Response to a Slave Rebellion - Nat Turner's Rebellion

By Sharon Fabian

Nat Turner's Rebellion:

Nat Turner was an intelligent and very religious young man. He also became something of a mystery, someone who claimed to have visions. As an adult, he remained a mysterious figure. Many questions remain about Nat Turner to this day.

We do know that Nat Turner was the leader of a slave rebellion that took place in Virginia in 1831. He led a group of about 60 or 70 slaves. These rebels began at the Travis plantation where Turner was a slave. They killed the entire Travis family. Then, they moved on to other plantations. In the end, a total of about 60 plantation owners and family members had been killed.

Response to the Rebellion:

The first official response to Nat Turner's Rebellion was to call out the militia. About 3,000 troops were sent to capture Nat Turner and his followers. Many slaves were captured and tried in court for participating in the rebellion. A few of the captured slaves were later found innocent and set free, but many more were found guilty and executed.

Nat Turner himself was jailed, tried in court, found guilty, and executed by hanging. While he was in jail, a local lawyer, Thomas Gray, interviewed him. The lawyer published a book, called The Confessions of Nat Turner, which he claims was Nat Turner's true confession as told to him. In this book, he quotes Nat Turner as saying that Mr. Travis was a kind master who trusted him, and that he had no cause to complain about his treatment by Mr. Travis. He also quotes Nat Turner as saying, "my object was to carry terror and devastation wherever we went." To this day, no one knows for sure whether The Confessions of Nat Turner is really a record of what Nat Turner said, or whether it is fiction created by Mr. Gray.

The courts also made another decision. They decided that the plantation owners would be reimbursed, or paid back, for the slaves they had lost.

Many stories were spread after the rebellion. Some of the stories praised slaves who did not participate in the rebellion. Some told how slaves had been trusted with weapons and used them to save their masters' lives. Other stories about the slaves who did join Nat Turner said that they had been threatened into joining. These stories portrayed Nat Turner's Rebellion as an illegal act by a few criminals. The people who told these stories hoped that rebellion would not spread.

Despite these stories, plantation owners and their families became very nervous and afraid after Nat Turner's Rebellion. They were afraid that the same thing might happen on their own plantation. Some people decided to take matters into their own hands. They planned and carried out acts of violence. One estimate says that about 200 slaves were murdered by mob violence in the years following the rebellion.

Nat Turner's Rebellion had far reaching effects. Even in other states, slaves were tried and executed, accused of being a part of the rebellion.

After the rebellion, southern states began to pass new laws. These laws severely limited what slaves were allowed to do. The lists of activities that were not permitted were long ones. Slaves were not allowed to vote, serve on a jury, own property, testify in court, learn to read or write, buy or sell goods, be a preacher, own a gun, meet in groups of more than five people, and many other things. The states that passed these laws hoped that they would prevent another rebellion like Nat Turner's from happening. These laws continued through the time of the Civil War. After that they became known as the Black Codes, and they limited what free blacks were allowed to do, just as they had limited what slaves could do in the years after Nat Turner's Rebellion.

The overall effect of the rebellion had been to make the lives of slaves even more difficult. It also made slaves want their freedom more than ever.
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Questions

1. Nat Turner's Rebellion took place in ______.
   A. South Carolina
   B. Massachusetts
   C. Georgia
   D. Virginia

2. Nat Turner and his followers attacked ______.
   A. British soldiers
   B. plantation owners and their families
   C. government and army officials
   D. slaves and their owners

3. Nat Turner led a group of about ______ slaves.
   A. 600
   B. 500
   C. 60
   D. 16

4. The first plantation attacked in the rebellion was owned by a family named ______.
   A. Turner
   B. Travis
   C. Gray
   D. none of the above

5. The effects of Nat Turner's Rebellion included ______.
   A. the hanging of Nat Turner
   B. the execution of many slaves involved in the rebellion
   C. the murder of many more slaves
   D. all of the above

6. The effects of Nat Turner's Rebellion were only felt for a short time.
   A. true
   B. false

7. The Black Codes passed after the Civil War had their origin in laws passed after Nat Turner's Rebellion.
   A. false
   B. true

8. New laws passed after Nat Turner's Rebellion ______.
   A. neither
   B. made plantation owners feel safer
   C. both
   D. limited slaves' freedom even more