on or to return to their plantations. The militia, joined by a few Native Americans who became paid slave catchers, searched the area. It took one week for all the slaves to be caught and killed. In all, twenty-one whites and forty-four slaves were killed during the revolt. The rebellion was put down, but white planters continued to be fearful; in South Carolina there were more black people than whites, giving rise to widespread fears of insurrection. Some of the white families moved away, and the government of the colony paid rewards to blacks and Indians who had acted against the rebellion. It also created a special patrol along the Stono River. Slave owners feared that the very people who made them rich could also be their enemies and not only deprive them of labor, but worse still, kill them. In June 1740 lawmakers learned from an enslaved man of an impending rebellion among about 150 slaves to capture arms from a store and attack Charleston. fifty slaves were caught and hanged for this conspiracy.

Owners could not rest. In May 1740 the South Carolina legislature enacted a new Negro Act, a much more restrictive slave code that outlawed teaching slaves to read and write, and severely restricted black mobility. In addition, slaves were no longer allowed to grow their own food or earn their own money. Slave owners all over the South now faced a dilemma: in the 1740s rice, indigo, tobacco, and cotton were wealth-producing cash crops that required an extensive work force. Plantation owners needed to remain alert and implement ever-new methods to keep enslaved people not only producing crops but "in their place" to prevent further rebellions.

Plots and rumors of conspiracy surfaced from time to time, but the largest and most deadly rebellion took place in Virginia on August 22, 1831, when a literate preacher named Nat Turner led between sixty and eighty enslaved people in an uprising that shook the entire country. Turner considered himself a Christian and said he received visions from God about the timing of the revolt. Although early missionaries had argued that Christianity would render slaves docile and concerned only with performing their duties to their earthly masters, the leaders of some of these rebellions were indeed religious men and may have acquired leadership roles in the rebellions precisely because of their roles as religious leaders.

Turner and his fellow rebels planned to kill all white people in their path and capture Jerusalem, the county seat of Southampton County, Virginia. Turner, along with fellow slaves Sam, Nelson, Hark, Henry, Will, Nelson, and Jack, all of whom had planned the revolt, set out before dawn and went from house to house killing white men, women, and children. Turner himself belonged to a nine-year-old child, which may have helped him to justify killing even very young children. The group of rebels grew throughout the morning and by midday they had killed fifty-five people in eleven homes. Soon however, local militias as well as ones from North Carolina responded, and captured or killed all the rebels, except Turner who eluded capture for two months. Once caught, he too was executed.

The terror of the rebellion provoked fear among whites in Virginia. Thomas Dew, professor at the College of William and Mary, wrote that even after the rebellion had been put down, the participants had been executed, and many whites had concluded that Nat Turner was a fanatic, "still the excitement remained, still the repose of the commonwealth was disturbed, for the ghastly horrors of the Southampton tragedy could not immediately be banished from the mind." Again, whites could not rest.

The legislature debated the idea of ending slavery in Virginia altogether. Members of the House of Delegates argued that having free blacks in the state would encourage slaves to revolt; thus all free black people should be removed from the state and sent to Africa. Some argued that their own wealth and the wealth of the state was tied to slavery, but others countered that it was simply too dangerous to keep slaves in their midst. Henry Berry, himself a slave owner, argued that there could be no rest until all the slaves were free. The legislature, he said, had already done all it could to keep slaves submissive, but it was not working. “Sir,” he argued, “we have, as far as possible closed every avenue by which light might enter their mind; we have only to go one step further—to extinguish the capacity to see the light, and our work would be completed; they would then be reduced to the level of the beasts of the field, and we should be safe; and I am not certain that we would not do it, if we could find out the necessary process—and that under the plea of necessity.” Berry believed that it was a mistake to think that whites could ever completely subdue blacks. Could slaves live among those who were free and not know what freedom is? If they thought they had the power to assert their freedom, wouldn’t they? Berry thought they certainly would, and he predicted, “a death struggle must come between the two classes, in which one or the other will be extinguished forever. Like a mighty avalanche,” he said, “it is rolling towards us, accumulating weight and impetus at every turn. And, sir, if we do nothing to arrest its progress, it will ultimately overwhelm and destroy us forever.” To avoid what he saw as an imminent calamity, Berry advocated a plan of gradual emancipation in which owners could hold on to their slaves for the present, but the institution would eventually die away.

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Nonetheless, a majority of legislators concluded that the economic and social structure of the state would collapse without slavery. As Dew later argued, “It is in truth the slave labour in Virginia which gives value to her soil and her habitations—take away this and you pull down the atlas that upholds the whole system—eject from the state the whole slave population, and we risk nothing in the prediction, that on the day in which it shall be accomplished, the worn soils of Virginia will not bear the paltry price of the government lands in the West, and the Old Dominion will be a ‘waste howling wilderness,’—‘the grass shall be seen growing in the streets, and the foxes peeping from their holes.’” The legislature upheld slavery with even stronger and more oppressive laws that constricted the behavior of enslaved people. In March 1832 the Virginia House of Delegates restricted preaching by black people as their interpretations of the scriptures were seen as disruptive to the peace of white society. Nat Turner had, after all, been a preacher. Many whites lived in fear of organized violence by slaves, and Henry Berry predicted that the force of black people’s opposition to their oppression would eventually destroy Virginia. Unlike their counterparts in Jamaica or Brazil where there were more frequent and larger uprisings, African Americans lived surrounded by white people and white power in the form of weapons, overseers, drivers, slave patrols, militia, local law enforcement officers, and, after the 1780s, the federal military power of the United States. Where could they go? The slaves who had participated in the Stono Rebellion were heading to Florida to live under the protection of a separate sovereign power. Nat Turner himself had plans to get to Jerusalem, the Southampton County seat, but what would he and the others have done there? They certainly could not have simply declared their freedom or ordered an end to slavery. Although blacks constituted 60 percent of the county’s population, whites owned the guns, and they held the power to put down the insurrection.

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Turner’s was the sort of violent uprising David Walker had urged two years earlier in his *Appeal*. Walker had also condemned African Americans for complacently accepting their condition as slaves or free people in northern states without equal rights or opportunities. But he failed to articulate the consequences for those who rebelled or attempted to escape. Indeed, considering the seeming futility of the revolt, some people then, as now, concluded that Turner must have been insane to raise a violent challenge to such a ubiquitous and seemingly invulnerable institution. Individual slaves could and did escape to northern states once slavery ended there, but even in those states they had to hide their status of runaway slave because the U.S. Constitution subjected them to being returned to owners. Many people felt they were trapped in slavery. Some became accustomed to it and perhaps believed it was their lot in life. Some likely never questioned the racial hierarchy, economic inequities, and distorted power relationships into which they were born. Others contemplated a way out.

As Henry Berry saw it, whites in Virginia made every effort to repress African Americans. If slave owners could somehow find a way to render enslaved people inhuman enough not to contrive plots to free themselves and to harm whites, yet human enough to be able to do the thinking required to complete their jobs, whites could be both rich *and* safe. For whites, the challenge was how to protect the institution of slavery: to have people who produced wealth and were satisfied with living in dire poverty; to have people who would submit to “correction” without challenging owners’ power and authority; and to continue the repression and submission of an entire race of people. For African Americans, the challenge was how to assert their humanity and undermine whites’ power without sacrificing their lives. The challenges for both slave owners and slaves continued as long as slavery did.