Panic and Reprisal: 
Reaction in North Carolina to the 
Nat Turner Insurrection, 1831

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Local slave revolts were an ever-present threat in North Carolina and other southern states during the antebellum period. Gabriel Prosser's plot, uncovered in Richmond, Virginia, in 1800; unrest in northeastern North Carolina in 1802; and the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1822 caused concern in the minds of southern whites over potential uprisings by slaves. Nevertheless, news of the Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, caught North Carolinians completely by surprise.

On Sunday, August 21, 1831, a self-ordained black preacher and slave named Nat Turner began a campaign of murder and terror that quickly spread panic from Virginia into North Carolina and eventually the rest of the slaveholding South. When the insurrection was only hours old, the terrifying news of the Southampton massacre reached far into the Tar Heel state. By the following day the entire northeastern tier of counties was in a state of alarm; militiamen and citizens were called to arms, and Governor Montfort Stokes began to receive urgent pleas for weapons and ammunition from every section where fear prevailed.

As the week of August 21, 1831, ended, the situation calmed to some degree in the northeastern counties. Meanwhile, word of the insurrection had extended into the southern counties, where imaginary slave plots and rumors of revolt became rampant. Two weeks after the rebellion in Virginia, racial chaos swept across southeastern North Carolina. Although the eastern section of the state, with its large slave population, reacted most violently to the insurrection scare, concern over slave rebellion also spread westward into Anson and Mecklenburg counties and even into the gold-mining region of mountainous Rutherford, Burke, and Lincoln counties.

The leader of this revolt producing such widespread terror, Nat Turner, was a mystical figure who supposedly possessed strange powers. He felt a certain calling from God and believed that he had been promised a sign from heaven to free blacks from white oppression—"to arise and prepare myself and slay my enemies with their own weapons."

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years Turner patiently had awaited a sign. In February, 1831, when an eclipse of the sun occurred, he stirred to action.

Turner recruited four trusted lieutenants and set July 4, 1831, as the day to strike a blow at the white enemy. He fell ill, however, and the attack had to be delayed. On Saturday, August 13, 1831, a more spectacular sign appeared that not only inspired this black minister but also disturbed people throughout most of the eastern United States. The sun grew so dim that it could be looked at with the naked eye. An uneasy calm was in the air as the sun changed colors, from pale green, to blue, to white. By afternoon a black spot moved across the sun’s white face. Contemporary accounts reported predictions from New York to South Carolina of a terrible war or the end of the world. To Turner the second strange alteration in the sun’s appearance was a divine message for him and his followers to rise up and slaughter their white masters. He informed the members of his band that “as the black spot passed over the sun so shall the blacks pass over the earth.” Truly, he believed, his time to strike was signified.2

Indeed, the time was right for a slave uprising. Because crops were not yet ready for harvesting the work load was light in August, and on Sunday evenings slaves hunted in the woods and fields most of the night. The white population usually paid little attention to a noisy band of Negroes rambling through the countryside. Using the chase as their cover, Turner and six accomplices began their brutal attack against the whites of Cross Keys, Virginia, on Sunday night, August 21, 1831. They stopped first at the home of Joseph Travis, Turner’s master and the stepfather of nine-year-old Putnam Moore, the slave’s legal owner. The Travis family was the first to be either axed or beaten to death before Turner’s rebellion was quelled. Over a period of thirty-six bloody hours, fifty-nine white men, women, and children died at the hands of Turner’s enraged band.3

While the gruesome murders continued in Southampton County, news of the massacres reached North Carolina, carried there by John “Choc-taw” Williams, a teacher at Cross Keys. On Monday morning, August 22, Williams heard of trouble close by and dismissed his classes. That decision cost the lives of many of the children who, upon returning to their homes, fell victim to members of Turner’s army, which had grown to sixty. Leaving his school, Williams traveled to the farm of Nathaniel Francis, where his wife and child were visiting. There he found his family slaughtered in the road. Stunned, Williams mounted his horse and hurried across the state border to Murfreesboro, sixteen miles south of Cross Keys. From this shocked and bereaved messenger the people of Hertford County first learned of the insurrection in Virginia. The ensuing panic at Murfreesboro was the first to occur in North Carolina.4

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3Oates, The Fires of Jubilee, 64, 77-78.

The horrifying news of Nat Turner's slave insurrection at Cross Keys, Southampton County, Virginia, first reached North Carolina at Murfreesboro in Hertford County. The ensuing panic in the Tar Heel town was the first to occur in the state. The segment (top) from an 1865 map shows the close proximity of Murfreesboro to Cross Keys. Depicted at the bottom are the counties of North Carolina in 1831. Shaded are those where there was considerable white reaction to rumors of local slave revolts inspired by Turner's uprising. Top excerpt from the Map Collection, State Archives; bottom map adapted from David Leroy Corbitt, *The Formation of the North Carolina Counties, 1663-1943* (Raleigh: State Department of Archives and History, third printing, 1975), following p. 282.
Upon receiving the news of Turner's uprising, the Hertford County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions ordered Colonel Charles Spiers to call out immediately the county militia to assist in suppressing the insurgents. The court authorized the colonel to request assistance from adjoining counties; it also directed him to dispatch an urgent message to Governor Montfort Stokes in Raleigh. When informing the governor of the insurrection in Virginia, Colonel Spiers declared that it "threatens this state with invasion and slaughter."5

The Governor’s Guards, a local militia company, set out for Cross Keys immediately. These North Carolinians aided in putting down Turner’s band and, according to newspaper reports, killed approximately forty slaves and free blacks.6 Before the revolt was suppressed, Murfreesboro gave sanctuary to more than 1,000 refugees, many of whom came from Southampton County. At the height of the confusion a citizen from nearby Northampton County, North Carolina, rode into Murfreesboro exclaiming that a hostile force of blacks was not more than eight miles from the town. The fear created by the rider’s story was so great that an elderly man, Thomas Weston, allegedly died of fright. His was the first death in North Carolina attributed to the insurrection. A troop of militia was sent immediately to the area where the rebels supposedly were sighted, but that report, as so many others, ultimately proved to be untrue.7

Northampton County, North Carolina, is situated just south of Southampton County, Virginia, the scene of Turner’s rampage. Colonel Carter Jones, believing that the rebellion would spread, ordered out all of the Northampton County militia. By Tuesday morning, August 23, between 500 and 600 men were under arms in the county, and they remained on duty until Thursday, August 25, when the number was reduced to 350.8

While Northampton County lay in a more precarious position than several of the other northeastern North Carolina counties, the dispatches and news reports from there were less distorted and more rational than those circulating in other counties. The presence of such a large number of armed militiamen undoubtedly had a soothing effect on the citizenry.

From Warren County, forty miles southwest of Southampton, Major General Micajah T. Hawkins, commander of the state militia in the area, issued a general order on August 23, 1831, for local officials to alert the civilian forces and to ascertain the truth regarding the rumors of trouble in the northeastern counties of North Carolina and in southern Virginia. Hawkins sent Majors John L. Laughton and E. W. Best of the state militia into nearby Halifax County and on to Northampton County to the

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5Charles Spiers to Montfort Stokes, August, 1831, Governors Papers, Montfort Stokes, Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, hereinafter cited as Governors Papers, Stokes.
7North Carolina Free Press (Tarboro), September 6, 1831, hereinafter cited as North Carolina Free Press.
8Carter Jones to Montfort Stokes, August 23, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
As fear of possible slave uprisings swept through North Carolina following Nat Turner's revolt, Governor Montfort Stokes received numerous requests from militia officers and local officials for arms to protect white citizens. Photograph of portrait from the files of the Division of Archives and History.

east on a fact-finding mission. On August 24, after having traveled from Warren County to the Northampton courthouse at Jackson, Laughton and Best issued their report to Hawkins, who sent it directly to Governor Stokes. Laughton and Best reassured Hawkins and the governor that the insurrection in Southampton appeared to be confined there and that sufficient forces had been dispatched to Virginia to crush the revolt.

General Hawkins's letter to the governor on August 26, conveying the Laughton and Best report, stated that from all indications Warrenton and Warren County were surprisingly quiet. Hawkins wrote that he had ordered 100 regular militiamen to readiness in Warren County, but he did not see any necessity to send them to any other part of North Carolina at the time. In addition to the militia, Hawkins reported, a volunteer company of 100 men was patrolling the county.

Northampton and Warren counties were well prepared to handle slave disorders, and the militia officers were reasonably well informed of developments in Virginia and in neighboring counties. Although fear was

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11M. T. Hawkins to Montfort Stokes, August 26, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
present, panic did not prevail as it had in Murfreesboro. Northampton and Warren counties were the calm eye of the storm that was moving south across North Carolina in the aftermath of Turner's rebellion. As rumors dissipated in this area, the storm's full fury was lashing nearby Halifax County.

News of the violence in Virginia was slow to reach Halifax County. In fact, South Carolina's threatened nullification of the tariff of 1828 was still the leading news story in the Roanoke Advocate of Halifax, the county seat, on August 25, 1831; the first two pages of that issue were devoted to "John C. Calhoun's Sentiments" concerning the "Tariff of Abominations." In its next weekly issue, the Advocate acknowledged reports of a black insurrection in Virginia, but the editor professed the need to wait for confirmation before sounding an alarm.12

The editor's advice, however, came too late to persuade the citizens of Halifax County who, without waiting for verification of the distressing news from Virginia, took immediate and extreme action.13 The justices of the peace feared that if protective measures were not taken "this spirit of insubordination and insurrection may extend among the larger body of slaves immediately around us." William K. Smith, John Young, and H. M. Nickles, justices, issued orders to Captain Henry Applewhite, commander of the militia for the seventh and eleventh districts of Halifax County, to summon his forces.14

On August 23 the Roanoke Blues, a volunteer militia unit, and many citizens assembled at the county courthouse. Jesse A. Simmons, commander of the Blues, was appointed chairman of the meeting. The group resolved that the Roanoke Blues would first protect the town of Halifax; then, as soon as sufficient numbers of militiamen arrived, the Blues would go to the assistance of their neighbors in Southampton County, Virginia. The final action of the citizens' meeting was to appoint a committee of safety to provide for the defense of Halifax.15 The town and the nearby countryside were immediately mobilized with every citizen that was capable of bearing arms being deputized and placed under the direction of Captain Henry Garrett, who was assigned to act as the commanding officer on the home front.16 Halifax County was ready for racial war.

By 4 o'clock in the afternoon of August 23 the Roanoke Blues were ready to march toward Southampton County, some forty miles to the north.17 Upon receiving a report that between 1,000 to 1,500 Negro rebels had crossed the Meherrin River near Hadley's Bridge in Northampton County, the Blues decided to camp at the home of A. P. Smith, a local

12 Roanoke Advocate (Halifax), September 1, 1831, hereinafter cited as Roanoke Advocate.
13 Petition of the People of Halifax, December 21, 1831, Bills, Petitions, Reports, etc., Tabled, General Assembly Papers, Session of 1831-1832, LP 462, State Archives, hereinafter cited as Petition of the People of Halifax, December 21, 1831, General Assembly Papers.
14 List of Halifax Militiamen, August 23, 1831, Michael Ferral Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library at Chapel Hill.
15 Petition of the People of Halifax, December 21, 1831, General Assembly Papers.
16 Roanoke Advocate, September 1, 1831.
17 Petition of the People of Halifax, December 21, 1831, General Assembly Papers.
citizen. During the night an express rider approached the house, startling
the sentinel, who quickly gave the alarm to the sleeping company of
troops. In the confusion that followed, the excited militiamen believed
that the insurgents had surprised them; a shot was fired, severely wound-
ing Shephard Lee of the Blues. Two days later Lee died of his wound.18

The following morning the Roanoke Blues proceeded on their march to
Southampton County. When they arrived they were shocked by the sight
of the brutal murders committed by Turner's insurgents. Simmons offered
the services of his company to the commanding officer of the Southamp-
ton County militia but was informed that all of the rebels except a few
had either been killed or taken prisoner. Without seeing action, the Blues
set out for home and arrived there the next day, August 25.19

While the Blues had been marching to Virginia, as many as 1,000
women and children had gathered at the home of Jesse Simmons and at
Mrs. Fleming's Tavern in the town of Halifax where they could be pro-
tected by militiamen. All of the male slaves in the town and surrounding
area had been locked immediately in jail and placed under a reinforced
armed guard. Arms and ammunition not in use by whites were gathered,
stored, and guarded in the courthouse.20 Even with these precautions, the
people, still afraid, had demanded that more desperate measures be taken
against the blacks.

Colonel Spier Whitaker of Enfield, also in Halifax County, informed
Governor Stokes of the panic in that county, particularly in the town of
Halifax "where it seems the alarm cannot subside." In their "zeal" to
suppress the supposed insurrection, Whitaker recounted, the people in the
town had seized a free Negro. When they failed to extort a confession
from him, they shot him.21

As the initial fear among North Carolina whites dissipated, the terror
justifiably intensified among the black population. Robert Parker, a resi-
dent of Enfield, wrote to his friend Rebecca Manney of the happenings in
the county: "the alarm is somewhat over, although Negroes are taken in
different directions and executed every day." Parker remarked that sev-
eral blacks in Halifax County had been executed during the week of
August 28.22 Patrols were sent out to "scour" the countryside for evil-
doers, he said, while the town of Halifax was surrounded by sentinels and
guarded "at every pass." The editor of the Roanoke Advocate reported
that the town "was literally a garrison and every citizen was a soldier."23

18 Roanoke Advocate, September 1, 1831.
19 Petition of the People of Halifax, December 21, 1831, General Assembly Papers.
20 Robert Parker to Rebecca Manney, August 29, 1831, John Kimberly Collection, Southern
Historical Collection, hereinafter cited as Kimberly Collection.
21 S. Whitaker to Montfort Stokes, August 26, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes. Spier Whit-
aker, Sr. (1798-?), served in the state House of Commons in 1838-1839. He was attorney
general of North Carolina from 1842 to 1846 and then moved to Iowa where he died soon
after the Civil War. Cheney, North Carolina Government, 182, 196n, 309; W. C. Allen, His-
tory of Halifax County (Boston: Cornhill Company, 1918), 202.
22 Robert Parker to Rebecca Manney, August 29, 1831, Kimberly Collection.
23 Roanoke Advocate, September 1, 1831.
So long as this atmosphere existed, no slave or free black could be certain of his safety.

Reports of several incidents shocked those citizens who had remained calm. In one instance a free Negro who, whites assumed, was going to Southampton to aid Turner entered Halifax. Before he reached the center of town eight or ten guns fired on him. His head was cut off and mounted on a pole and his body thrown in a pit. On the same day a woman and her children headed toward town in her carriage. Her black driver behaved in a manner that alarmed her. Upon arriving in the county seat, he was shot to death by armed whites.24

From Halifax County the news of the Southampton insurrection spread to Tarboro in adjoining Edgecombe County. When an express courier bearing the news of Turner’s revolt arrived in Tarboro on Tuesday, August 23, the county court was in session. Immediately the court adopted measures to ensure the safety of the county, and the justices sent a rider to the northern counties to gather as much information as possible regarding the insurrection. Two volunteer militia companies were raised—a troop of cavalry under the command of Captain Henry Austin and a company of light infantry under Captain Joseph R. Lloyd. The colonels of the two standing militia units in the county also were ordered to muster their men and place them in readiness.25

Edgecombe County whites were apprehensive that the Southampton disorder would incite their own chattels to rebellion, but panic never overwhelmed the people as it had in nearby Halifax. In Tarboro, the North Carolina Free Press reported on August 30 that “we are constrained to believe from suspicious movements of several Negroes and certain mystical expressions recently used in this vicinity and elsewhere, that an ineffectual effort was made to extend the insurrection into this state.”26 However, no reports of cruelty or murder of blacks came from Edgecombe, although there may have been some isolated cases of attacks by whites. On September 6, 1831, the Free Press praised Edgecombe County citizens for their “energy and promptitude” during the crisis. Such actions by the citizenry demonstrated how “utterly hopeless any general attempt of the kind must prove,” the editor declared.27

Gates County, along the Virginia border and southeast of Southampton, also received an alarm within hours of the Nat Turner massacre. The intelligence that Gates County militia colonel John D. Pipkin received from Murfreesboro was that there was an armed band of 700 Negroes in Southampton County and that Murfreesboro was to be the next site of

24Robert Parker to Rebecca Manney, August 29, 1831, Kimberly Collection.
26North Carolina Free Press, August 30, 1831.
27North Carolina Free Press, September 6, 1831.
Finding his county unprepared to meet such a force, Colonel Pipkin immediately sent a dispatch to Governor Stokes. The colonel declared that less than one third of the militiamen of Gates County had suitable arms. He requested that as quickly as possible the governor send 100 stand of arms to the militia for the defense of the county. This plea was the first of a barrage of such requests for weapons the governor received from across the state in the wake of rumored threats of slave uprisings.

Rumors that a large force of armed slaves had taken to the swamps also agitated citizens of Gates County. In the spring of 1831 the county court of pleas and quarter sessions had authorized a patrol committee of thirty men. This committee had authority to appoint as many men to monitor each district as it deemed necessary. When the news of the trouble in Virginia and neighboring counties reached Gates, the patrol committee sent a military force into the Juniper Swamp where over the course of four days it searched futilely for the mythical insurgents. On September 6 a company of men went into the Dismal Swamp and returned several days later with twelve slaves who were probably runaways rather than conspirators. Other companies patrolled the county and guarded the captured Negroes, who apparently were confined and subsequently returned to their owners after tensions eased.

To the south of Gates County lay Chowan County with Edenton, a colonial and antebellum trading center, as its county seat. From Edenton, Thomas S. Hoskins informed Thomas Ruffin, associate justice of the North Carolina Supreme Court, about the panic in Chowan County caused by the Turner revolt. He reported that many people in Chowan were up day and night watching for any movement by militant slaves. All over the county the patrols strictly monitored the blacks and arrested many of them, causing the jails to be “filled to overflowing.” On the night of September 1, 1831, “ten likely fellows were brought to town” (Edenton) from the northern region of Chowan County and jailed, the “proof” being “strong against them.” Before the fear subsided in Chowan County, many blacks suffered harsh punishment by the white guards and patrols attempting to suppress the threat of insurrection.22

29 John D. Pipkin to Montfort Stokes, August 23, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
30 Patroll Committee, entry for May 17, 1831, Minutes of Gates County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, May, 1831, term [p. 197], State Archives.
31 Militia Records during Nat Turner Revolt, 1831, Gates County Miscellaneous Records; Raleigh Register, September 29, 1831.
With militia companies and patrols proliferating everywhere, the black population experienced a terror as devastating as that of their white masters. Daniel Reaves Goodloe of Oxford, at the age of seventeen, volunteered for one of the patrols during the disturbance and later declared, "never was there a time when the Negroes were so far removed from revolt. They were ten times more scared than the whites."

The initial shock of the Nat Turner insurrection that hit the northeastern counties swelled as it pushed southward across the state to the next area of panic and reprisal, a multicounty section in southeastern North Carolina. Particularly hard hit by the fear of insurrection were Duplin, Sampson, and New Hanover counties. These counties lay almost directly south of Southampton County, Virginia, although more than 130 miles away. Spawned by panic, the atrocities committed there by the white population were equally as horrible as those perpetrated by the black insurgents in Virginia. In addition, the rumors that spread out of the southeast did much to rekindle the fear of rebellion in areas not yet recovered from the immediate reaction to the Turner uprising.

That an extreme reaction would occur in the southeastern counties was not surprising. Widespread distrust and fear of the blacks in the area had been developing for many months. On December 14, 1830, the citizens of Duplin, Sampson, New Hanover, and adjoining Bladen County petitioned the North Carolina legislature for military assistance in searching the woods and swamps for troublesome runaway slaves and for the authority to shoot the fugitives on sight. The petitioners alleged that the black population had become uncontrollable, that "they go, and come as they please, and if attempts are made to stop them, they flee to the woods where they stay for months committing depredations" on the property of the whites.

Duplin, Sampson, and New Hanover counties comprised a powder keg that exploded when news of the Turner rebellion provided the spark. Within two weeks of the Southampton massacre chaos reigned in these three southeastern counties. Rumormongers had succeeded in convincing almost all of the white population that Nat Turner's insurrection plot was so widespread that it was known to almost every black in several states. Fabricated reports indicated that the Turner insurgency had failed because of the confusion over the date it was to begin. By the end of August,
Ignited by news of the Virginia revolt, inflammatory rumors of local slave rebellion led to particularly severe retaliation against suspected blacks in Sampson and Duplin counties. In this letter of September 13, 1831, the justices of Sampson County inform Governor Stokes of the imprisonment, trial, and execution of some of the slaves in the two counties. From Governors Papers, Stokes, State Archives.
1831, almost every white man, slaveholder or not, was suspicious of any move made by the most innocent black man. Therefore, when a certain free black described on September 4, 1831, a plan among the Negroes of Sampson and Duplin counties to revolt, the white citizens wasted little time in exposing the alleged plot.36

On September 5, a meeting was held at the Duplin County Courthouse in Kenansville at which, Dave, the slave of Colonel Thomas K. Morrisey, sheriff of Sampson County, was implicated in a conspiracy to rebel against white slave owners. Sheriff Morrisey, reluctant to believe that Dave was involved, volunteered to examine the evidence in an attempt to clear his chattel of the charge. After investigation it appeared that a plot of some sort involving Dave did exist. Dave was committed to jail by a special court made up of five justices, probably sitting as a court of oyer and terminer. Although such a court needed the permission of the governor in order to convene legally, none was sought nor granted to the Duplin justices. Upon being subjected to prolonged torture, Dave implicated several other blacks who were supposedly involved in the plot.37

The justices informed Governor Stokes on September 13 that from ten to fifteen blacks were being held in jail at Kenansville. All those who had been arrested to that point had been named by Dave in his confession. This group of prisoners, which included the slave Jim, who was Dave’s second in command, also received harsh treatment in an effort to extort confessions. Jeremiah Pearsall, a leading Duplin County citizen and a juror in the proceedings, told his friend Samuel Langdon that the slaves were “whipped without mercy and some will probably yet die of their wounds.” Pearsall also said that those who were most guilty “bore the most punishment, yet some almost died before they would make a disclosure.” The testimony of some of the prisoners implicated most of the 8,000 Negroes in Duplin and Sampson counties.38

The slaves’ plan supposedly was well conceived, and the date set for the uprising was to be October 4, 1831. On that morning the slaves in Duplin and Sampson counties would kill selected families in their neighborhoods, many of whom were named in Dave’s confession. Then the rebellious blacks planned to seize the best horses from the plantations and march in two columns, “spreading destruction and murder” as they made their way to Wilmington. When the insurrectionists reached Wilmington, according to the coerced confessions, they hoped to be reinforced by some 2,000

36Raleigh Register, September 22, 1831.
37Jeremiah Pearsall to Samuel Langdon, September 19, 1831, Langdon-Young-Mears Collection, Southern Historical Collection, hereinafter cited as Langdon-Young-Mears Collection.

Reaction to the Nat Turner Insurrection

slaves and free Negroes and to supply themselves with arms and ammunition from the local arsenal. According to the plan, after arming themselves, they would take the bank and other institutions, killing whites as they encountered them. Upon completion of their raid on Wilmington, they would march back toward Kenansville in Duplin County, Clinton in Sampson County, and continue on to Fayetteville, the county seat of Cumberland, spreading terror en route and freeing slaves.  

The justices holding the special court in Duplin County were convinced that Dave’s confession was true, and they issued orders for all slaves suspected of being involved in the conspiracy to be seized. Soon thereafter 35 more slaves were severely beaten into confessing that they had agreed to join Dave and Jim in the insurrection. After having received as many as 200 to 300 “cracks of the paddle,” many were set free, while others were incarcerated in the Duplin and Sampson jails.

It is probable that at least some discussion of insurrection had occurred among the slaves of the southeastern region, and one can surmise that the news of Nat Turner’s uprising two weeks prior may have been the catalyst for such talk. The rumors, however, were based on scant evidence or, worse, were completely fabricated. The irrational acts of violence and carnage that resulted surpassed even the reaction in the northeastern counties, where fears of slave insurrection spreading from nearby Southampton County were palpable.

In New Bern and Fayetteville, for example, reports circulated that the town of Clinton in Sampson County had been burned. Other reports, including the first one received by Major General Nathan B. Whitfield of Lenoir County, who commanded the militia district, indicated that the Negro rebels in Sampson and Duplin counties were led by three “rascally whites” and that they had murdered seventeen white families. These reports were soon proved false, but not before they harmed innocent blacks. The most inflammatory rumor, circulating in Duplin and Sampson counties soon after Dave and Jim were jailed, indicated that an armed band of blacks had gathered in Sampson County. They intended to march toward Kenansville in Duplin County, where Dave and Jim were prisoners, killing white families along the route. Panic quickly spread on September 9, and by mid-afternoon more than 600 women and children had gathered in the Duplin courthouse. A second rumor swiftly followed, alleging that the black army had grown to more than 1,500 strong and that it was closing on the town. Despite the presence of a militia company at the jail, hysterical citizens seized “General” Dave and “Colonel” Jim,

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39 Nathan B. Whitfield to Montfort Stokes, September 12, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes; Raleigh Register, September 22, 1831; North Carolina Free Press, September 20, 1831.
40 Nathan B. Whitfield to Montfort Stokes, September 12, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes; Pearsall to Langdon, September 19, 1831, Langdon-Young-Mears Collection.
shot them, and cut off their heads, which they placed on posts as a warning to other blacks. Soon after the executions the rumors of a murderous band of Negroes proved to be false, but the panic did not ease nor did the brutal treatment of innocent blacks.

The jails of Duplin and Sampson counties remained packed with arrested blacks waiting to be tried for conspiracy by the superior court. According to one juror, Jeremiah Pearsall, "everyday since" the execution of Dave and Jim on September 9 "we have held trials." Most of the slaves tried extralegally in Duplin County were put to death. When the superior court convened for its regular session, the trials of suspected black conspirators continued. The justice administered was the same as in the special court. At least one of the accused conspirators was burned at the stake on the Duplin County Courthouse lawn. No details as to the crime or the name of the person executed are found in contemporary sources, only that it occurred. Moses Ashley Curtis, an Episcopal minister and naturalist in New Hanover County, noted on September 21 "that in Duplin County one black has been roasted." The punishment showed that whites had little compunction or mercy in squelching even a rumored insurrection.

By September 14, 1831, about ten days after the purported plot had first been discovered, Duplin and Sampson counties began to settle into quiet judicial revenge. For the next several months the patrols and courts conducted trials of slaves charged with conspiracy. On September 14, General Whitfield informed Governor Stokes that, contrary to earlier reports, no whites had been killed. Whitfield said that the families that had gathered for mutual security were beginning to return home, and the militia would be discharged as soon as a thorough search for rebellious Negroes was made in the two counties. The general assured the governor that the "feeling among the slaves is generally not one of insurrection"; nonetheless, he reported, the patrols had been reinforced and were "very vigilant."

When the rumors of interior revolts reached Wilmington in early September, the first reaction of the citizens was to adopt mild measures of precaution, since they were already well prepared for trouble among their slave population. On June 16, 1831, less than three months prior to the supposed plot, the county court of New Hanover (Wilmington) established a new set of ordinances governing the patrols that kept an eye on blacks. Under the new rules more stringent controls were imposed on the area's...
blacks. All Negro houses were to be searched at least once every twenty days; every pass carried by a slave had to specify the places the slave had permission to go; night gatherings were banned; and punishments for violations were set.47

The reports of the confessions being gathered in Duplin and Sampson counties began increasingly to implicate the blacks of Wilmington. On September 10, 1831, the first “evidence” was revealed that Negroes in Wilmington were directly linked to the Duplin and Sampson plot. Isaac Scott, a free black who later became a Christian missionary to Liberia, informed authorities in Wilmington of a suspected plot and implicated several Wilmington blacks. Among those named was a respected free black identified only as Dan, who was arrested and charged with showing the magazine of powder and arms to the rebels. Immediately, other blacks accused of knowledge of the conspiracy were arrested. Panic soon overwhelmed the citizens of Wilmington. A large force of volunteers was organized, and Wilmington officials, with the permission of Governor Stokes, armed these men from the state arsenal for the protection of the town and county.48

On the evening of September 12, when a noise heard in the distance north of town multiplied rumors, Wilmington was engulfed by hysteria. Moses Ashley Curtis vividly described the activity in the town in his diary: “Bless me! Now an explosion has taken place.” On that evening a young lady came to the Curtis home telling of the excitement created by a report that 200 blacks were within twenty miles of Wilmington. Curtis tried to calm the young woman as well as the women of his own household, assuring them that the militia forces in the area were sufficient to check any such threat.

Soon after this visit, Curtis ventured to town in an attempt to learn the truth about the rumor. There he found the people excited with “fear and despair, what confusion!” The streets were filled with women and children carrying mattresses and prized trinkets to the safety of the militia post. When Curtis reached the post, he found more than 120 women and children packed into one of the dwellings, all “half dead with fear.” “One was stretched out on a mattress in hystéries [sic], a number fainted, and one was jabbering nonsense in a fit of derangement.” He found only one man, a northern clergyman, who was “cheerful and fearless.” During the night the men of Wilmington armed themselves and patrolled the streets. Curtis, however, returned to his home where, to pacify his wife, he slept with a loaded musket. He closed his diary entry for that day with the exclamation, “What contemptible fuss for nothing at all except a want of reason and judgment.”49

47Rules and Regulations for the government of the Patroll of New Hanover County, entry for June 16, 1831, Minutes of the New Hanover County Court of Pleas and Quarter Sessions, June, 1831, term [pp. 365-366], State Archives; Curtis Diary, September 9, 1831.
48Curtis Diary, September 9, 1831; Town Commissioners of Wilmington to Montfort Stokes, September 14, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes; Joseph B. Hinton to David S. Reid, August 28, [1851], Private Collections, David S. Reid Papers, PC 1, State Archives.
49Curtis Diary, September 12, 1831.
Wilmington on the morning of September 13 was calm. At 5:00 A.M. the men formed a corps of defense, and arms and ammunition were passed out along with orders to reassemble in two hours. By that time a company of militia returned from the site of the supposed gathering of armed blacks. The alarm, the troops reported, had been caused by a few “revelers” some miles north of Wilmington who had frequently discharged a field piece on the evening before. After receiving this reassurance, the calm and rational Reverend Curtis witnessed the “silliest move of all,” when all those gathered to defend the town returned their arms. Curtis felt that the town had gone from overreaction to neglect of its security.⁵⁰

After the night of confusion and pandemonium the citizens of Wilmington began, as had many whites in other locations, to seek out the presumed black conspirators. Numerous arrests were made and confessions were forced from those who could survive the punishment. On Saturday, September 17, 1831, blacks made the most revealing confessions to Dr. James F. McRee, a town magistrate. From those confessions it was determined that blacks in five counties were involved in a plot to assault Wilmington on October 4. The counties were Duplin, Sampson, New Hanover, and probably Bladen and Cumberland. Whites believed that 4,000 slaves had prepared to participate in the raid. Upon entering Wilmington the blacks supposedly planned to set fire to the Methodist and Baptist churches, which were situated at opposite ends of the town. While the townspeople fought the two fires the blacks would attack, killing as many women and children as possible before engaging in battle with the military forces. If such a plot did exist, it would seem to have been a poor one. As Moses Ashley Curtis pointed out, “any man of reflection upon seeing two churches half a mile distant simultaneously on fire would run for his musket instead of buckets.” Whether or not the plot existed, the people secured the town to their satisfaction and hoped that they could “for a time rest in quietness.”⁵¹

Fayetteville, the county seat of Cumberland County, located northwest of New Hanover and adjacent to the western boundary of Sampson County, remained in a state of quiet concern during the entire crisis. News reached Fayetteville of the Nat Turner uprising in Virginia on August 26, 1831. At once J. W. Wright, magistrate of police in the town, set in motion certain precautions against a surprise attack from the county’s slaves and free blacks. In an effort to secure the community further, Wright asked Governor Stokes for permission to take arms from the state arsenal in Fayetteville in order to supply the volunteers who would be on patrol for the next several weeks.⁵²

The force of citizenry who were already mobilized may have been responsible for keeping panic to a minimum in Fayetteville when the trouble began in neighboring counties. During the confessions of the

⁵⁰Curtis Diary, September 13, 1831.
⁵¹Curtis Diary, September 13, October 4, 1831; Raleigh Register, September 29, 1831.
⁵²J. W. Wright to Montfort Stokes, August 26, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
slaves in Duplin County it was discovered that one slave, Nat, belonging to a Colonel Wright of the Sampson County militia, was missing. Soon afterward Nat was captured near Fayetteville. He was accused of going to Cumberland County to raise a company to join the insurrection in Duplin.53 The citizens of Cumberland, however, did not appear to be unduly alarmed by this revelation.

New Bern, the county seat of Craven County, located at the convergence of the Neuse and Trent rivers, was less than fifty miles from Kenansville, where rumors regarding a black insurrection were rife. As a result, the dispatches received in New Bern were greatly exaggerated; and, had they not soon been corrected, a panic might well have occurred there. Craven County—like Duplin, Sampson, and several other counties—had been experiencing difficulties with slaves for more than a year. In February, 1830, the county court in Craven had ordered two members of the county patrol to seize immediately all firearms found in the possession of slaves and, if necessary, to inflict punishment on the slaves who had arms.54 Prior to this time some slaves had been permitted to have firearms for hunting or the protection of their master’s property. The confiscation of arms followed some vague activity among the Negroes of the county that is not clearly evident, but it probably was similar in nature to the trouble experienced in the southeastern counties that year. In September, 1830, another crisis developed in New Bern. An abolitionist pamphlet of an “inflammatory nature” appeared among the slaves in Craven County. The violent tract was probably Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World by David Walker, a North Carolina free Negro who had migrated to Boston.55 White citizens believed that this pamphlet may have caused the slaves to “seriously reflect on the most effectual means to obtain their freedom,” that is, by violence. Suspicious actions of the slaves in the area, combined with news of the circulation of the incendiary publication, prompted the townspeople to call a meeting to adopt measures to suppress any attempt at insurrection. The situation in 1830 seemed serious enough for the state’s adjutant general to send to New Bern two hundred stand of muskets from the arsenal in Raleigh.56

Thus, New Bern was susceptible to any rumor of slave unrest. On the evening of September 13, 1831, three weeks after Nat Turner’s rampage,

53 *Raleigh Register*, September 22, 1831.
54 Carron and Slade Commissioned to Seize Firearms Found in Possession of Slaves, 1830, Slaves and Free Negroes, 1775-1861, Craven County Miscellaneous Records, State Archives.
56 Deverly Daniel to New Bern Intendent of Police, September 20, 1830, General Correspondence and Miscellaneous Materials, 1771-1868, Records of Department of the Adjutant General, AG 77, State Archives.
Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World by David Walker, a North Carolina free black who migrated to Boston, was an abolitionist tract that stirred white anxiety over slave insurrection when it appeared in New Bern in 1830. Thus, the town was susceptible to rumors of slave unrest when news of Nat Turner reached there in 1831. This title page is from the second edition of Walker's pamphlet.
word reached New Bern that a band of “black banditti” had murdered as many as seventeen white families in Duplin County. The militia was immediately called out and an express rider was dispatched to Duplin to obtain details of the outrage. A short distance outside New Bern the rider met a General Miller of Jones County, who assured him that the rumor heard in New Bern was false. This intelligence quickly quieted the people, and the next day New Bern had returned to normal.57

From New Bern, William Gaston, the noted politician, congressman, and future state supreme court justice, soberly wrote to his son-in-law in New York regarding the problems in North Carolina caused by the Nat Turner affair. The initial report from Duplin County to arrive in New Bern, Gaston said, was “one of the miserable consequences of the Southampton County tragedy, that the public mind is to be abused from time to time with false rumors.” Of the alleged evidence against blacks uncovered in Duplin, Sampson, and New Hanover counties, Gaston had doubts, but he expressed cautious belief in the “supposed conspiracy.” He speculated: “when you abstract the effect which the Southampton massacre had made on timid and susceptible minds, little else will remain but some idle gossip” among the blacks, “indicating a vague undefined purpose . . . of changing their condition.” He accurately predicted that “rash, cruel, and unjust acts” would be committed against the slaves in North Carolina, not in Craven County but in the “panic stricken sections of the state.”58 Gaston’s rational attitude demonstrated the relative calm, except for the brief episode of September 13, that prevailed in and around New Bern. Perhaps the people there had learned a lesson from their unjustified anxiety of the previous year.

As emotions cooled in New Bern, rumors in Edgecombe and Halifax counties escalated again. On Tuesday, September 13, a passenger on a stage from Fayetteville told the citizens of Tarboro in Edgecombe County that Wilmington had been “fired and taken by blacks who had risen in considerable numbers” from neighboring counties. This passenger also stated that troops were being sent to Wilmington to help suppress the insurgents. Tarboro had not yet settled down from its violent reaction to the initial news of the Turner revolt and news of trouble among North Carolina blacks to the south caused considerable excitement. This renewed sense of panic was reinforced on the next day when the Fayetteville Observer arrived with reports of the conspiracy in Duplin and Sampson counties. Also on September 14, 1831, a rumor spread in the Edgecombe-Halifax area that a force of 500 slaves was massed only seventeen miles from the town of Clinton in Sampson County.59 The next reports to arrive in the area came with the circulation of newspapers from various towns. Ironically, the newspaper from tranquil New Bern caused the greatest disturbance among the citizenry of Halifax and Edgecombe.

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57William Gaston to Robert Donaldson, September 14, 1831, William Gaston Collection, Southern Historical Collection; hereinafter cited as Gaston Collection.
58William Gaston to Robert Donaldson, September 14, 1831, Gaston Collection.
when it erroneously reported that seventeen white families had been killed in Duplin County.

Colonel Spier Whitaker, commander of the militia in Halifax County, reported a slightly different version of the rumor in the town of Halifax. There it was said that Wilmington had been burned and many of the port city’s inhabitants murdered. The rumor contended that the insurgents were marching on Fayetteville, that they had killed seventeen families while passing through Duplin and Sampson counties, and that they had burned the Sampson County courthouse. With this false information, Whitaker asked Governor Stokes to consider the large number of slaves on the lower Roanoke and to send appropriate military supplies to the area. Whitaker also offered assistance in helping put down the “insurrection” in the southeast.60

Raleigh, in the summer and fall of 1831, was in disarray. On June 21 the statehouse burned to the ground, and the General Assembly seriously contemplated relocating the state’s seat of government to another town.61 Such relocation would have meant economic doom for Raleigh, which had been established forty years earlier as the permanent capital of North Carolina. Businessmen and other citizens in Raleigh were already faced with this uncertain future when the added burden of slave unrest came upon them. The townspeople immediately expected the worst from the black population, which until then whites had only silently distrusted. Much excitement and panic occurred in the town when intelligence arrived informing the governor of the Southampton massacre, but the uproar soon dissipated.62

A second wave of rumors, which were greatly exaggerated, shortly began to pour into Raleigh from the southeastern counties. On Tuesday, September 13, 1831, many of the townspeople met at the Wake County Courthouse to plan for the town’s security. At the meeting a “Senior Volunteer Association,” to be made up entirely of men who were exempt from other military duty, was formed to aid in securing the town. During the meeting the people of Raleigh heard the rumor that seventeen families had been killed in Duplin and Sampson.63 This report fueled the fire of panic. The townspeople at the meeting decided that the free Negroes in the capital could no longer be trusted or controlled and, fearing their involvement if the insurrection spread, ordered them put into jail.64

On September 15 a story published in the Raleigh Register added credence to the rumors. The newspaper reported that “the slaves of Sampson and Duplin had risen in rebellion and committed many horrid butch-

60Spier Whitsker to Montfort Stokes, September 15, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
61Johnson, Ante-Bellum North Carolina, 32.
62George W. Mordecai to Jacob Mordecai, September 21, 1831, George W. Mordecai Papers, Southern Historical Collection, hereinafter cited as Mordecai Papers.
63Raleigh Register, September 15, 1831. During the meeting the citizens of Raleigh voted to render military aid to Smithfield in Johnston County, which had requested powder, lead, and flints.
Among the false reports that raged through Raleigh was that an armed band of insurgents was marching toward the capital. The citizens had previously agreed that when danger appeared imminent the bell in the steeple of the First Presbyterian Church would be rung, whereupon the women and children should take refuge in the church. The same night the rumor of the insurgents' approach spread through town, a blacksmith shop caught fire soon after midnight, and the church attendant rang the bell to summon help to fight the fire. Instead of fire fighters, the bewildered attendant got "a wild rush of women to the church, frantic for fear of murder or rape." The misunderstanding was clarified, and everyone returned home. On September 22, 1831, the Register reported that there was not a shred of evidence that any part of the Duplin and Sampson plot involved an assault on Raleigh. Nevertheless, the town was still apprehensive, and a "vigilant patrol" remained on guard around the clock for several weeks.

In Hillsborough the residents believed that Raleigh was in immediate danger of an attack by an armed black force. The commander of the Orange County militia gathered a militia company of cavalry and set out to defend the capital. When the militiamen reached Chapel Hill, they learned that the intelligence received in Orange County was false and that Raleigh was safe from attack. They too returned home.

The Raleigh newspapers did their share to fan the panic. It may well have been a belated attempt to redeem credibility when the editor of the Register printed this poem:

The flying rumors gathered as they told,
Scarce any tale was sooner heard than told,
And all who told added something new,
And all who heard it, made enlargements too;
In every ear it spread, on every tongue it grew.

The fear that permeated North Carolina's capital did not completely disappear for many months. In November, Governor Stokes requested from the secretary of war of the United States, on behalf of the committee of vigilance in Raleigh, that a detachment of federal troops be stationed in the state capital. This request, however, was denied by the commander of the army. Many citizens like George Mordecai, a prominent Wake County landowner, felt that the scare and panic had a favorable effect on both the black and white population. According to Mordecai, "the whites

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65Raleigh Register, September 22, 1831.
67Raleigh Register, September 22, 1831.
68Raleigh Register, September 22, 1831.
69Lewis Cass to Montfort Stokes, December 9, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
In September, 1831, Joseph Caldwell, president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, reacted to rumors of an "alarm- ing attitude" among blacks in the area and requested that Governor Stokes arm the students to protect the university and town. Photograph of portrait from the files of the Division of Archives and History.

will be more on guard and not grant unwarranted indulgences on slaves as their mistaken ideas of philanthropy and humanity" had guided them to do in the past. As for the blacks, Mordecai thought they had seen how vain any large scale attempt at insurrection would be; therefore, they might as well "submit quietly to their unfortunate condition." 70 This attitude among powerful proslavery whites would, during the next four years, severely limit the few rights and privileges enjoyed by slaves and free blacks prior to 1831.

From Raleigh the reaction to the Nat Turner uprising spread west to Chapel Hill. On September 17, 1831, Joseph Caldwell, president of the University of North Carolina, reacted to rumors of an "alarm- ing attitude" among blacks in the area and requested arms for the university from Governor Stokes. President Caldwell did not inform Stokes that the arms were for protection against insurgent slaves, but a petition that arrived at the governor's office the same day from university students established this as the primary reason for requesting weapons. Sixty-five students, with the blessings of the university's faculty, had formed a volunteer company for the protection of the university and the town. The students and faculty did not see immediate danger but did feel that a revolt by blacks was possible, and they wanted to be armed. 71

As the panic continued its westward course in the piedmont, where small farmers were dominant and slaveholders few, Anson County expe-

70 George W. Mordecai to Jacob Mordecai, September 21, October 3, 1831, Mordecai Papers.
71 Joseph Caldwell to Montfort Stokes, September 17, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes; Petition of Students of the University of North Carolina, September 17, 1831, to Montfort Stokes, Governors Papers, Stokes.
rienced unrest over a possible slave conspiracy. In mid-September, Governor Stokes received a request from a judge in Wadesboro, the county seat, for muskets to arm a troop of cavalry.\(^\text{72}\) Also, William G. Smith, the colonel commanding the state militia in the county, informed the governor on September 20 that an independent company of “respectable and energetic men” was being formed for the purpose of suppressing the “insurrection which is afoot among the slaves.”\(^\text{73}\) The fear of imminent insurrection led to the formation of a third militia company, the Anson Dragoons, to protect the citizens and property of Anson, where several blacks had already been jailed for the fabricated conspiracy.\(^\text{74}\) From the southern piedmont also came reports of a general uprising of the slaves in Richmond County. Although there was no evidence to support the stories, local whites were convinced that a “deep-seated Negro conspiracy,” stemming from the Nat Turner incident, existed in their area.\(^\text{75}\)

Even western North Carolina, with many fewer slaves, was not immune to the slave insurrection scare. Mountain yeomen traditionally had resented economic competition from slaves, and that resentment was deepened when rumors of slave revolts infiltrated the southern highlands. Mountainous Rutherford County heard reports of uprisings among slaves who worked in the local gold mines. Generally, the farther west one traveled, the less intense was the apprehension of the citizens and the less severe the reprisals against blacks.\(^\text{76}\)

But in those eastern hotbeds of fear where emotional trials of suspected black rebels were conducted, white North Carolinians sought to prepare themselves against any future threat from blacks. Governor Stokes daily received requests for arms and for officer commissions as volunteer militia companies sprang up in almost every county. When the state’s arsenals were empty, the governor turned to the federal government to supply additional weapons, and the War Department complied with some assistance.\(^\text{77}\)

For weeks after the Nat Turner insurrection, reports of plots, conspiracies, and revolts circulated throughout the state. Of the dozens of rumors proclaimed in North Carolina in 1831, however, none can be proven true today. No evidence exists to substantiate any of the stories of conspiracy, not even the purported Duplin and Sampson plot. This does not mean that some blacks, inspired by the example of Nat Turner and his band, did not contemplate a strike for freedom. Perhaps inadvertently they were persuaded by white alarm that the Southampton revolt had spread to

\(^\text{72}\)R. Strange to Montfort Stokes, September 19, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
\(^\text{73}\)William G. Smith to Montfort Stokes, September 20, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
\(^\text{74}\)Thos. Waddill to Montfort Stokes, September 20, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
\(^\text{75}\)Taylor, “Slave Conspiracies in North Carolina,” 32.
\(^\text{77}\)Lewis Cass to Montfort Stokes, December 9, 1831, Governors Papers, Stokes.
North Carolina and would soon engulf the area. If they entertained such thoughts, their plotting did not go beyond the vague preliminary stage because the swiftness and harshness of white reprisals made it clear even to the most rebellious that slave insurrection could not succeed.

Once rumors of revolt subsided and tempers cooled, most jailed blacks were released to their masters’ custody, but the anxiety of a slave uprising lingered. Terrified of murderous bands of slaves provoked by northern abolitionists, antebellum North Carolinians passed numerous stringent laws limiting the liberties of all blacks, both slave and free. After the Turner affair, whites viewed free Negroes and black ministers as particularly dangerous to the tranquillity of the slave population; therefore, these two groups were especially subjected to restrictive legislation. In a further effort to neutralize free blacks as tools of abolitionists, the Constitutional Convention of 1835 removed the right to vote from this class of people.78

For the entire white population Nat Turner had, in one quick blow, destroyed “the prevailing stereotype of master-slave relations,” forcing whites to face “a grim and dreaded reality,” namely that their own slaves could strike against them.79

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