

# Nat Turner Was Far From Alone

New York Time Article

By Adeel Hassan

Oct. 7, 2016



Nate Parker as Nat Turner, center, in a scene from "The Birth of a Nation." Credit...Jahi Chikwendiu/Fox Searchlight, via Associated Press.

As long as there have been slaves, there have been slave rebellions.

Spartacus famously led a mutiny against Rome in 73 B.C. It ultimately failed. The 1839 uprising aboard the slave ship *Amistad*, a long-overlooked revolt and trial, received the Hollywood treatment in the late 1990s.

The film was notable for the director Steven Spielberg's decision to tell the story from the viewpoint of its main African character.

Similarly, "The Birth of a Nation," having its theatrical release on Friday, puts Nat Turner, who led an 1831 insurrection in Virginia, at the center of the tale. Turner led a group of 70 armed slaves and free blacks in an uprising that killed about 60 whites. He was captured and hanged, and some of his body parts were kept as mementos by whites.

Few Americans beyond historians can claim thorough knowledge of slave rebellions, considering the scant mention they receive in standard classroom curriculums and in popular culture. At the same time, the efforts of white abolitionists have been extensively covered.

But scholars have documented organized, sometimes-successful efforts by the enslaved in the Americas to break the chains that bound them: about

300 revolts. And there were likely hundreds, if not thousands, of smaller acts of resistance that we will never know about.

Here are other noteworthy slave revolts in the Western Hemisphere:

### **Uprising on Hispaniola, 1521**

The first recorded slave revolt in the New World occurred on the island shared by Haiti and the Dominican Republic today.

Africans and native Indians banded together, attempting to gain freedom from their Spanish masters. Little else is known about the events that took place.

### **Revolt on a Mexican Plantation, 1570**

A slave named Gaspar Yanga led an escape from a sugar plantation and, remarkably, created a colony that lasted 40 years before Spaniards finally razed it.

But the former slaves launched a counterattack that was so successful they were officially freed and granted a settlement.

### **Rampage in South Carolina, 1739**

South Carolina was home to the largest mutiny in the British colonies, when about 20 slaves broke into a store selling guns and ammunition. The group swelled to about 100 and ended up killing about two dozen whites.

They were most likely helped by a previously enacted law requiring all white men to carry guns to church services. That's where many of the townspeople were when the Sunday rampage began. By the time the rebellion was put down, 40 blacks had died. Other black participants were captured and killed.

### **Mysterious Fires and Hangings in New York, 1741**

Violent resistance wasn't confined to the South, of course. In the spring of 1741, after a particularly harsh winter, a mysterious series of fires flared in New York City. In one inferno, Fort George, the seat of royal government and a symbol of law and order, was burned to the ground.

White residents imagined a plot among slaves was unfolding, so they hanged or burned dozens of people, including four poor whites they believed were the ringleaders of the conspiracy. No firm proof was ever found of such a plan, but the extreme reaction showed the depth of the fear and insecurity that whites held about the slave population.

At a time of revolts in other colonies, the killings served as a notice to blacks that they would be terrorized into submission.

### **Death on Road to New Orleans, 1811**

The largest slave rebellion in the United States was led by Charles Deslondes, a mixed-race slave who managed hundreds of other slaves on a sugar plantation that doubled as a militia warehouse in Louisiana. Armed with

weapons stored there, more than 100 slaves set off for New Orleans, killing whites on their path.

They never made it; a couple dozen were killed in battle with United States soldiers and militiamen, while the rest were executed and their heads placed on stakes on the road to the city.

## **A Nation Rises From a Rebellion, 1794**

Deslondes had been inspired by the example of what is now Haiti, where a three-year slave uprising led by Toussaint L'Ouverture prompted the abolishment of slavery in 1794 and the end to French rule.

Some believed that Napoleon wanted to restore slavery, prompting them to rise up again.

That victory brought independence on Jan. 1, 1804, making Haiti the first nation to arise from a slave rebellion.

## **Slaves Strike in Jamaica, 1831**

Tens of thousands of Jamaican slaves took a different tack on Christmas Day that year. Led by Samuel Sharpe, they went on strike for better working conditions. When their demands were ignored, some of the slaves attacked plantations before British troops crushed the uprising in early January.

Many slaves were killed after going on trial. Sharpe, who had once said, "I would rather die upon yonder gallows than live in slavery," was hanged.

But their efforts factored into the British Parliament's passage of a law the next year that ordered the gradual abolition of slavery in all British colonies.

While Turner's rebellion and some other revolts failed to give slaves the new life they fought for, the development of the Underground Railroad — which, of course, was neither underground nor a railroad — helped tens of thousands of escaped slaves from the South reach safety up North.

That story is now the subject of a play, a TV show and a best-selling novel. A leader in that movement, Harriet Tubman, will replace the slaveholding Andrew Jackson on the \$20 bill.

Tubman is a reminder that, like Turner, countless black slaves organized sustained, sometimes-successful rebellions, fighting and dying for their freedom in myriad ways.