

## Some Slaves Refuse to Give in to Their Masters

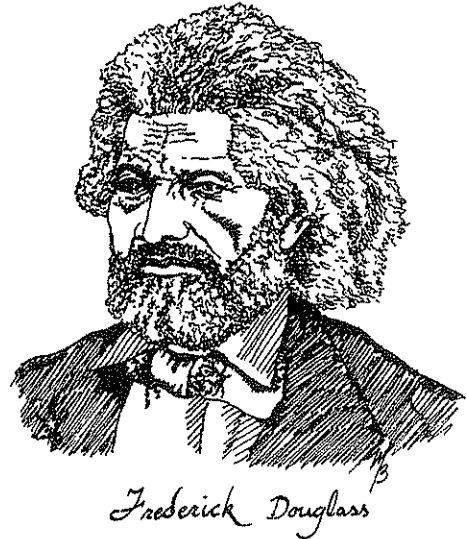
Since 1619, slavery had existed in the South, but when the Constitution was signed, it was agreed that the African slave trade would end within 20 years. A few hundred slaves were brought in illegally after 1808, but nearly all of the U.S. slaves had arrived or were born in America by that time. It is hard to say how slaves were treated because some masters were kind, while others were cruel. Some general things can be said. Masters bought slaves because there was work to be done, and few free laborers were willing to do that kind of work. Many slaves worked on plantations under white supervisors called “overseers” or black supervisors called “drivers.” Most worked as “field hands,” but others were servants or skilled laborers. Even though there were laws against teaching slaves to read, some were taught.

At best, slaves lived very insecure lives. A husband or wife might be sold by the master, and would never see each other again. Children belonged to the mother’s master and could be sold. A kindly master might die, and they could find themselves with a cruel master. Even when things were going well, a slave worried. Masters added to that worry when they threatened to sell them “downriver”—a reminder that no matter how bad things might be where you are, it could be far worse somewhere else.

Some slaves never gave their masters any trouble. They did their work, and they found pleasure in their religion and in family and friends. Religion was important because it told them that a better day was coming, when they could go to heaven and be with God. Others found little ways to get even on earth: break a hoe, loaf on the job, steal food, or set fires. Sometimes they openly defied their masters, either in groups or as individuals.

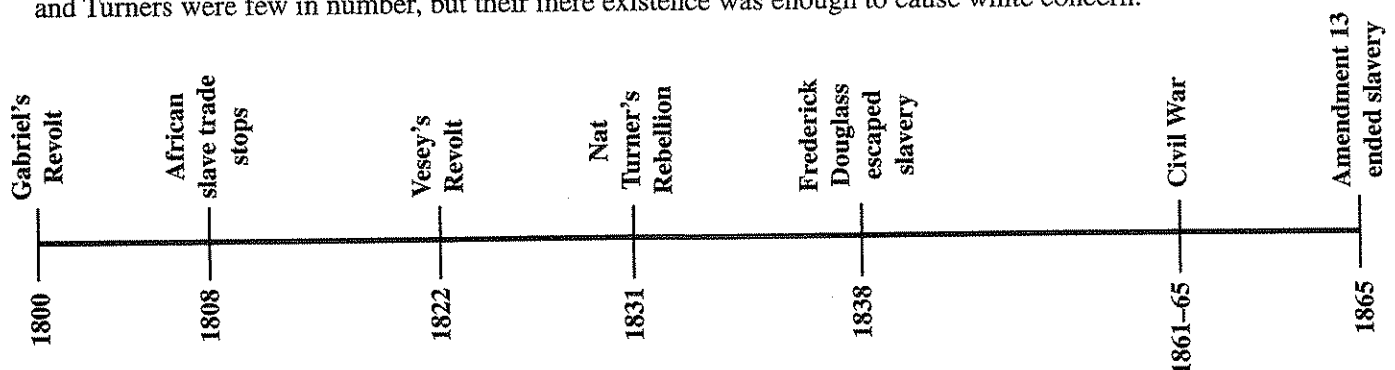
Occasionally, there were large-scale slave revolts. In 1800, Gabriel’s Revolt took place in Richmond. Gabriel, a blacksmith who could read, planned with other slaves to capture the arsenal and kidnap the governor; then other slaves would join them. Some slaves told their masters, and those involved in the plot were arrested; 20 were killed. In 1822, Denmark Vesey, a free black in Charleston, South Carolina, organized about 80 men; but again, slaves told their masters, and the group was crushed. Vesey and 34 others were tried and executed. The largest rebellion was that of Nat Turner in rural Southampton County, Virginia. Turner was convinced that God had chosen him to lead a rebellion, and he and his followers killed about 60 whites before they were captured, tried, and executed.

The story of Frederick Douglass is different. He was a slave in Maryland. His master tired of Frederick’s allowing his horse to run away and decided to send him to Mr. Covey, an evil slave-breaker. After six months of brutal treatment, Douglass had had enough. In a long, two-hour wrestling match with Covey, Douglass came out on top. Covey never whipped him again. Later, Douglass escaped slavery and became an outstanding spokesman for the anti-slavery movement.



**RESULTS:** What slaves could or could not do was limited by the type of master they had. When the master understood that happy workers were more productive, slaves lived better; if the master felt harsh discipline was the only way to treat them, their lives were miserable.

Slaves developed methods of resistance that evened the score with the system that held them down. The Vesey and Turners were few in number, but their mere existence was enough to cause white concern.



## Slaves Rebel in Different Ways

While some people will always put up with a cruel system, others will not. As masters were not all good or bad, slaves were not all obedient or rebels, either. When slaves did not like their master or overseer, they had ways of getting revenge. One way to do it was by loafing—pretending to be sick might get them out of a day’s work. Other ways were by breaking tools so they could not work, stealing from the master, or deliberately leaving a gate open so livestock would get loose. Spreading gossip was another method, and it did not take long for slaves and whites to hear that “Massa’ Jones’ wife went after him with a skillet when he was drunk.”

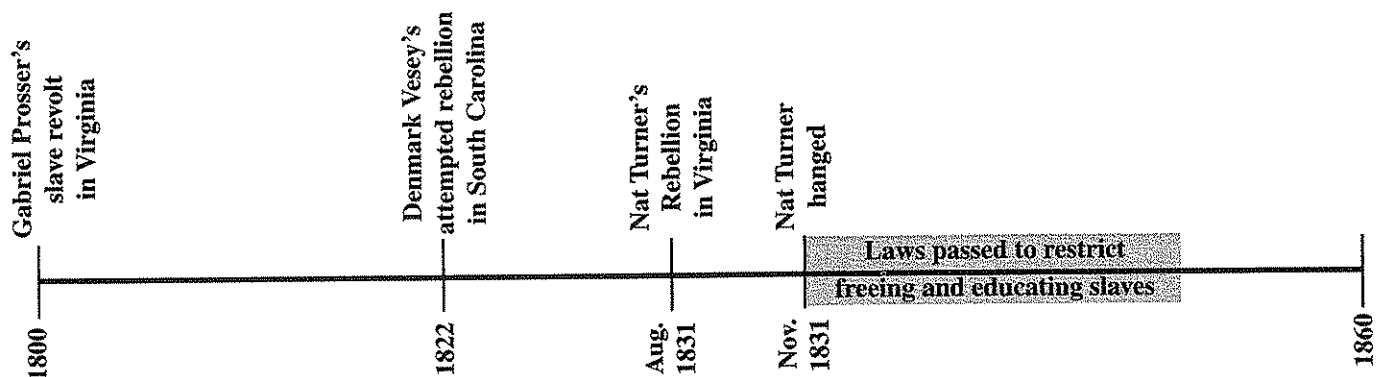
Learning to read and write was another form of rebellion. Whites feared that if slaves became educated, they could forge passes, read abolitionist newspapers, and begin to think for themselves. Some slaves learned to read from white children studying their lessons or from kind mistresses who wanted to teach them how to read the Bible. To most slaves, reading print on a page was what separated the free from the slave, and they wanted to know how to do it.

Violence was also a possible response. One example was Denmark Vesey, a former slave who won enough money in a lottery to buy his freedom. His hatred for slavery and admiration for Toussaint L’Ouverture led him to organize an 1822 slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina. Keeping the plans in a small circle of advisors, he recruited slaves through cell leaders. Two weeks before the planned date of rebellion, a house slave informed his master of the plot, and its members were rounded up. Vesey refused to give any information to his captors, and he was executed.

Nat Turner was born in 1800, the year of Gabriel Prosser’s rebellion. Turner had some education, and he became convinced that he had been chosen to free the slaves from bondage. He saw signs in the heavens and on leaves and planned his attack for August 21, 1831. With seven other slaves, he attacked his master’s family and killed them. Then the slaves scattered and, in one day and night, killed approximately 60 whites. A white response developed quickly, and the revolt collapsed; but Turner had disappeared. Rumors spread throughout the South that Turner was “in the neighborhood,” and that caused many sleepless nights. Actually, Turner was hidden away about two miles from where the revolt began. Turner and most of the other leaders involved in the plot were eventually caught and executed.

During Turner’s trial, it was charged that he had read the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*; and fear spread that Nat Turner’s rebellion was the result of northern agitators. No evidence exists to support the fear, but the South knew it had others besides slaves to watch from now on.

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# The Underground Railroad



*Harriet Tubman*

The 250,000 free African-Americans of the North lived very uncertain lives. Many, like Frederick Douglass, had escaped from slavery. Others had “freedom papers” showing that they had been emancipated (legally freed). States with personal liberty laws made it difficult for slavecatchers to capture slaves and take them South. But when owners were determined, they stopped at nothing to get their slaves back. Anthony Burns fled from slavery in 1853 and was captured in Boston by a U.S. marshal the next year. Abolitionists in the city protested loudly, and the day he was taken to the ship, Boston went into mourning.

The Burns case was different from most. In the North, many whites had strong feelings against African-Americans. This was especially true of poor immigrants in the cities, who did not like competing against African-Americans for jobs, and true of the “butternuts”—Southern-born farmers living north of the Ohio River. Some made a living out of catching and returning slaves. In the southern states, there were whites who would persuade African-Americans that they were friends, capture them, and then take them to farmers who did not ask questions about the “merchandise” they were buying.

Slaves were suspicious of whites who told them about the “Underground Railroad” that would take them to freedom. The Underground Railroad was composed of volunteers who would hide slaves traveling north to Canada. Slaves were hidden during daylight hours at stops along the route and, using the North Star, they moved in the dark to the next location 10 or 15 miles north. Until they reached Canada, they were never completely safe. If they were caught by a slave catcher or U.S. Marshal, they would be returned to their master, who would probably make a great display of flogging them. It was risky for whites to be involved, but it was even more dangerous for African-Americans who helped slaves to escape. Facing a death sentence if they were captured, it took great courage for them to help slaves escape.

Josiah Henson, a runaway slave, worked as an “agent” on the Railroad, helping over 200 slaves to escape. John Mason, a fugitive from Kentucky, left the safety of Canada to rescue over 1,300 slaves. The most famous of the African-American agents was Harriet Tubman, a clever woman. It is said that she rescued 300 slaves in 19 trips through the South. She would boast, “I nebber run de train off de track, and I nebber lost a passenger.” Some passengers lost their nerve and wanted to turn back. She would point a pistol at their heads and say, “You go on or die.”

No one knows how many slaves were rescued or how many agents helped them to freedom. One estimate is that 100,000 took the Railroad north to freedom, aided by 3,200 workers. It was rarely helpful to slaves in the Deep South, but it did rescue many from the Upper South.

**RESULTS:** Slaves escaped, and southerners became obsessed by the Underground Railroad. Not many boarded it, but the South was alarmed by the number of slaves who did manage to escape through it.

