

Nat Turner Documents

Document A: John Chavis. Antebellum Negro Preacher and Teacher:

As a result of the Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, in August 1831, the North Carolina legislature in 1832 passed an act silencing all colored preachers. With reference to this act, as applied to Chavis, we find an entry in the Proceedings of the Orange Presbytery, under date of April 21, 1832, as follows:

"A letter was received from Mr. John Chavis, a free man of color, and a licentiate under the care of the Presbytery, stating his difficulties and embarrassments in consequence of an act passed at the last session of the legislature of this state, forbidding free people of color to preach : whereupon, Resolved, That the Presbytery, in view of all the circumstances of the case, recommend to their licentiate to acquiesce in the decision of the legislature referred to until God in His providence shall open to him the path of duty in regard to the exercise of his ministry.

Document B: Norborne E. Sutton to Governor John Floyd, 21 September 1831.

Bowling Green Sept 21st 1831

Honorable John Floyd

Sir It is now certain that the slaves in this county was apprised of the insurrection which developed itself in South Hampton. Some Gentleman have enquired of these slaves as to this fact, (Mr. Campbels) in this immediate neighbourhood all admitted that they had received information of the intended insurrection but that it commenced two soon by eight days Yesterday a faithful servant of Mr. Wm P Taylors gave him information that large meetings of slave were held in his neighbourhood for the purpose of converting and effecting the best cours they should pursue to get clear of the whits Much excitement and much alarm has prevailed in the county especially with the slaves of the county and it is now so obvious that the slaves design an attempt between this and the 1st of October I have concluded to suggest to you the propriety of furnishing the militia with arms at least to some extent.

For one until the information in relation to Mr Taylors slaves was received I had not even had my gun in my room Because I did not apprehend any danger and I was certain it was calculatd to create a greater degree of alarm with my wife and I thought two it was giving an importance which might induce the negros in this neighborhood to imagine that I was alarmd I hope sir you will arm the Troop and a part of the companies in this county if not all I am as perfectly satisfied that those travling preachers and Pedlers have been instrumental to a great degree in producing the present state of things as that I am now addressng this letter to you And I do hope that the Legislature will at the next session at least pass a law which shall have for its object This That no man particularly a strangr shall preach in any County or Town untill he shall have produced sufficnt evidence that he has been regularly ordained and of his moral worth and standing when he was received on his last place of residence.

I hope I shall be excused for suggesting other civils slaves should not be permitted to have preaching at any time nor should they be permitted to go about contracting for themselves I would make the Law in

relation in relation to These matters more penal and I would make it the duty of every officer to arrest such slaves as are permitted to goe at large and sell him forthwith the result to be applied to the use of the County Again Sir it is now the practice at every Court House to see large numbrs of Carts some white and some black vending and trad in various things there Sir although I have used my exertions to arrest the civil practice of court nights frequently the exhibition of whites and blacks mingling together Beggars description They have no law imposed upon them They are composed of the very dregs of the different Counties and what I ask is to be expected but disorder and consequences of the most dangerous and alarming results Last October or November Mr Blak had a valuable slave killd at these Carts white and black all engaged in the [encounter?] late at night I hope you will incur(?) these suggestions repectivly yours & c

P.S. I would suggest the propriety of arming the four companys immedi ally about this place wher information must be received first on sight to be fully armed say Capt John Bellah Capt John Washington Captain Washington Carter and Capt W. Wrights these I think should be armed

fully

N. E Sutton

Document C: Proclamation by Governor John Floyd, 17 September 1831.

By the Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia

A Proclamation

Whereas the slave Nat, otherwise called Nat Turner, the contriver and leader of the late Insurrection in Southampton, is still going at large: Therefore I, John Floyd, Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia have thought proper, and do hereby offer a reward of five hundred dollars to any person or persons who will apprehend and convey to the Jail of Southampton County, the said slave Nat: and I do moreover require all officers civil and military, and exhort the good people of the Commonwealth to use their best endeavors to cause the said fugitive to be apprehended, that he may be dealt with as the law directs.

Given under my hand as Governor, and under the lesser Seal of the Commonwealth at Richmond, this 17th. day of Septemr: 1831.

John Floyd

Nat is between 30 & 35 years old, 5 feet 6 or 8 inches high, weighs between 150 and 160 lbs. rather bright complexion but not a mulatto-broad shouldered-large flat nose-large eyes-broad flat feet-rather knock-kneed-walks brisk and active-hair on the top of the head very thin-no beard except on the upper lip, and the tip of the chin-a scar on one of his temples produced by the kick of a mule-also one on the back of his neck by a bite-a large knot on one of the bones of his right arm, near the wrist, produced by a blow

Governor's Office, Letters Received, John Floyd, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia.

Document D: Anonymus" to Governor John Floyd, 28 August 1831.

To the Governor of Virginia

Sir

It has been humbly & respectfully suggested that as Nat. Turner the leader & mover of the insurrection in Southampton has not been caught or killed that it would be adviseable to offer a large reward for him if caught by a white or free man, or manumission to any slave who will bring him dead or alive so that he may be punished. It is perhaps idle to think that this insurrection is ended until the Leader is killed

Aug 28th

Anonymus.

Document E: Trial of Nat Turner, Southampton County, 5 November 1831.

At a Court of Oyer and Terminer Summoned and held for the County of Southampton on Saturday the 5th day of November 1831 for the trial of Nat, alias Nat Turner, a negro man slave late the property of Peterson Moore, charged with conspiring to rebel and make insurrection The prisoner Nat, alias Nat Turner, was set to the Bar in custody of the Jailer of the County- and William C Parker is by the Court assigned Counsel for the Prisoner in his defence- and Merewether Brodnax Attorney for the Commonwealth filed an Information against the prisoner, who upon his arraignment pleaded not guilty.- The Court after hearing the testimony and from all the circumstances of the case are unanimously of opinion that the prisoner is guilty in manner and form as in the Information against him is alledged, and it being demanded of him if anything for himself he had or knew to say why the Court to Judgement and execution against him of and upon the premises should not procede. he said he had nothing but what he had before said Therefore it is considered by the Court that he be taken hence to the Jail from whence he was taken therein, to remain until Friday the 11th day of November instant, on which day between the hours of ten oClock in the forenoon and four oClock in the afternoon he is to be taken by the Sheriff to the usual place of execution and then and there be hanged by the neck until he be dead And the Court valued the said slave Nat to the sum of three hundred and seventy five dollars Teste

James Rochelle Cl

Document F: Laws Passed After Nat Turner

- It is enacted that no slave, free Negro or mulatto shall preach, or hold any meeting for religious purposes either day or night.... Slaves and free Negroes who attend and religious meeting conducted by any free slave or Negro preacher, ordained or otherwise, and slaves who attend any preaching at night, although conducted by a white minister, without the permission of the master, shall be punished....
- The slaves of any one master may assemble together for religious devotion,
- No free Negro shall hereafter be capable of acquiring ownership, except by descent, to any slave other than his or her husband, wife, or children.
- Free Negroes are not to carry firelocks of any kind.... Permission heretofore granted authorizing justices to permit slaves and free Negroes to carry firearms in some cases is repealed.
- Slaves and free Negroes are not permitted to sell or give away ardent or spirituous liquor....

- If a slave or free Negro write or print anything advising persons of color to commit insurrection or rebellion, he is to be punished by thirty-nine lashes; if the person offending be white, he is to be fined from \$10.00 to \$100.00.
- Riots and unlawful assembly, trespasses and seditious speeches by free Negroes shall hereafter be punished with stripes as directed for slaves.
- If any white person or free Negro shall knowingly receive from any slave or free Negro any stolen goods, he shall be punished in the same manner as if he had actually stolen the goods.
- Free Negroes hereafter shall be tried and punished for felony in the same manner as slaves....

(Guild, 1969, p. 54)

Document G: Selections from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs (1861)

In this selection¹ from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, first published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, Harriet Jacobs explores the relationship between the church and slavery, observing how the teaching "If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master" was used in an attempt to prevent slave rebellion. Religion may have, at times, provided a momentary relief, but in this passage, Jacobs questions whether it could bring a meaningful release from the ills of slavery

From *Voices of A People's History*, edited by Zinn and Arnove

After the alarm caused by Nat Turner's insurrection had subsided, the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters. The Episcopal clergyman offered to hold a separate service on Sundays for their benefit. His colored members were very few, and also very respectable—a fact which I presume had some weight with him. The difficulty was to decide on a suitable place for them to worship. The Methodist and Baptist churches admitted them in the afternoon, but their carpets and cushions were not so costly as those at the Episcopal church. It was at last decided that they should meet at the house of a free colored man, who was a member.

I was invited to attend, because I could read. Sunday evening came, and, trusting to the cover of night, I ventured out. I rarely ventured out by daylight, for I always went with fear, expecting at every turn to encounter Dr. Flint [James Norcom], who was sure to turn me back, or order me to his office to inquire where I got my bonnet, or some other article of dress. When the Rev. Mr. Pike [John Avery] came, there were some twenty persons present. The reverend Gendeman knelt in prayer, then seated himself, and requested all present, who could read, to open their books, while he gave out the portions he wished them to repeat or respond to.

His text was, "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."

Pious Mr. Pike brushed up his hair till it stood upright, and, in deep, solemn tones, began: "Hearken, ye servants! Give strict heed unto my words. You are rebellious sinners. Your hearts are filled with all manner of evil. 'Tis the devil who tempts you. God is angry with you, and will surely punish you, if you don't forsake your wicked ways. You that live in town are eye-servants behind your master's back. Instead of serving your masters faithfully, which is pleasing in the sight of your heavenly Master, you are idle, and shirk your work. God sees you. You tell lies. God hears you. Instead of being engaged in worshipping him, you are hidden away somewhere, feasting on your masters substance; tossing coffee-grounds with some wicked fortuneteller, or cutting cards with another old hag. Your masters may not find you out, but God sees you, and will punish you. O, the depravity of your hearts! When your

masters work is done, are you quietly together, thinking of the goodness of God to such sinful creatures? No; you are quarrelling, and tying up little bags of roots to bury under the door-steps to poison each other with. God sees you. You men steal away to every grog shop to sell your master's corn, that you may buy rum to drink. God sees you. You sneak into the back streets, or among the bushes, to pitch coppers. Although your masters may not find you out, God sees you; and he will punish you. You must forsake your sinful ways, and be faithful servants. Obey your old master and your young master—your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master. You must obey God's commandments. When you go from here, don't stop at the corners of the streets to talk, but go directly home, and let your master and mistress see that you have come."

Document H: The General Assembly of Virginia Prohibits the Teaching of Slaves, Free Negroes, or Mulattoes to Read or Write, 1831

4. Be it further enacted, That all meetings of free negroes or mulattoes, at any school-house, church, meeting-house or other place for teaching them reading or writing, either in the day or night, under whatsoever pretext, shall be deemed and considered as an unlawful assembly; and any justice of the county or corporation, wherein such assemblage shall be, either from his own knowledge, or on the information of others, of such unlawful assemblage or meeting, shall issue his warrant, directed to any sworn officer or officers, authorizing him or them, to enter the house or houses where such unlawful assemblage or meeting may be, for the purpose of apprehending or dispersing such free negroes or mulattoes, and to inflict corporal punishment on the offender or offenders, at the discretion of any justice of the peace, not exceeding twenty lashes.

5. Be it further enacted, That if any white person or persons assemble with free negroes or mulattoes, at any schoolhouse, church, meeting-house, or other place for the purpose of instructing such free negroes or mulattoes to read or write, such person or persons shall, on conviction thereof, be fined in a sum not exceeding fifty dollars, and moreover may be imprisoned at the discretion of a jury, not exceeding two months.

6. Be it further enacted, That if any white person for pay or compensation, shall assemble with any slaves for the purpose of teaching, and shall teach any slave to read or write, such person, or any white person or persons contracting with such teacher so to act, who shall offend as aforesaid, shall, for each offence, be fined at the discretion of a jury, in a sum of not less than ten, nor exceeding one hundred dollars, to be recovered on an information or indictment.

7. The judges of the superior courts of law, and the attorneys prosecuting for the commonwealth, in the county and corporation courts, are hereby required to give this act in charge to their several grand juries.

8. This act shall be in force from the first day of June next.