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Information Control in Early 19th Century American Slave Societies: The Conflict Over
Information in Richmond and Southampton Following Organized Resistance

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Abstract

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This thesis analyzes the conflict over the information control in early 19th-century Virginia, as told through a study of the Richmond and Southampton rebellions. This research was conducted primarily within the newspapers published after the events, the court records of enslaved peoples' trials, and the narratives of other enslaved peoples. The rebellions induced in white Virginians a version of events that involved simplified barbarity simultaneously with the role of information in the organization of resistance. This attention to the significance of information prompted responses by enslavers which sought to extend further control over the access to and influence over information amongst enslaved communities. The conflict over information in Virginia reveals the significance of controlling information to enslavers for maintaining the stability of their society and control over enslaved peoples. For enslaved peoples, information networks are shown to be important and attentively maintained in Virginia for the survival of themselves and their communities.

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Introduction

Virginia's history and the history of the early United States are inseparable. The first permanent English settlement in North America occurred in 1607 at Jamestown, Virginia.¹ That colonial settlement has a direct political ancestry to the modern day United States. Virginia was also the home or birthplace for many of the founding thinkers before, during, and after the American revolution.² Beyond the broader significance of Virginia to the history of the United States, Virginia and slavery were specifically and deeply intertwined throughout the history of the early country.³ Thus the institution of American slavery in Virginia was older than it was in any other state- and indeed the population of enslaved peoples remained highest in Virginia through the entire history of chattel slavery until ratification of the 13th amendment.⁴ These facts are stated at the top of this thesis to make clear that the interactions between slavery and the laws in Virginia are significant in the history of the United States more broadly. Amongst these interactions there are two of the most significant and heavily-studied organized plots of resistance amongst enslaved peoples: Gabriel's conspiracy in Richmond, and Nat Turner's rebellion in Southampton.

The event now known as Gabriel's conspiracy was intended to be an uprising of enslaved peoples, and it originated with a man named Gabriel, who was enslaved on the plantation of Thomas Prosser outside of Richmond. Gabriel initially brought a few others into his plan, but overtime leading up to the day, more and more became linked and counted upon for the

¹ Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 14.

² Ibid, 63-64.

³ Nikole Hannah Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: New York Times Company, 2021), 2.

⁴ "Table Group Bb 1-98: Black Population, by state and slave/free status: 1790-1860," Historical statistics of The United States, Millennial edition Online, Cambridge University Press, Accessed March 3, 2025. <https://hsus-cambridge-org.proxy.library.emory.edu/HSUSWeb/toc/tableToc.do?id=Bb1-98>.

rebellion.⁵ The plan was for the enslaved peoples to gather at night and make their way to Richmond, and light part of the city ablaze. During the chaos of the response to put out the fire, the enslaved peoples would enter the other side of the city and seize the cache of firearms, powder, and ammunition stored there. From that point, they intended to hold the city and kill all white Virginians opposed to their emancipation until the institution of slavery in Virginia was ended.⁶ The planned uprising was intended to begin at night on August 30, 1800, but there was a sudden and intense storm which disrupted the beginning of the uprising.⁷ Because of the storm, the enslaved peoples agreed to commence their attack on Richmond the next night instead; however, during the day on August 31, 1800, William Mosby was informed by an enslaved woman from his plantation about the planned attack, and he then spread the alarm amongst the white population.⁸ This sparked a mass number of patrols, fear, and chaos amongst the white population, which eventually discovered the full extent of the planned attack, and some of the involved enslaved peoples stood trial.⁹

31 years later, enslaved peoples in Virginia once again created a plan to rebel against their enslavers and achieve their freedom. This plan originated in the mind of Nat Turner, an enslaved man in Southampton on the plantation of Nathaniel Francis at the time. Turner had religious experiences throughout his life that he understood as divine guidance, and he eventually felt religiously destined to lead a fight for his freedom and the freedom of other enslaved peoples, and so he gathered Hark, Henry, Sam, and Nelson to plan this uprising.¹⁰ The plan was deliberated between this group for weeks, until they finally agreed to begin on the night of

⁵ Michael L. Nicholls, *Whispers of Rebellion: Narrating Gabriel's Conspiracy* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 23-24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 59-70.

¹⁰ Patrick H. Breen, *The Land Shall be Deluged in Blood: A New History of The Nat Turner Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 17.

August 21, 1831.¹¹ Through personal connections amongst this initial group of enslaved men, other enslaved peoples in Southampton became aware and prepared to partake in the fight for freedom once it commenced. Turner and the others began attacking and killing white families in the plantation homes of Southampton, and as they travelled their numbers rose overtime, though seemingly not as quickly or as massively as Turner had hoped for.¹² Turner sought to lead the group to Jerusalem Virginia as quickly as possible to acquire more weapons and ammunition, but sections of the army lagged behind and did not meet with him on time.¹³ In the chaos of working to coordinate these two groups, a group of white militia attacked the enslaved fighters, though eventually retreated due to being outnumbered. As Turner's group pursued them, they encountered a much larger force of white troops, and in the chaotic fleeing from that group Turner's troop was halved as enslaved people splintered off away from the main body.¹⁴ Turner's group began working to recruit more participants, turned around and headed back to the origins of the uprising, and eventually established a spot to rest the night as it was already night on August 22, 1831, and they had fought through the entire day.¹⁵ At this point, Turner continued retracing their path, but lost even more numbers from his group to skirmishes with white families and troops, as well as those who retreated and did not return.¹⁶ Turner worked to continue recruiting on August 23, 1831 and intentionally split his numbers to find more recruits until he was alone in Southampton county. Those sent off were eventually captured, and Turner sought to hide himself to evade capture as well.¹⁷

¹¹ Ibid, 27-28.

¹² Ibid, 58-59.

¹³ Ibid, 64.

¹⁴ Ibid, 67.

¹⁵ Ibid, 69.

¹⁶ Ibid, 72.

¹⁷ Ibid.

These incredibly brief introductions to the history of the two rebellion plots are not intended to be comprehensive. Instead they supply the reader with sufficient information to understand the following thesis. This thesis is about the control of information and the nature of information networks in Virginia, and it is told through the lens of these two rebellions in order to fully capture the role of the criminal justice system in interfering in the spread of information or otherwise manipulating the information in society. These two events left behind a multitude of documents and sources, including articles in newspapers, court records, letters written by enslavers, and trace references in the narratives of enslaved peoples. In studying the records produced during and after the two events, I discovered similar trends in the stories told by enslavers, the emphasis on information throughout white Virginians' reactions, and similar examples of enslaved peoples' information networks throughout the communities involved in the rebellion plots. These similarities between the two events drove me to center my thesis on the role of information control by both enslavers and the enslaved in Virginia throughout the course of these events. The records of the two events and their intersection with the criminal justice system represent an opportunity to better understand enslaved people's lives, during both typical days or resistance, through what can be observed of their efforts to control information or spread it along information networks. The records also are a chance to analyze the methods by which slavery in Virginia was controlled and perpetuated by enslavers, as they worked to exert their own control over information in society as well as influence or limit the information networks of enslaved peoples.

I do not intend this to be, nor would it be particularly useful, as a pure historical overview of these two events. Previous historians have already produced comprehensive and strongly supported works fulfilling that role. The event planned to be Gabriel's rebellion or conspiracy

has been discussed at great lengths by American historians before me, understandable given its significance as a moment of enslaved people's agency active in an organized and planned resistance to slavery. Historian Douglas Egerton presented in 1993, through his book *Gabriel's Rebellion*, the history of the planned rebellion through telling the life story of Gabriel himself through his entire life and the later planning of the uprising.¹⁸ While this work was significant to the current understanding of the event, thanks to its specific attention to the event itself, future works by historians James Sidbury and Michael Nicholls have provided far more substantial and pivotal images of the planned rebellion. Sidbury, in *Ploughshares into Swords*, notably contributed to the understanding of Gabriel's rebellion through adding greater detail to the wider communities of enslaved Black people in Virginia and their culture.¹⁹ In contrast to Egerton, Sidbury did not set out to detail the entire history of the conspiracy, and he instead focused his work on the nature of the enslaved communities told through the planned rebellion.²⁰ Nicholls work, *Whispers of Rebellion*, however is principally dedicated to telling the story of Gabriel and the rebellion (and to correct those errors or unsupported assumptions made in Egerton's account).²¹ Nicholls' work is the most complete and well supported history of the plan centered on the events and actors, and so despite the notable trailblazing-aspect of Egerton's work, I have relied more heavily on Nicholls in aiding my understanding of the planned rebellion.

Sidbury's work has also influenced my approach in this paper, through the insight shown into the ways that cultural ties and relationships amongst enslaved peoples' communities were involved in the rebellion.²² Both Nicholls' and Sidbury's works have focused heavily on what I

¹⁸ Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 7-8.

¹⁹ James Sidbury, *Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel's Virginia, 1730-1810* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 22; 32.

²¹ Nicholls, 10-12.

²² Sidbury, 64; 75.

believe to be the results of this paper's central concern: the information networks amongst enslaved communities in early 19th-century Virginia. Nicholls spoke on the recruitment of members into the conspiracy, but with a substantial emphasis on the ensuing events.²³ Similarly, Sidbury's depiction of the cultural connections can be seen as the result of information networks that spread throughout the groups of enslaved peoples, but the work lacks clear representation of *how* and *where* these contacts and communication occurred.²⁴ Sidbury pays close attention to the acquisition and creation of a Black Virginian culture, both through observation of white Virginians and the earlier generative efforts of those transported to Virginia based on their African origins.²⁵ But it is impossible for such cultural ties to have come into shape without established and maintained networks along which information and histories could flow. And for both of these historian's works, the understanding of the white Virginian reactions to the planned rebellion is largely centered on controlling or influencing behavior. Sidbury discussed the importance of information and the history of the conspiracy for white Virginians considering how to respond, included Governor James Monroe's efforts as well as other pro-slavery and some anti-slavery thinkers.²⁶ However, none of the attention in the reactions and the attention to information was directed at the control over enslaved people's stories or information. Instead, Sidbury focused on the efforts to organize increased policing and militia to suppress any potential uprising.²⁷ Nicholls' discussion of the state's reaction to the rebellion similarly does not include significant attention to the broad efforts to control information.²⁸ These comments should not be read as detracting from these works; instead, they are delineating how this work carries on

²³ Nicholls, 35-37.

²⁴ Sidbury, 71.

²⁵ Ibid, 84; 32.

²⁶ Ibid, 134-139.

²⁷ Ibid, 141-142; 145.

²⁸ Nicholls, 126.

their efforts to depict the community of the enslaved Virginians who planned or were otherwise connected to the Richmond conspiracy in 1800.

Regarding Nat Turner, the historiography is quite a bit more expansive than that surrounding the Richmond plot. However, there is currently a similar gap regarding the specific role of information control and the information networks among the enslaved Virginians. For a general depiction and overview of the events of the rebellion, a combination of historians' David F. Allmendinger's *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County* and Patrick Breen's *The Land Shall be deluged in Blood* were pivotal in writing this thesis through providing well researched references to the general facts of the rebellion.²⁹ Allmendinger made specific reference to the role of the information the planners brought when establishing their plot, though without significant attention to the sources of this information or the potential connections to networks amongst the enslaved communities.³⁰ And while the description in this work of the response similarly acknowledges the efforts into controlling the available information (including the creation of *Nat Turner's Confession*), the analysis regarding these components will be built upon in this paper by adding in the role of the criminal justice system.³¹ Enslavers' attempts to shape the understanding and response to the rebellion did not start and end with Governor James Monroe's actions; they began with the information immediately spread regarding the rebellion by the wider white Virginian public and ended with the experiences of the enslaved peoples affected by the new laws passed.

Historian Christopher Tomlins has also noted flaws in Allmendinger's interpretation of Nat Turner's confession, namely where the division line between Turner's words and Thomas

²⁹ David F. Allmendinger, *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); Breen.

³⁰ Allmendinger, 99.

³¹ *Ibid*, 215-216.

Gray's is placed. Tomlins' conclusion, that the first half of the confession (up to when the attack actually began) was largely Turner's own thoughts and expressions, whereas the rest after is primarily Gray's writing projected through Turner to grant it increased validity, has been influential in this guiding paper's use of the confession.³² Tomlins did not seek to address the information networks of the wider enslaved communities in Southampton, as it was a history of the rebellion told with a lens centered on Turner himself. However, Tomlins' understanding of Turner's confession is crucial in the work of this paper as it contributes to my ability to "hear" Turner himself in the archives. This thesis will seek to expand on Tomlins' book by working to reduce some of the gaps remaining in the historiography around the other enslaved individuals involved in the case, as well as speak to the nature of information in the society those peoples existed within.

This thesis will seek to build upon the historiography surrounding not only Gabriel's rebellion plan and of Nat Turner's but also the general understanding of 19th century Virginian enslaved peoples' communities, through working to contribute to our understanding of information and its' role. Such an effort has necessitated working to faithfully speculate what might have existed in the archival silences surrounding these rebellion plots when possible, inspired by the notion of critical fabulation pioneered by historian Saidiya Hartman.³³ I have been inspired by this process of working to imagine, supported and based upon research, what might have occurred in the lives of those whom the processes of recording information ignored or distorted.³⁴ While the marginalized were so often denied an overt presence in the recorded

³² Christopher Tomlins, *In the Matter of Nat Turner: A Speculative History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 44; However, as will be discussed in the narratives section, I disagree with Tomlins' bifurcation of the text. While the dividing line between the first two sections is well argued and supported, it seems highly likely that the description of Nat's time evading arrest after the collapse of the rebellion was also (at least more heavily) drawn directly from Nat's own words and ideas.

³³ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008).

³⁴ Hartman, 12.

information available to historians today, it is possible to make educated speculations regarding what might have occurred which allow for a more clear picture of the people being discussed.³⁵ However, it is incredibly important to practice narrative restraint in this process, speculating based upon well evidenced events or conditions in the lives of other marginalized peoples. It is imperative to not overstep what can be supported based upon the evidence available, nor to ever present the information imagined as having been fact. The people who have already suffered marginalization in the records would be disrespected by fantasizing about their lives in an inaccurate or unfaithful manner. It has thus been my practice in writing this thesis to question the other possibilities in each situation where I have speculated, in an effort to ensure that the scenario I have imagined was truly likely, a fair representation of the enslaved person, and not conjured only to further my writing. Finally, it is necessary in this process to never claim to have removed the silence in the archives, as that would be to reduce the true marginalization and suffering inflicted on those being studied. The work of speculation allows for us to reintroduce some aspects of the subject's humanity that have been removed by biased or sparse records, but it can not truly undo that damage. It can only work to mitigate it, and better our understanding of our past.

The process of applying critical fabulation to this thesis has required careful thought around the lives of enslaved Virginians broadly. In that effort, the work of historian Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, was central in helping to construct this thesis' understanding of enslaved people's communities and cross-plantation connections.³⁶ This paper seeks to build upon her impressive work by focusing specifically on information and the information networks which connected enslaved peoples, not just for organized resistance but for their everyday life.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women & Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

The notion of rival geography is built upon, to include not just meetings and physical space but also information pathways and mental space.³⁷ In combination with information from other enslaved Virginians, this paper has been centered around the resistance efforts in Richmond and Southampton. The focus on the instances of Nat Turner and Gabriel's rebellions was chosen based on the clear and well preserved presence of the criminal justice system's effect on these pathways for information. While instances and references to the criminal justice system were apparent throughout various formerly enslaved people's narratives or biographies, through centering on the two organized rebellions this paper will more effectively be able to reconstruct the tensions between enslaved peoples' and enslavers' influence over information. In working to reach that goal, historian Maria Montalvo's *Enslaved Archives* has been foundational in my understanding of how court records worked to tell enslaver's stories, while simultaneously being windows into understanding the enslaved peoples present within the legal system in that moment.³⁸

In these ways, this thesis is an effort to speak to the nature and relationship of information and the criminal justice system in the 19th-century Virginia slave society. In the instances of these two rebellions information networks were central to the organization of resistance, while the enslavers turned to the criminal justice system and control over information in society to promote the stability of the slave society. In Virginia more broadly, there becomes a clear picture of how the criminal justice system was a major pillar in the conflict over information between enslavers and enslaved peoples, influencing the networks of information's reach and content. This thesis will trace the information pertaining to the two rebellions as it was produced in various spaces, first through enslavers' newspapers, then in the courtroom, and

³⁷ Camp, 6.

³⁸ Maria R. Montalvo, *Enslaved Archives: Slavery, Law, and the Production of the Past*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024).

finally in the histories of and by enslaved Virginians. In the first chapter the initial reaction of the enslavers will be discussed through the lens of the newspapers published quickly after the two resistances, demonstrating the efforts to create a consensus depiction of the rebellions in the white public and thus the importance of information for maintenance and stability of a slave society. The second chapter, on the court records and government documents, traces how the criminal justice system worked to craft and spread an official account of the rebellions. These accounts were then utilized further by the government in advancing controls on information which they hoped would prevent future organized resistance and maintain the institution of slavery. Finally, the third chapter works to understand the role of information networks amongst enslaved peoples' communities, and how the efforts of enslavers in Virginia through the criminal justice system influenced them.

This thesis builds on the historiography regarding Gabriel's conspiracy and Nat Turner's rebellion through a focus on information and its movement amongst Virginian communities. Through this, it also speaks to the nature of slavery in Virginia as a whole given the demonstrated interest of enslavers' to control what information circulated and how in the interest of promoting the stability of slavery. Their efforts to do so were centered on homogenous messaging in the public regarding instances of resistance, limiting enslaved peoples' knowledge and community connections, and finally directly interfering and seeking to alter their public histories. It also shines light on the lives and experiences of enslaved Virginians through exploring the nature of their information networks and thus cross-community connections. It becomes clear that enslaved Virginians worked to create and maintain pathways for knowledge to flow along in ways that served not only their every-day interests but also enabled organized resistance. I believe that this focus on information and its routes through both white and enslaved

communities could be productively applied to other states in America, especially those in the deep South given the institution, and the states themselves, being younger and less developed. Similarly the specific understanding of executions as forcing an end to the life history of an enslaved person in their community holds potential in various places of American history, but especially other instances of resistance. The scope of this thesis is rather limited temporally and geographically, spanning just one American state over 31 years, compared to the centuries long history of slavery in the United States. It seems obvious, though, that enslaved Virginians over these 31 years would not have been the only communities to create and maintain information networks, nor would they have been the only to encounter tension with their enslaver's efforts in the field of knowledge.

Chapter 1: Newspapers

In 19th-century Virginia, newspapers served as a primary means for public communication besides in person methods. The discussion of Gabriel and Nat Turner's rebellions in the contemporary papers captured a majority of the information about the rebellions that was immediately available to the white Virginia community. Thus, the newspapers played a direct and significant role in shaping the publicly accepted story of the incidents. In the discussion of the incidents of Richmond and Southampton the newspapers reveal the immense fear which spread throughout the communities, while they promoted a simplified depiction of the plots as brutal acts driven primarily by violence. The papers also sought to stabilize the societies after the incidents by dispelling rumors around what had occurred, discouraging future rebellions, and protecting the institution of slavery. All of these efforts make apparent that the control of information was crucial for the stability and control of the slave society by white Virginians, and the newspapers played a critical role in maintaining this control over the prioritized information.

The Library of Congress' catalog of digitized newspaper editions was the major source for locating newspapers to use in this analysis of the public reaction to the rebellions. Amongst the newspapers published in 1800, every paper available in the LOC archive published in America from August 30 to November 1, 1800, was analyzed closely. This timeframe was chosen specifically, as the entirety of the rebellion, trials, and executions had all ended by November 1. Some papers published across the nation, including in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Providence, Rhode Island, published sections written to their audiences about Gabriel's rebellion and have been included in this study. While they were inherently not writing to a Virginian audience, the information distributed in each of those sections was directly cited to a

Virginian writer or correspondent who were there observing the society's reaction to the rebellions. Great care was taken to perceive any bias in the reporting of events from northern papers (with likely stronger abolitionist audiences), but interestingly there was little to no discussion around the incidents besides the reporting that the events had occurred. An observed trend in the newspapers was that most references to the events ceased before November 1, seemingly because the rebellion had been foiled and reported so heavily in September and early October. Additionally, Gabriel himself was executed on October 10, 1800, and the final conviction of Jack Bowler occurred on October 29. However, by closely analyzing the two months immediately after the rebellion, this paper sought to capture the early reactions of the public and writers through the newspapers. Similarly in 1831, every newspaper in the archive published from August 21- November 21 was reviewed for sections pertaining to Nat Turner's rebellion. Turner himself was executed on November 11, 1831, and the last immediate trial at the local level was on November 21.³⁹ A similar trend was observed in the newspapers published following the Southampton rebellion, where the number of sections written on the rebellion decreased significantly before even the final trial dates occurred. As the trials and executions of enslaved peoples after the rebellions ticked onwards, the public seemed to accept that the events were over and their interest in continual frequent updates dropped away.

Through the reading of the newspapers which followed both of these events, I have discovered very similar trends in the efforts of white Virginians to establish control over the information regarding the rebellions and even the reactions of the public regarding the facts or the best response. These similarities, stretching even to the point where the descriptions of the

³⁹ There were 3 trials sent to the Superior Circuit court of Virginia, which heard those cases from April 3rd-7th. However, as these cases were so far removed from the rebellion, they would not strongly contribute to the understanding of the public's *initial* reaction to the rebellion as this section intends to understand. Indeed, by the time those trials commenced there had already been several months since the last trials in which the public could come to understand the story told in those court records.

two events in the papers are highly similar, reveal the continued importance of information in the general white Virginian public in the early 19th century. The newspapers reveal not only that fear was rampant in both of the societies as they learned about the respective rebellions, but also that the newspapers worked to restore stability in society through how they described and reported on the events. The newspapers after both events also reveal a trend towards promoting the repression of the access to information by enslaved peoples. Through these similarities, the newspapers contribute to the understanding that information control among the white population of Virginia was extremely important for the continuation of their society and sense of safety in society.

Reporting on Gabriel

Gabriel's planned rebellion in Richmond, Virginia, in August of 1800 stoked the fear of future uprisings of enslaved peoples in the minds of many Virginians. Though this fear was already present, the plan exposed in Richmond prompted a drastic increase in the fear.⁴⁰ Living in a plantation slave society where there were 345,000 enslaved peoples and 443,000 white Virginians, white people found themselves surrounded by large numbers of enslaved individuals.⁴¹ Following from this, white population must have relied upon a sense of control over the enslaved communities for their sense of safety. And so when Gabriel and his compatriots planned to rise up against the white Virginians, it scared them in a way that they identified as novel. An unidentified Virginian correspondent spoke of the planned uprising,

⁴⁰ James Sharples, *The World that Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 5.

⁴¹ "Table Group Bb 1-98: Black Population, by state and slave/free status: 1790-1860," "Table Aa6200-6248 - Virginia population by race, sex, age, nativity, and urban-rural residence: 1790-1840 [Historical boundaries]" Historical statistics of The United States, Millennial edition Online, Cambridge University Press, Accessed March 16, 2025.
<https://hsus-cambridge-org.proxy.library.emory.edu/HSUSWeb/toc/layoutChange.do?swidth=1920&id=Aa6200-6248&tableType=t>

believing that it would “have been the best planned and most matured of any before attempted.”⁴² Though resistance to control was clearly not unheard of to this writer, the organization and potential to succeed struck them as especially terrifying. It seems highly probable that the level of fear produced by Gabriel’s plot was reduced by its discovery before it could begin in earnest as intended. However, the early warning did not prevent the example of developed resistance from the enslaved communities clearly driving high apprehension and fear among the large proportions of the white population. On September 8, 1800, over a week after the plot’s discovery, a letter written from a Richmond man was published which stated “For the past week we have been under momentary expectation of a rising among our negroes, who have assembled to the amount of 900 or 1000, and threatened to massacre all the whites...God only knows our fate...”⁴³ Despite the discovery of the plot, the letter writer felt continued apprehension that a further uprising would occur based on knowledge of the prior attempt and then expand to comparatively enormous numbers. The revelation of Gabriel’s plot and the fact that it was prevented from succeeding was not enough to quell the fears of the white population. This suggests that there was an inherent element of a plot like Gabriel’s that was extraordinarily terrifying to the white community in Virginia. I believe this to have been the communication of information between enslaved communities outside of enslavers control turned towards the enslaved peoples’ liberation. The differences mentioned above by a white Virginian between Gabriel’s plan and other resistance types, in the size and organization of the plot, would have both required and implied information spreading amongst many plantation communities. The true extent of how much of that information was travelling in Richmond mattered less than the

⁴² *The Providence Journal and Town and Country Advertiser*, Sept. 17 1800, pg 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn83021629/1800-09-17/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>

⁴³ *Gazette of the United States, & Daily Advertiser*, Sept. 20 1800, pg 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84026272/1800-09-20/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>

clear immense fear it induced in the white population. It opened the doors to a terrifying world where another such event might upend their society as they knew it.

The basis of this fear is further demonstrated in perhaps the most intriguing coverage of Gabriel's rebellion, which related the plot to the global resistance of enslaved peoples to their conditions through comparing Gabriel to Toussaint Louverture in Haiti.⁴⁴ On October 3, 1800, the *Virginia Argus* cross published a pro-emancipation piece written for the *Philadelphia Aurora* which claimed that the only reason Gabriel had not risen to become a figure as successful as Louverture was that he had gotten unlucky with the rain leading to the planned rebellion being foiled.⁴⁵ Further, the author spread the fear that the existence of these anti-slavery uprisings in Virginia was inherently caused by the institution itself.⁴⁶ This moment captured people grappling with a reminder of how unstable slave societies were, simultaneously abroad as well as up directly before them. The feeling prompted by Gabriel's rebellion, even as far away as Philadelphia, was that such uprisings were not only capable of but inevitably bound to spread. While they certainly would have seen or heard of resistance to authority from enslaved peoples, Haiti demonstrated the potential for success in uprisings while Gabriel brought a new sense of fear of mass rebellion at home. The newspaper called for the southern states to become aware of the danger that they were in from mass uprising of enslaved peoples, and to take actions that would stabilize their societies. These proposed actions included increasing the white populations, limiting the numbers of enslaved peoples in proportion to the whites, and most interestingly- ending the slave trade and eventually liberating all peoples of African descent.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The use of the name "Haiti" in this paper rather than "Saint Domingue" as the contemporary Virginians still referred to it is a deliberate acknowledgment of the country's freedom from colonial rule. Saint Domingue was a name given to the land by the French colonizing power and not that of the island's native or African-descent populations. And because the freedom movement that eventually established Haiti had already begun, I choose to acknowledge those freedom fighters' legacy rather than that of enslavers and colonizers.

⁴⁵ *Virginia Argus*, Oct. 3 1800, pg 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-10-03/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

This article, having been written in Philadelphia, made it clear that even for the supporters of emancipation the fear of rippling plots across the United States was constant. But this paper was cross-published in a southern slave state soon after a plotted uprising of enslaved peoples, which points to the general shock and confusion around the event. It seems highly probable that in calmer times, such a publication of anti-slavery rhetoric would have included critical editors' comments defending the institution. Or, even more likely, would not have been published at all. The publication of this letter in Virginia at that time contributes to the image of frenzied fear being abound in Virginia, and to the white population grappling with recent domestic and international signs of the fragility of their societies. It also speaks to the universality of seeking to control Black communities' ability to organize and communicate information, as even this (comparatively) progressive stance on the issue of slavery intended to numerically dominate the hypothetically free Black populations in the region. The plot in Richmond brought to the forefront of white people's, and especially the enslaving class', minds that information spread by enslaved peoples brought with it the capability for a rippling effect of rebellions, and many turned towards the newspapers to shape the information being publicly discussed.

This shaping of the information, which worked to generate a unified version of events that could reduce the level of fear in the white society, involved first establishing the 'facts'. In response to the acts of enslaved peoples in Gabriel's rebellion, there seems to have immediately been a consensus to depict the events as undirected violence rather than a larger scoped attempt at mass freedom. On September 12, 1800, the *Virginia Argus* described the event after trials had already begun, stating that the enslaved peoples were being tried for "treason" after having "meant to massacre[d] indiscriminately...to obtain their liberty and possess themselves of their

master's property."⁴⁸ These initial terms depict the immediate fear of the white population of Virginia, which encapsulated the entire destruction of their slave society. Learning of Gabriel's plot, they filled in details that were not directly nor explicitly revealed by the enslaved peoples themselves— most significantly the indiscriminate massacre of white people or the seizure of their enslavers' property.⁴⁹ In these words there was also the effect to dilute the goals of the rebellion. As stated by witnesses at Gabriel's trial, the plan was not simply to achieve mass murder but to fight for their freedom. Those perceived to have opposed slavery or who did not benefit from it (specifically Quakers, Methodists, and the French) were to be spared, and all the fighting was to end once their freedom was granted. Any property seized was intended to further supply and fuel the uprising.⁵⁰ The newspapers in this way had simplified the true intent of the rebellion into primarily savage murder, while also adding the idea of theft without the information that it was only directly related to furthering the pursuit of freedom. While this particular issue had the most clearly worded simplification of the aims, no newspapers went against the idea or tried to claim that the rebellion plot was an organized attempt at gaining the enslaved peoples freedom.⁵¹ The newspapers were interested in telling a simple story based around the pursuit of violence rather than freedom, and the white communities whose understanding of the uprising was fed by these sources would likely have adopted the same perception of the event.

⁴⁸ *Virginia Argus*, Sept. 12 1800, pg. 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-09-12/ed-1/>.

⁴⁹ *Commonwealth v. Gabriel &at.* Oct 6th 1800, No. 11, in Governor's Office, Letters Received, James Monroe, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia. While it could be argued that the phrase "possess themselves of their master's property" might refer to the act of freeing enslaved peoples, given their perceived status as property, I argue that this is in fact referring to two separate acts. I base this inference on the separation of the two acts in the sentence, rather than linking them together, such as "possessing themselves of their master's property through..." Ultimately, it seems more likely than not for the writer to have been referencing the seizure of other property than enslaved peoples by the rebellion.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Virginia Argus*, Sept. 12 1800, pg. 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-09-12/ed-1/>; *Virginia Argus*, Sept. 16 1800, pg. 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-09-16/ed-1/>; *Virginia Argus*, Oct. 3 1800, pg 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-10-03/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>.

Amidst the mass fear of rebellions beginning and the base stories of the rebellion having been simplified down to savagery, many of the newspapers suggested steps to dissuade future resistance as well as restore calm and stability to the slave societies in Virginia. One of the most common and supported ideas circulated following Gabriel's rebellion was to punish those involved so severely that it would dissuade any other enslaved people from attempting resistance. The *Virginia Argus* wrote on September 16, 1800, "'Tis most devoutly to be wished, that these examples may deter all future attempts of this diabolical nature.'" This wish followed a summary of the execution of 10 participants in the rebellion so far and expressed the belief that more would surely soon follow as the trials continued. Other subsequent papers went about advertising and updating the public on the fulfillment of the death sentences over time, seemingly as an assurance to the white Virginians that the matter was being dealt with.⁵² The specifics of these executions will be addressed later in this paper, in the section on the court documents available from these rebellions, but their presentation to the public was clearly an attempt at controlling the public sentiment and information circulating about the rebellions. The newspapers' work to iron out all the details into a homogenous story, as demonstrated above, was combined with the display that the rebellions were over and the readers of the papers could return to a feeling of stability in their lives.

The preventative measures proposed in the press after Gabriel's rebellion did not stop at the legal process, however. After the plot was uncovered and the public became aware of the facts, there was a strong linkage of different political movements with having either caused the rebellion or being pitched as the only way to prevent subsequent incidents. A letter written from nearby Washington stated that "all the people of that city [Richmond] begin to think they were

⁵² *Virginia Argus*, Sept. 12 1800, pg. 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-09-12/ed-1/>; *Virginia Argus*, Sept. 16 1800, pg. 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-09-16/ed-1/>; *Virginia Argus*, Oct. 3 1800, pg 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-10-03/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>.

wrong in their designs against Federalism, and charge their defection to the busy designing Foreigners who have lately come among us.”⁵³ That same letter implicated a man, Henry Callender, of having intentionally incited the rebellion through spreading documents promoting the election of Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson as well as creating chaos in the region.⁵⁴ In the October 3, 1800, edition of the *Virginia Argus*, however, Callender himself replied and worked to disprove any notion of his involvement in inciting the rebellion, during which he stated that “If an idea so monstrous as that of promoting an African conspiracy can have entered into the head of any white man, he must have been a *Federalist* [sic]; for... An insurrection, at the present critical moment, by the negroes of the southern States, would have thrown everything into confusion; and consequently it was to have prevented the choice of electors...”⁵⁵ Such jabs thrown from each side of the nation's political landscape reveal that the path forward from the incident was immediately linked to the upcoming political presidential election of 1800. This rebellion was contextualized as needing a solution, and both Federalists and Democratic-Republican’s felt that they presented the best stabilizing presence for the enslaver class of Virginia.⁵⁶

The endorsement of politicians based on how they would work to prevent any similar events in the future is further displayed through a writer's endorsement of General Pinckney from South Carolina. The praise for Pinckney is based around his supposed strong military leadership and skill at dealing with the chaos and dangers posed to the white community by the rebellion.⁵⁷

People in the newspapers sought to control the information on the causes of the rebellion, and

⁵³ *Gazette of the United States, & Daily Advertiser*, Sept. 24 1800, pg 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84026272/1800-09-24/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.362,0.741,0.649,0.33,0>.

⁵⁴ *ibid*.

⁵⁵ *Virginia Argus*, Oct. 3 1800, pg 2-3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-10-03/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>.

⁵⁶ John Ferling, *Adams Vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800*, (New York City: Oxford University Press, 2004), 129-130.

⁵⁷ *Gazette of the United States, & Daily Advertiser*, Sept. 23 1800, pg 3.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84026272/1800-09-23/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>

thus shape the interests of the voting white population in how to respond to the matter. At the center of all the responses proposed by the Virginians was the goal of preventing any future rebellion plans from ever materializing. And yet, 31 years later, these efforts were proved futile when Nat Turner's rebellion occurred.

Nat Turner's Rebellion in the Newspapers:

When Nat Turner's rebellion began, the white Virginian community reacted very similarly as they had to the conspiracy just over three decades before. The fear created by the Southampton plot was based on the same two base possibilities feared in Richmond: a rippling effect of rebellions and of uncontrolled information flow or organization amongst enslaved communities. In the aftermath of Turner's rebellion, the primary evidence of fear for widespread rebellion emerged from writers for the newspapers trying to silence such sentiments- for them to dedicate so much effort to sweeping away fears, they must have been truly pervasive. On August 27, 1831, the *Phenix Gazette* wrote that "the disturbance has been noised in all possible directions, and statements made, everywhere almost, of different and contradictory natures..."⁵⁸ Though the remainder of the piece was dedicated to dismissing these rampant fears, it makes apparent that the white Virginia population in general had become ablaze with terror and false reports of uprisings. Even in areas that had seen no uprisings or violence from enslaved peoples seeking freedom, the white population was on edge.

Other writers addressed such rampant rumors, stating in the *Gazette* on September 6, 1831, that "we have been astonished... to see the number of false, absurd, and idle rumors circulated by the press... editors seem to have applied themselves to the task of alarming the

⁵⁸ *Phenix gazette*, Aug. 27 1831, pg 2.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-08-27/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.282,0.632,0.975,0.496,0>

public mind as much as possible...⁵⁹ The newspapers reinforced the fact that in the aftermath of the Southampton incident, there was not only mass fear of spreading resistance but also many false reports of such. The white population of Virginia felt the same fear and spread the same worries in the public about the spreading of enslaved communities rising up. Hidden amongst these frantic feelings and false reports is the same worry over the fragility of their slave societies displayed in the aftermath of Gabriel's rebellion. The writers on September 6, 1831, however, presented a new reason to dismiss the false rumors of rippling rebellions: to discourage actual new upwells of organized resistance. They added to their acknowledgment of the fear, "... and of persuading the slaves to entertain a high opinion of their strength and consequence... the exaggerations to which we have alluded, are calculated to give the slaves false conceptions of their numbers and capacity, by exhibiting the terror and confusion of white..."⁶⁰ The newspapers demonstrate that the fears of the spreading rebellions was so serious that the white Virginian population needed to work not to spread rumors so that it would not come to fruition. There was a clear fear that the information being spread in other newspapers, and white society generally, would enter into enslaved peoples' information networks and spread in ways that destabilized the institution of slavery. The solution proposed was an increased control over the information spread in Virginian society generally, and more specifically a limiting of accounts to the consensus approved details.

As the papers created this unified depiction of the rebellion, very similar trends emerged as those that were depicted after the Richmond uprising. The newspapers wrote of savage violence while simultaneously simplifying the aims of the rebellion. The *Phenix Gazette* from September 1, 1831, began describing the motivation for the rebellion by writing, "What their

⁵⁹ *Phenix Gazette*, Sept. 6 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-06/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.037,0.396,0.624,0.317,0>

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

ulterior object was, is unknown. The more intelligent opinion is that they had none, though some of them say it was to get to Norfolk, seize a ship, and go to Africa.”⁶¹ In this short section, the paper promotes the notion that the violence of the enslaved peoples was simple and aimed at destruction rather than obtaining freedom locally. Yet the paper addressed the confessions and information made available by the several enslaved peoples who had, at that point, already accounted their versions of events in the approach to the trials.⁶² It was not only possible but undeniable that the plot was aimed ultimately at the freedom of the involved enslaved peoples’ and their communities.⁶³ Yet the section’s writer doubled down on dismissing this fact, following the previous sentence with “My own impression is, that they acted under the influence of their leader Nat, a preacher and a prophet among them; that even he had no ulterior purpose, but was stimulated exclusively by fanatical revenge.”⁶⁴ Further, in the *Richmond Enquirer* on September 6, 1831, they published a description of the events that lacked any reference to the enslaved peoples seeking freedom. Instead, terms such as “misdemeanor-like desperadoes” were used, and the fate of the enslaved peoples actions was generally depicted as doomed to failure from the beginning.⁶⁵ The enslaving class had a vested interest not only in suppressing such rebellions but also in suppressing any details on their potential for success or knowledge of what happened. The public debate surrounding the uprising worked intentionally to strip away any wider motivation of the plots. By doing so, they followed the same story woven by the white population after Gabriel’s rebellion— acknowledging the enslaved peoples were destroying

⁶¹ *Phenix Gazette*, Sept. 1 1831, pg 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-01/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.086,-0.031,0.96,0.488,0>.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray* (Lucas & Deaver Print: Baltimore, 1831), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>. Pg 10.

⁶⁴ *Phenix Gazette*, Sept. 6 1831, pg 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-06/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.037,0.396,0.624,0.317,0>

⁶⁵ *Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 6 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1831-09-06/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.085,0.211,0.553,0.281,0>.

things, but quelling the fear of organized resistance through depicting the destruction as that of savagery rather than politically aimed methods.

Other people continued this reduction of the Southampton rebellion, embodying the evils they perceived down into just Nat Turner himself. The *Phenix Gazette*, on September 6, 1831, claimed that Nat Turner was a bloodthirsty leader of the rebellion, and that he himself had been the source of all the deadly killing by promoting such feelings among his followers. Indeed, the paper attributed to a young enslaved boy the story that Turner killed the first white family by himself when the others around him hesitated, and only then did the other enslaved peoples become violent and join him in pursuing blood.⁶⁶ Nat Turner himself, they claim, was acting solely off of the impulse of revenge and violence against the white population without any higher level thinking.⁶⁷ Turner was once again simplified into a violent and corrosive influence in the enslaved communities, while denying to acknowledge any motive more complex than spilling blood. But through describing Turner as the origin for all the violence, the Gazette's writer promoted reduced fear amongst the white population from the larger enslaved communities around them. As the author of that section painted the events, the violence would not have occurred if there had not been such an especially malignant enslaved person like Turner- thus the enslavers need not fear any and all groups of enslaved peoples as capable of such actions. They only needed to prevent another person like Turner from having or spreading influence in the communities of enslaved peoples. Another writer carried this process even further, claiming that Nat Turner and a few other leaders of the rebellion had actually forced the other peoples to participate, based upon the unsupported assumption that the local enslaved communities were

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

too docile to ever engage in organized violent resistance.⁶⁸ Much like the earlier Gabriel incident, the newspaper coverage from the white population sought to create a far more simplified version of the rebellions and those involved in their planning. Doing so was clearly their attempt to control what information was accepted by the communities in order to stabilize their slave society.

The papers following the Southampton rebellion not only echoed the earlier descriptions of events but also had very similar methods of restoring social stability. In the wake of Nat Turner's rebellion, the same presentation of the court processes was repeated as the newspapers worked to disseminate the notion that the rebellions were over and that stability had been restored. The *Phenix Gazette* on September 2nd published an update stating that:

“The principal actors in this tragedy are in custody, and ready to await the judgement of the law, or have already expiated their crime by suffering the highest punishment known to human laws. They have in turn felt the fury of outraged humanity, and will be, it is hoped, long regarded as faithful warnings against any similar act of violence.”⁶⁹

Once again, there were various additional short updates in the time following the incident on the procession of the enslaved peoples' trials and executions.⁷⁰ These communications from the

⁶⁸ *Phenix Gazette*, August 30 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-08-30/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.634,0.392,0.579,0.295,0>

⁶⁹ *Phenix gazette*, Sept 2 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-02/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.014,0.027,0.861,0.438,0>

⁷⁰ *Phenix gazette*, Aug. 27 1831, pg 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-08-27/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.282,0.632,0.975,0.496,0>; *Phenix Gazette*, August 30 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-08-30/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.634,0.392,0.579,0.295,0>; *Phenix Gazette*, August 31 1831, pg. 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-08-31/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>;

Phenix Gazette, Sept. 1 1831, pg 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-01/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.086,-0.031,0.96,0.488,0>; *Phenix gazette*, Sept 2 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-02/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.014,0.027,0.861,0.438,0>; *Phenix gazette*, Sept 3 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-03/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.129,0.768,0.841,0.428,0>; *Phenix Gazette*, Sept. 6 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-06/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.037,0.396,0.624,0.317,0>; *Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 20 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1831-09-02/ed-1/?sp=3&st=image&r=0.009,0.417,0.224,0.114,0>; *Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 6 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1831-09-06/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.085,0.211,0.553,0.281,0>

papers worked to dismiss the fears of the white population that there could be any further immediate spread of the rebellion and thus reduce the worries that this would only become the first in many such instances. They spread information that promoted the restoration of normality amongst their society, trying to control the panic shown earlier to have become rampant across Virginia. In this vein, there was an appeal written by ‘the commanding officer of the 8th brigade’ (unnamed), who asked that the white Virginian population “abstain in future from any acts of violence to any personal property...” and cautioned that “acts of barbarity and cruelty are never looked upon but with horror by any but savages.”⁷¹ In this moment the newspaper attempted to deescalate the white population in the region, which were cited as having committed several atrocities against enslaved peoples and their communities in reaction to the rebellion.⁷² This sentiment was taken even further in the September 6, 1831, issue of the *Phenix Gazette*, which worried that any future revolt among enslaved peoples might lead to such extreme retribution from the white Virginians that the entire population of Black people would be murdered.⁷³ The cessation in the violence against enslaved peoples was driven by the interests of the enslavers and slave society. The calmness of the white population was not called for out of a fear for the lives of the Black Virginians, as exhibited by the normalcy of calling for the extinction of free Black peoples. An article published in the *Richmond Enquirer* of September 13, 1831 requested the legislature to enact taxes on free Black Virginians so high that they would be unable to afford

Richmond Enquirer, Sept. 13 1831, pg. 3.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1831-09-13/ed-1/?sp=3&st=image&r=0.271,0.371,0.323,0.164,0;>

Richmond Enquirer, Sept. 20 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1831-09-20/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.313,0.308,0.92,0.468,0.>

⁷¹ *Phenix Gazette*, Sept 2 1831 pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-02/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.014,0.027,0.861,0.438,0>

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 6 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1831-09-06/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.085,0.211,0.553,0.281,0>

having children, and thus eventually driven out of existence.⁷⁴ It can be drawn from this instance that the genocide of Black Virginians was not something to avoid; However, the extinction of the enslaved class of Virginians was. The call for calmness amongst the white population and the end of reactionary violence was in the interest of the enslavers' property and stability of the agricultural slave society fueled by the labor of enslaved peoples. The shaping of information in the newspapers sought to further the control and stability of Virginia society for the enslaver class.

While the responses to the Southampton rebellion were less connected to national politics than those following Gabriel's rebellion, the same trends towards calling for increased control over enslaved peoples were echoed in the newspaper publications. The rebellion was very quickly spun into an example for how enslavers should treat the enslaved populations living on their plantations, specifically with a balance of leniency and control. One method for bolstering the control of society by the enslaving class floated at the time was a decrease in leniency from enslavers to the enslaved peoples and populations.⁷⁵ The record of this proposal left in the archives, however, is based on a critic publicly calling for a more nuanced approach to the treatment of enslaved peoples. In the *Phenix Gazette* on September 3, 1831, a letter to the editor called for enslavers in Virginia to allow enslaved peoples to learn how to read as well as provide them with religious materials and the cutting edge of eugenic scientific publications. These facts, it was reasoned, would make the enslaved populations more docile and aware of the futility of resistance from a supposedly inferior race towards their superiors.⁷⁶ These suggestions reflected the popular notion of paternalism then circulating slave societies, attributed by historians as a

⁷⁴ *Richmond Enquirer*, Sept. 13 1831, pg. 3.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1831-09-13/ed-1/?sp=3&st=image&r=0.271,0.371,0.323,0.164,0>

⁷⁵ *Phenix gazette*, Sept 3 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-03/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.129,0.768,0.841,0.428,0>

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

method for reassuring the enslavers of their dual-statuses as Christians and enslavers.⁷⁷ While the more usual argument for paternalism was the increase in productivity of enslaved peoples, in reaction to Nat Turner's rebellion it was argued that a balance of kindness and control over enslaved peoples would prevent future community uprisings. In this way, instead of a limit on information networks or what entered enslaved communities, it was instead proposed that enslavers directly interfere and insert information in their interests into said networks. Yet still, in the reactions to organized resistance the control of information by whites in Virginia was directly connected to the stability of slavery.

The overlap between the reactions to the incidents in Richmond and Southampton are crucial in understanding the efforts of the white class to control the information available in their communities, as well as the information available to enslaved peoples. First, some of the enslaving class felt after both incidents that these actions could not have been the will or desire of a majority of the local enslaved peoples in their respective areas. Instead, they depicted either a malevolent force that corrupted otherwise benign enslaved communities or a group that actively forced the participation of others in their plot.⁷⁸ Some of these later writings worked, with a somewhat desperate energy, to dispel any of the prior rumors about wide reaching conspiracies and a rippling uprising. The writers claimed that if those prior rumors continued to circulate or go unopposed then it might create greater unrest and confidence among the enslaved populations around them.⁷⁹ These commonalities contribute to the understanding that while the rebellions may have been unusual in Virginia, the reactions of white society emerged out of established and enduring characteristics of the enslavers' society.

⁷⁷ Erskine Clarke, *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2005), 250-251; Camp, 18.

⁷⁸ *Phenix Gazette*, August 30 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-08-30/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.634,0.392,0.579,0.295,0>

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

Despite this, the newspaper's reactions to the two events should not be simplified down to identity. One significant difference between the newspaper records of the two events is that there was a much larger amount of confusion and misinformation in the wake of Nat Turner's acts. In articles published from August 27 to 31, 1831, there were key facts disagreed upon or missing from general accounts. This can be likely be attributed to the fact that the incident in Southampton actually began before any of the white population learned about it, whereas the prior plot in Richmond was uncovered before it had the chance to begin. Thus, there would likely be a much higher degree of chaos and a lower initial level of information on what the plot and motives of the enslaved peoples were. Simultaneously, the confused immediate reaction of this population reveals what they feared most— a mass rebellion of enslaved peoples and a rippling effect across the state or the entire country.⁸⁰ At the heart of this fear is the capability of enslaved peoples to spread ideas and details of events in ways that their enslavers were unable to control. It would have been impossible for the uprising to spread further than what had initially started without the spread of information. While this could have taken the form of the rebelling enslaved peoples themselves, the fear of uninvolved enslaved people would have been more difficult to suppress and thus cast a far more ominous shadow.

The newspapers after both rebellions reveal the importance of information in Virginia at the time, and especially how significant the control of it was for enslavers. Following Gabriel's conspiracy and Nat Turner's rebellion, the white population demonstrated immense fear, and the newspapers worked to diminish this fear. This was done through beginning the work of creating a consensus version of events, as well as promoting stabilizing adaptations to their society, and repressing the access to or control of information in enslaved communities. As was mentioned

⁸⁰ *Phenix gazette*, Aug. 27 1831, pg 2.
<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-08-27/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=0.282,0.632,0.975,0.496,0>.

previously the papers after both rebellions leaned heavily on the notion that the criminal system should, and was, dealing with the official and further steps in these efforts regarding information. While the newspapers were the more accessible sources of information, published by private enterprises for as broad of an audience as would purchase them, the criminal system was a more official venue for the handling of these concerns. This thesis will thus now shift to study the documents left behind by the criminal justice system after both of these rebellions.

Chapter 2: Court Records and Enslaver's Records

As was repeatedly called for amongst the newspaper responses to Gabriel's and Nat Turner's rebellions, the criminal justice system wound up dealing with the matters. Whereas the newspapers attempted to establish unified opinions regarding the uprising and called for certain responses, as shown previously they also heavily deferred towards the criminal justice system regarding the official responses to the rebellions. Many enslaved peoples were put through criminal trials after the two rebellions, during which both white Virginians and other enslaved peoples testified against them regarding their respective involvement in the rebellions. The records—including the court records, petitions to the governors, letters between enslavers, and the general assemblies' laws—left in the wake of these trials reveal that the criminal justice system was central to the maintenance of the slave society in Virginia, through creating and spreading a “verified” version of events as well as working to limit or shape the information enslaved peoples were able to disseminate from their own perspectives. As seen through the testimonies by and defenses of enslaved peoples in these court hearings, the information put into the court records was aimed at creating a simple narrative regarding the rebellions rather than providing detail or listening to enslaved peoples. This chapter calls into question the legitimacy of the cases in both regions following both rebellions, as the lack of true and fair justice demonstrates how crafting a narrative around the rebellions was a central purpose of those bodies and trials. These interferences of the criminal justice system into the public histories of the rebellions were not only deliberate but also operating how the criminal justice system was seemingly built to function in Virginia.

In accessing and using the court records produced by enslavers during the legal systems reaction to the rebellions, this chapter explores how the court system interacted with the public

story of the rebellions and the history telling among the enslaved communities. In accessing these archives, transcripts already produced by the Library of Virginia or the Nat Turner Project have been utilized when available, as a form of double-checking my own reading of the handwritten documents. Such transcriptions were carefully checked against the original document scans before being used in this chapter and so served as an indirect form of peer-checking my own understanding. In understanding these court records, I have found them to have been heavily “distorted” towards promoting the interests of the enslaver class. I have based this understanding of distortion, as will be discussed in this chapter, on the short and non-direct summary of the testimony presented at trials as well as the lack of any true defense for any of the enslaved peoples. My use of the term distorted implies that they were not aimed at accurately reflecting the facts or events but were instead aimed at furthering the simple story the courts were certifying. In the case of both of these sets of trials, but especially those following Gabriel’s plot, there are not sufficient or direct enough sources from the enslaved peoples themselves to ever perfectly understand what was actually said by the enslaved witnesses at these trials. Instead of summarizing what was recorded, this chapter seeks to ask why and how the courts went about impacting the narratives, through the details that seem to stick out as unusual. However, the court’s efforts at denying the archive or our current day understanding the real events and information of what happened. Speculation regarding the “true” events at the trials, or what was actually said by any of the witnesses, ought to be very carefully drawn so as to avoid projecting our own opinions onto the past. As previously mentioned, I have worked diligently to practice narrative restraint as I imagined what might have occurred in the trials but went unrecorded. It is never my intention to present these pieces of speculation as undisputable nor as having repaired

the repression of the subject enslaved peoples. Instead, I have speculated carefully to enable a more complete and narratively “full” account of the events based on the evidence in the records.

Additionally, the narratives or autobiographies of several enslaved peoples who lived in Virginia have been used in this chapter, to help imagine the information not available in the court records. These narratives are principally used to demonstrate common trends or aspects of enslaved people’s lives and communities in Virginia and have been used carefully to avoid unsupported overreaching. These life stories were selected from the UNC Documenting the American South collection of enslaved people’s narratives, and only those life stories connected to Virginia have been considered for comparison to the events in the courtrooms of Richmond or Southampton. The narratives in the UNC collection were read with an attention for references to enslaved peoples controlling information about themselves or their community, the information networks in their community, or instances where they encountered enslavers repressing enslaved peoples control over information or the enslavers’ own influence over information. Further, the narratives which did make reference to these aspects of information were then further analyzed for the similarities between the lives of the subject enslaved person and those living in Richmond or Southampton, which determined whether they were suitable to support the work of critical fabulation in this section. This chapter specifically uses these narratives to suggest an alternative interpretation of the motivations for execution of enslaved peoples involved in rebellion, and this is solely intended to be an informed suggestion. Given the use of speculation built through combining the lived experiences of several Virginians from across the state, this proposed motivation seems well supported, but without documentation directly from either rebellion spelling out this motivation it should remain as a suggested motivation amongst others.

The Richmond Courts

The criminal justice system's reaction to Gabriel's rebellion was rapid, based on the plot having been exposed before it could truly begin as initially intended. By the evening of September 1, 1800, 6 involved enslaved peoples were already imprisoned, and the plot had been foiled by the immense number of improvised and official armed white troops patrolling the area.⁸¹ Very soon after, the trials for these enslaved peoples, and thus the efforts of the criminal justice system to control the publicly accepted story, began. First, the enslaved peoples who helped in the process of creating the court verified version of events were frequently granted amnesty or leniency in their sentences. This is apparent before the fact, in the case of Pharaoh or Ben from Gabriel's conspiracy who were promised continued life if they provided information about the wider plot in the time when the criminal system was desperately trying to understand its geographic and numerical scope.⁸² In a hearing on September 11, 1800, the enslaved man named Solomon was charged and the evidence against him was presented to the court. While four enslaved peoples spoke at this trial, the majority of the information presented was done by Ben, who was enslaved by Thomas Prosser. The court record does not include any of the questions posed or a description of any other circumstances surrounding the trial, nor does it even capture the direct words of witnesses. Instead, the information regarding the rebellion is stated like so: "That the prisoner [Ben] at the Bar made a number of swords for the purpose of carrying into Exctn the plan of an Insurrection which was planned by Gabriel..."⁸³ The words of these enslaved peoples describing the rebellion were filtered through the minds of the court record keepers— to what exact degree may never be known in each specific instance.

⁸¹ Egerton, 75; 77-78.

⁸² An Act to purchase Pharaoh and Tom, January 14 1801. Found in: Samuel Shepherd, ed., *The Statutes at Large of Virginia, From October Session 1792, to December Session 1806, Inclusive, in Three Volumes, (New Series,) Being a Continuation of Hening* (Richmond, Virginia: Samuel Shepherd, 1835), 2:273.

⁸³ Evidence Adduced Against Solomon, The Property of Thomas Henry Prosser in his Trial on the 11th of September, 1800 pg 1. in *Death or Liberty Documents: Gabriel's Conspiracy*, Library of Virginia

The result of this distortion is undeniable however: the court records contain a clear and simple depiction of how the rebellion took shape, which enslaved peoples were involved, and to what extent those peoples were culpable. It seems highly likely, then, that the existence of this document was intended to generate a public and approved version of the rebellion's history. No other venue in the society would have had as unobstructed access to the various enslaved peoples accounts nor a status as official as the courts in producing their version of events in these records. Those who witnessed the trials live, or those who read the records/reports based on the records later, would have consumed a distorted and influenced version of events that sought to shape their understanding of their society and its history. Thus, histories based on the records must carefully work to understand and dig through the distorting effect of the enslavers' courts and attempt to understand the information being conveyed by the enslaved peoples as well as possible. Those that instead accept the court records at face value, or those that uncritically accept histories which have done so, only serve to continue this process of distortion begun in 1800. Based on the extreme simplicity demonstrated in the court records, it is my belief that the records should be read as solely the version of events which the criminal justice system desired to propagate. This approach was strongly influenced by Walter Johnson's argument around enslaver's letters and written records having been intentional performances of their desired version of themselves.⁸⁴ There is, surviving today, insufficient evidence or records to concretely prove exactly what each and every person involved did— and so I have not sought to do so in this thesis. The criminal justice system served to spread a specific version of events regarding the rebellions, in simplified and (seemingly) undeniable formats.

This version of events was put to work against other enslaved peoples involved in the rebellion, as their trials demonstrated a shocking lack of transcribed testimony or evidence

⁸⁴ Johnson, 13.

presented. On September 15, 1800, the trials for four enslaved peoples took place (Jupiter, Sam, Daniel, and Isham), and on September 16, 1800, three more trials occurred (Ned, Isaac, and Laddis). Each of the trials involved further testimony from Ben, but his words at those trials were restricted simply to the involvement of the specific enslaved person then at trial.⁸⁵ For example, in the trial of Ned, Ben's entire testimony was "That the prisoner was one of the Conspirators- That he was a Soldier under Ben Woolfolk he contributed six pence for the purpose of purchasing liquor to be treated with by Ben Woolfolk in order to enlist men to fight the white people."⁸⁶ It was just one sentence that was deemed sufficient to convict Ned in what the court seemed to consider his own separate trial.⁸⁷ Similarly in the trial of Isaac, the only information presented was the testimony of Ben, of which the records include the following:

"That the prisoner came to the Shop, and asked Solomon, if he had Cut the Scythe Blades to fight with, and at what time it would be that the Insurrection would commence, that if it was not soon he would go off, as he was determined not to serve a White man another year- Solomon asked the prisoner if had a Scythe Blade; who replied he had not, and that Solomon must find one for him, which he promised to do, and Solomon shewed the prisoner the handles which he had for the swords."⁸⁸

Perhaps the only reason for the increased length in Ben's testimony from this trial was the inclusion of the dialogue amongst Solomon and Isaac. In both of these 'trials' there were no depictions of wider events surrounding the rebellion, nor was there any other testimony besides that of Ben. It becomes clear from the brevity of these later trials that they were not truly independent events or even true trials meant to determine facts; they were intended just to put to pen the names of the enslaved peoples being executed and what the criminal justice system said

⁸⁵ Commonwealth against Sundry Negroes September 15 1800, Death or Liberty Documents: Gabriel's Conspiracy, Library of Virginia.

⁸⁶ Ibid, Ned's trial.

⁸⁷ This conclusion is based upon the document having a new section for Ned's trial on the page, and labelling it "The Trial of Ned." Presumably, if this was in fact the same trial with Co-defendants, then the court document would not isolate each enslaved person and give them the label of their own trial.

⁸⁸ Commonwealth against Sundry negroes, Trial of Isaac.

they had done. Truly, in these trials the criminal justice system can be seen as crafting a narrative the public could easily adopt and understand, since they had clearly laid out what each enslaved person did and left no room for doubt.

The only exception to the brevity of the later trials was that of Gabriel, where the entirety of the story told in the earlier testimonies are reproduced.⁸⁹ Given the delay in the capture and trial of Gabriel compared to every other enslaved person involved in the rebellion, this court document is seemingly the final and official version of the rebellion. And this court crafted version of events furthered the fear of the spread of information amongst enslaved peoples and enslaved communities, as it was written that:

“Gabriel said he had nearly 10,000 Men- He had 1000 in Richmond, about 600 in Caroline and nearly 500 at the Coal pits, besides others at different places... That the prisoner had enlisted nearly all the Negroes in town as he said, and amongst them had 400 Horsemen... Gabriel said all the negroes from Petersburg were to join him after he had commenced the Insurrection.”⁹⁰

The court had reinforced and repeated the concern that mass rebellion amongst the entire region had become a possibility because Gabriel had been able to spread the idea and details of rebellion amongst the enslaved peoples around Richmond. This was further proved by the little snippets of testimony scattered across the other trials— as Isaac had been able to communicate with Solomon to plan the rebellion, and Ned had been able to organize meetings for the same such purpose. While the newspapers had implied and feared the inherent aspect of communication involved in rebellions, the criminal court records in this process certified such a fear. This was no longer the wild, rampant theorizing of a scared public but instead the cold and precise shaping of information published by a court system. The courts, through crafting and

⁸⁹ Commonwealth v. Gabriel &at. Oct 6th 1800, No. 11, in Governor's Office, Letters Received, James Monroe, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

promoting this version of events publicly, directed the criminal system to further crack down on the ability of enslaved peoples to spread information across plantation boundaries.

The version of events painted by those enslaved peoples who were turned state's-witnesses also stuck quite closely to the version of events already begun by the newspapers regarding the methods of the plot, making it clear that the court was functioning as the verifier of the already existing story. The testimonies of Ben and Daniel were littered with terms such as "murder," and "kill indiscriminately," as well as ideas like putting to death anyone they encountered unless they joined in the fight.⁹¹ Indeed, it was not until the trial of Gabriel himself that the records even include any reference to the hopes of liberation through this fight.⁹² I believe this to have been the result of the clash between the effort to present the simplified goal of barbarity and the undeniable truth of Gabriel's involvement in the plot named after him. The courts, in the trials of those less involved in the conspiracy like Solomon, were able to simply describe the act as brute violence that aimed at killing. Demonstrating that the enslaved people at trial planned to participate in killing whites was sufficient to execute them and fit within the court's simple narrative of barbarity. Yet in the trial of Gabriel, it was undeniable that he had been involved in a plot seeking the freedom of enslaved peoples in his community, and so it is mentioned by Ben's testimony at trial.⁹³ But the testimony still included references to nearly indiscriminate slaughter, and maiming even those whites who did support emancipation.⁹⁴ This could be interpreted as the court forcing an asterisk onto the official narrative of Gabriel's efforts, so that even those who heard that he fought for freedom would visualize unnecessary

⁹¹ Evidence Adduced Against Solomon, The Property of Thomas Henry Prosser in his Trial on the 11th of September, 1800 pg 1. in *Death or Liberty Documents: Gabriel's Conspiracy*, Library of Virginia.

⁹² *Ibid*; Commonwealth against Sundry Negroes September 15 1800, *Death or Liberty Documents: Gabriel's Conspiracy*, Library of Virginia; Commonwealth v. Gabriel &at. Oct 6th 1800, No. 11, in *Governor's Office, Letters Received*, James Monroe, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia

⁹³ *Ibid*.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*.

savagery as opposed to an organized conflict. Given that each enslaved person was not given an in-depth account of their fight for freedom in their trials, it seems apparent that the courts sought to suppress that notion as much as possible. Simultaneously, the court testimony included references to extreme violence whenever possible. In these ways, the courts seemed to not have been an independent institution finding facts, but instead the rubber stamp on the narratives which had already circulated in the newspapers.

The final detail apparent in the court records after Gabriel's rebellion that makes apparent the trial's role in crafting a public narrative is the lack of any apparent defense. The trials occurring before Gabriel's, in the court documents, make absolutely no reference to there having been a defense attorney assigned to them or any witnesses called in their defense.⁹⁵ There was not a single sentence recorded in any of the court documents, other than the enslaved people's own pleas of not guilty, that suggests anything other than their absolute guilt and the truthfulness of the testimonies given.⁹⁶ The absolute lack of even a performative defense for these enslaved peoples once again demonstrated that the courts were not acting as true fact finding bodies. The magistrates present in the courtroom for the trials of those enslaved peoples were never seriously attempting to consider or weigh whether they had actually violated the law or to what extent they were involved with the plot, nor did they attempt to cloak themselves with even a veil of that authenticity. However, this lack of interest in weighing facts clashes with the fact that there are *court records* from trials that, however blatantly unfair, did *occur*. As discussed above, the thought that the trial records were produced in order to maintain the appearance of legitimacy is called into question given the lack of any defense. And so the information contained with the

⁹⁵ Evidence Adduced Against Solomon, The Property of Thomas Henry Prosser in his Trial on the 11th of September, 1800 pg 1. in *Death or Liberty Documents: Gabriel's Conspiracy*, Library of Virginia.; *Commonwealth against Sundry Negroes September 15 1800*, *Death or Liberty Documents: Gabriel's Conspiracy*, Library of Virginia; *Commonwealth v. Gabriel &at. Oct 6th 1800, No. 11*, in *Governor's Office, Letters Received, James Monroe, Record Group 3*, Library of Virginia

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

court records must have served the community in some other way- which was the formation of a singular, state endorsed version of events through the criminal justice system. With the adoption of the court's version of the Rebellion's history, the criminal justice system looked to shape the society moving forward. The control over information and history in the societies were crucial in this process.

One such change demonstrated the court's system perspective on the necessity of controlling information. A law passed on January 21st, 1801, "An Act to amend the act intituled, 'An act to reduce into one the several acts concerning slaves, free negroes and mulattoes'" that was one of several direct responses of the criminal system to the rebellion. The most important of the novel changes introduced into the act was the explicit permission for enslaved peoples to testify in trials against other enslaved peoples or free Black people or peoples of mixed race.⁹⁷ The previous confusion on this topic had to be cleared away in the cases relating to Gabriel's rebellion, since the enslaved peoples involved were the only source of information available to the shaping of the conspiracy. The law passed in 1801 was retroactively clarifying that what the courts in Richmond had already permitted was truly the new status quo, since before the law there had been disagreement across the state on the issue.⁹⁸ That the law was updated afterwards shows not only that the issue was unclear at the moment, but that the courts had found the testimony of the enslaved peoples in this particular case so valuable that they needed to remove any potential barriers from the use of such testimony in future cases. Through making it easier on the courts to shape the testimony on crimes or resistance, the criminal system deepened its control over the wider history and information circulating amongst the Virginia public.

⁹⁷ An Act to amend the act intituled, 'an act to reduce into one the several acts concerning slaves, free negroes and mulattoes'" January 21, 1801 General Assembly of Virginia. Found in: Shepherd, 2:300-301.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

The criminal system did not stop at control over information, however. Based upon the ideas of unfettered information flow in enslaved communities leading to the rebellion, as displayed in their version of events, the state moved to add increased powers to the criminal legal system in response. The principal effort of that aim was to increase the armaments available to the local county militias across the country and their usage, which began in “An act to arm the militia of certain towns.”⁹⁹ The society had received a fresh reminder of the danger posed by organization in enslaved populations, and so wanted to be able to organize more deadly and rapid responses to any future uprisings. And these state arms were also intended to be utilized more regularly in the suppression of enslaved peoples through the slave patrols. Lower level local magistrates were given the authority to send out slave patrols and even to “appoint an officer of patrol, who shall have the same powers, and receive the same pay, as the patrol appointed by the commanding officer of the battalion.”¹⁰⁰ These two acts, providing for more weapons across the state for militias and making it far more easy for any magistrate to begin patrols whenever they felt it necessary, were both passed on January 16, 1801. It thus seems highly likely that the general assembly, when writing and passing these two bills, did so with an understanding and goal of this combined impact. Through increasing the potential numbers of patrols across the state, the ability of enslaved peoples to communicate across plantation communities would likely be severely limited. Historian Stephanie Camp has identified slave patrols as a means for enslavers to regulate the movement of enslaved peoples across plantation boundaries, above the heads of any individual enslaver.¹⁰¹ They worked to balance out the potential leniency of individual enslavers, such as William Young, who reportedly routinely allowed gatherings on his

⁹⁹ An Act to arm the militia of certain towns, January 21 1801. Found in Shepherd, 280.

¹⁰⁰ An Act concerning patrols, January 16 1801. Found in Shepherd, 2:275.

¹⁰¹ Camp, 25.

plantation for funerals.¹⁰² These gatherings were generally perceived as such a threat to the continued existence of the slave society that they required organized patrols to prevent their occurrence.¹⁰³ Camp structured her understanding of these measures' necessity around the control over enslaved peoples mobility, and I seek to build upon this notion through focusing specifically on the inherent element in enslavers' efforts to stop gatherings was a fear of information transfer between enslaved communities on different plantations. Without knowledge of where and when a gathering would take place, there could be no more attendees than those living on the same plantation as the initial organizer. And at such gatherings, the state was extremely concerned by the potential spread of information pertaining to resistance. The court records told a version of the Richmond rebellion in which illicit gatherings and information spreading had been the central cause linking all of the enslaved peoples to the act of resistance. Their response of seeking to prevent such gatherings and communication becomes clearer, then, as an effort to control the enslaved peoples and uphold the slave society more broadly through control over information.

The work of the criminal justice system in crafting the stories of the rebellion did not end with the trials themselves but stretched to attempt controlling the history telling in the enslaved communities. Indeed, the acts of killing enslaved people after their trials were further steps in the process of controlling the information available or spreading in the enslaved communities. Many enslaved peoples were sentenced to death as a result of their involvement, which ought to be seen as a forceful intrusion into the communal histories of the families and friends of those killed by the state. Initially the execution of those involved in the rebellion may appear typical, as we read from our modern perspective of a criminal justice system all too comfortable with applying

¹⁰² *Virginia Argus*, Oct. 3 1800, pg 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-10-03/ed-1/?sp=1&st=image>.

¹⁰³ Camp, 27.

the death penalty. However, the execution of enslaved peoples was likely seen as quite distinctive to the enslavers running the court system, for their society was built to enforce the idea of enslaved peoples as property.¹⁰⁴ From this lens, the execution of enslaved peoples would have been a deliberate and wasteful act of destroying monetary value. The life of Anthony Burns depicted that even enslaved peoples who were sufficiently marked with the “taint of freedom” that they could not even speak to other enslaved peoples in the jail were still eligible to be sold.¹⁰⁵ And various Virginia enslaved peoples have described someone being sold to the deep South as having been like the death of the individual sold, grieving them and generally never expecting to see them again.¹⁰⁶ The mechanisms of history telling available to the communities of enslaved peoples on plantations were quite limited, and oral history passed on through close friends or family was crucial. Anthony Burns described the efforts of burying family or community members occurring with any sticks or rough stones that they could locate to mark their locations.¹⁰⁷ There was no other method available to remember where someone was buried, and so they used whatever they could. But through using materials like a stick or stone, the necessity of oral history networks becomes apparent. Only the story of who exactly was buried in a specific spot, and who they had been, could overcome the plain materials marking their resting place. The importance of oral history is further demonstrated in a statement from George Henry’s autobiography. Henry was born in Virginia in 1819, and was eventually able to escape

¹⁰⁴ Philip J. Shwarz, *Twice Condemned: Slaves and the Criminal Laws of Virginia, 1705-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 13-14.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Emery Stevens, *Anthony Burns: A History* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856) <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/stevens/stevens.html>, 196; James Lindsay Smith, *Autobiography of James L. Smith: Including, Also, Reminiscences of Slave Life, Recollections of the War, Education of Freedmen, Causes of the Exoduc, etc* (Norwich: Press of the Bulletin Company, 1881), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/smithj/smithj.html>. 6-7 & 15; Bethaney veney, *The Narrative of Bethaney Veney: A Slave Woman* (Worcester: Press of Geo. H. Ellis) <https://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/veney/veney.html>, 25.

¹⁰⁶ Veney, 25.; “Many Friends,” *Biography of London Ferrill: Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Colored Person, Lexington KY* (Lexington: A. W. Elder Printer, 1854) <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/ferrill/ferrill.html>, 1; Henry Parker, *Autobiography of Henry Parker*, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/parkerh/parkerh.html>, 1..

¹⁰⁷ Charles emery stevens, 166-167.

enslavement through fleeing the boat he was forced to labor upon.¹⁰⁸ Henry wrote of his early life that, since his parents died when he was relatively young, he had no connection to the history of the community he was born into.¹⁰⁹ These individuals, from their narratives, depict a system of history-telling that was dependent upon oral community traditions and community knowledge. It was also one that heavily utilized the personal connections between those telling stories and those receiving them. The selling of someone to the deep South from a Virginia Plantation would have seemingly been sufficient to totally break their connections and remove their ability to spread ‘bad influence’ in their communities.¹¹⁰

The society sought to prevent these instances from ever happening again, as expressed by a section in the *Virginia Argus*, which wrote after the execution of enslaved peoples involved that “Tis most devoutly to be wished that these examples may deter all future attempts of this diabolical nature.”¹¹¹ And yet with an understanding that the enslaved peoples sold away were mourned as though they had died, this goal of deterrence through execution seems incomplete. It seems highly probable that the choice of the courts in reaction to Gabriel’s rebellion to execute those involved was deeper than simply removing someone who they perceived as a negative influence on the enslaved communities. The act of public execution in these cases seem to have been a deliberate choice to shape the information or stories available about the involved enslaved peoples; After watching them die, the enslaved communities would have to speak of them with a known permanent end and without the unknown hope of life continued unseen. Through doing so, the criminal justice system would have forced upon the enslaved communities’ histories an end to the life stories of those involved in the rebellion. In such an act, the notion of organized

¹⁰⁸ George Henry, *Life of George Henry: Together with a Brief a History of the Colored People in America* (Providence: H, I Gould & Co. Printers) <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/henryg/henryg.html>, 44-45.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Montalvo citation, 104.

¹¹¹ *Virginia Argus*, Sept. 16 1800, pg. 3. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024710/1800-09-16/ed-1/>.

rebellion or resistance to the slave society was linked with their public deaths in a way that would force an undeniable end to the enslaved person's life. Their communities would have to balance the certainty of their performative killing as they continued any oral remembrance of those peoples. Such an intrusion into the history telling of the enslaved communities was seemingly deliberate and was enabled by the control over information in society as well as the enslaved peoples lives more broadly that the courts sought.

The Virginian system of slavery and the criminal justice system were deeply intertwined, however, and the execution of enslaved peoples in order to control information was not totally superior to the enslavers' interest in maintaining their wealth. The selling of an enslaved person to the deep-South would have netted at least some reimbursement for these enslavers, and there would have thus been economic forces promoting them to sell away those whom they perceived as negative influences. Indeed, Historian Walter Johnson demonstrated in *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* that processes to mitigate the resistance of certain enslaved peoples existed in order to still ensure sale and profit.¹¹² Such economic pressures might have otherwise prompted the enslavers to fight against the execution of enslaved peoples or to otherwise be uncooperative. But so strong was the criminal system's interest in shaping the enslaved communities' histories that it worked to counteract the economic pressures that promoted sale over execution. In the Virginia laws at the time, it was normal practice for the enslaver and Judge to negotiate whether an enslaved person who broke a law should be sold outside of the community or executed, but the ultimate decisions lay at the "discretion of the Judge."¹¹³ The courts made available funds to reimburse the enslavers the estimated value of the

¹¹² Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 47.

¹¹³ James M. Matthew, *Digest of the Laws of Virginia of a Criminal Nature: Illustrated by Judicial Decisions* (Richmond: West & Johnston Publishers, 1861), 77.

enslaved peoples whom it executed. The archives contain records of public claims by enslavers after Gabriel's conspiracy made to the Court of Oyer and Terminer which sentenced the enslaved peoples involved to death, requesting the pay-outs of these reimbursements.¹¹⁴ Through making these payments available, the criminal courts are arguably providing social welfare to the communities, as they felt it in the best interest of maintaining the slave society to actively interfere in the economic pressures affecting the enslavers in order to shape the history-telling of enslaved peoples in their communities.

Such a service was not unusual or unheard of in Virginia, as evidenced by the fact that funds were prepared and intended for just this purpose by the courts. In a letter from William M. Berkeley to Governor James Monroe, Berkeley wrote that "The sum estimated by the Honorable Legislature as sufficient to discharge the claims for slaves executed being entirely exhausted, and as those claims are and will be greatly increased by the late serious insurrection..."¹¹⁵ Berkeley made clear at this moment that the legislature had an amount of funds it had previously prepared for the courts to disburse before Gabriel's rebellion had even occurred. The only unusual circumstance recognized in the letter is the unforeseen need to reimburse so many more times in that fiscal year due to the many enslaved peoples soon to be executed. It is apparent then that the criminal system was not just responding to Gabriel's rebellion specifically when it entered into the business of shaping the history telling of enslaved communities, but that it was designed to,

¹¹⁴ Prosser, Thomas : Public Claim, 1800-09-20 (7430162_0018_0003_0001-0006). Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va; Prosser, Thomas H. : Public Claim, 1800-10-20 (7430162_0018_0011). Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va; Prosser, Thomas H. ; Wilkinson, Nathaniel : Public Claim, 1800-09-24 (7430162_0018_0008). Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.; Burton, William : Public Claim, 1800-09-20 (7430162_0018_0004_0001-0005). Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.; Goode, Thomas : Public Claim, 1800-02-06 (7430162_0018_0016_0001-0003). Virginia Untold: The African American Narrative Digital Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Va.

¹¹⁵ William M. Berkeley to Governor James Monroe, 1800, in Governor's Office, Letters Received, James Monroe, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia.

budgeted to, and regularly functioned in this role. The criminal courts even spent time estimating the value of each enslaved person that was sentenced to death, further demonstrating that these reimbursements were a regular and routine public service the criminal system was providing to maintain the slave society in Virginia.¹¹⁶ This valuation took into consideration the transgression that the enslaved person had been executed for, clarifying the role of the criminal courts as being a public service rather than some form of corruption towards powerful enslavers in society.¹¹⁷ The court was not blindly assisting the finances of the elite plantation owners and enslavers in society, but instead the system was truly seeking to simply take the place of a sale in the ledgers of the enslavers. Reimbursing the enslavers was a key step in the criminal justice system working to shape the information and communication in the enslaved communities.

The Southampton Courts

The criminal cases following Nat Turner's rebellion were equally concerned with spreading a state crafted and sanctioned version of events in the rebellion, and they followed similar trends in the reaction by the criminal system. The court records read nearly identically in structure to those following Gabriel's rebellion, with the only changes being the names of the parties involved and the specific facts of the event. Otherwise, the patterns in the court documents held true. Once again, the actual testimony of the witnesses, whether enslaved or free, are only presented through summary that had clearly been passed through the mental filter of the court record keeper. The testimony of the enslaved man Hubbard, from the case against the

¹¹⁶ Valuation of Slaves Sentenced to Death, n.d. [ca. 1800] in Governor's Office, Letters Received, James Monroe, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia; Proceedings of a Court of Oyer and Terminer in Henrico County, 6 October 1800 in Governor's Office, Letters Received, James Monroe, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia

¹¹⁷ Caitlin Rosenthal, *Accounting for Slavery: Masters and Management*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 3.

enslaved man Davy, serves to encapsulate how the entirety of the information is summarized in the cases:

“Hubbard a slave being sworn and charged, as a witness for the Commonwealth, says that he is the property of the late Mrs. Caty Whitehead, that a company of insurgent negroes came to his Mistresses and murdered her and family—that the prisoner Davy was in company with them the witness is positive that the prisoner was there because he had known him well for several years & spoke to him.”¹¹⁸

It seems highly dubious to the modern reader that Hubbard would have so freely identified himself as simply the property of his enslaver Caty Whitehead without that being specifically prompted to him, nor that the information provided would have flowed in such a manner without any questioning.¹¹⁹ One can almost hear the moments when questions were asked that redirected the testimony, and the information recorded in the court’s records is almost certainly a blend of the questions asked and the answers provided. The exact words Hubbard said on that day have unfortunately been excluded from the record, but such was the design of the courts in response to the insurrection. They did not work to promote a story with any doubt or one that would have been difficult to follow, nor did they care to record the exact information included from each of the witnesses. Instead, the courts were going about crafting a common and simplified version of the rebellion into which each enslaved person convicted neatly fit. The testimony of each of the witnesses, then, was reduced and distorted in the records to the point where it fit entirely into the wider narrative that the courts sought to weave regarding the rebellions.

Not all of the testimonies were considered equally by the Magistrates when forming their version of the rebellion’s history, however. The differences in the perception of testimony from enslaved peoples and white people can be seen in the weight which their words were given at

¹¹⁸ Court Minute Book, Southampton county, p. 80.

https://www.brantleyassociation.com/southampton_project/gallery/min_bk_1830-35/index.html.

¹¹⁹ The exclusion of the title “Mrs.” in my own words is a deliberate choice, as I do not see an enslaver being worthy of any honorific. It has been preserved in the sample of the original material only to maintain the authenticity of the direct quotation.

trial. The exact weight given to the words of witnesses of either race is hard to ascertain precisely, given the lack of clear information in the records, but it can be surmised from the trial of Curtis, a man enslaved by Everitt Bryant. In this trial, John C. Turner testified that he encountered Curtis walking in the opposite direction of his home plantation on the morning of August 23, 1831. According to Turner, Curtis was drunk and told Turner that he had been given alcohol by the members of the rebellion. Additionally, Turner testified that Curtis said, “[T]he leader of the insurgents told him to go to Newsoms and Allens quarter to get other negroes to join them and that he was on the way for that purpose.”¹²⁰ It is important to note in this testimony that Curtis had been involved in the rebellion for a majority of the night, consumed enough alcohol to be perceivably drunk to Turner. Additionally, these are his words filtered through both Turner’s mind and then again through the court’s record keeper. Immediately after Turner’s testimony, the court heard the testimony of the enslaved man Scipio, who said that “he was at home when the insurgents came up—they took Curtis with them and he did not appear to go willingly—that Curtis the prisoner could not have escaped because the insurgents surrounded him.”¹²¹ The information provided by Scipio would have cast Curtis as an unwilling participant in the rebellion, seemingly forced along with threats of violence.

Unwilling or coerced participation was an established reason to escape punishment, as seen after Gabriel’s rebellion when an enslaved man named Scipio (enslaved by Paul Thilman) was pardoned by Governor Monroe because the writers of the petition stated that “the Condemned Slave is a Young lad not above 18 or 19 years of Age, he appears to be a very ignorant Lad and lived on the same plantation with Mr. Thilmans man Thornton who it appears

¹²⁰ Court Minute Book, Southampton county, p. 77-78.

https://www.brantleyassociation.com/southampton_project/gallery/min_bk_1830-35/index.html.

¹²¹ Ibid.

enlisted the said Scipio & who no doubt drew him into the Conspiracy.”¹²² In this instance, it was not even alleged that Scipio was an unwilling participant, only that he had been misled by Thornton into participation. Yet in the case of Curtis, where there was an eyewitness who stated that Curtis was forced into participating in the rebellion, such precedent would strongly suggest that the courts recommend for his sentence to be commuted, as has been shown to occur routinely in the trials. However, the information provided by Turner was inarguably given more weight than that presented by Scipio, and Curtis was sentenced to death without recommendation for the sentence to be commuted.¹²³ Clearly, in crafting the state version of the events, the courts weighted the information from white people more than they did the enslaved peoples who testified. This is an important consideration to remember, given the prevalence of the enslaved peoples’ testimony in these trials. Their information was seemingly only fully trusted so long as it was helpful in constructing the court’s narrative and if it did not clash with the statements of a white person. Once again the court’s primary interest in promoting the continuance of the slave society is made apparent, when they seemingly prioritized a simple and white-approved narrative as opposed to actually judging facts.

The story of an enslaved person found not guilty would not have fit neatly into this process. In the case of Tom, a man enslaved by the same Caty Whitehead, he was found not guilty of any involvement in the rebellion attempt. The entirety of the trial “records” amount to the following:

“Tom late the property of Caty Whithead named in the said information was then set to the bar in custody of the Jailor of this Court and being arraigned of the premises pleaded not guilty to the information and James S. French Esq. Attorney at Law is by the Court appointed to defend the prisoner. And thereupon the Court after hearing the testimony are

¹²² John Hoomes et al. to Governor James Monroe, n.d., in Governor's Office, Letters Received, James Monroe, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia.

¹²³ Court Minute Book, Southampton county, p. 77-78.

https://www.brantleyassociation.com/southampton_project/gallery/min_bk_1830-35/index.html.

of opinion and doth accordingly order that the said Tom be discharged from further prosecution for this said supposed offence.”

The testimony which the court records claim to have heard, expressed in the statement “after hearing the testimony,” was excluded from the court records, possibly because it was deemed irrelevant.¹²⁴ Tom was judged to not have been involved in the rebellion, and afterwards the court as a body decided that it did not need to write down or publicize the information presented regarding his story. There appears to be a strong link between these two facts, when compared to the existence of testimony in cases where enslaved peoples were found guilty. The exact same brevity and lack of records happened in the trial against Arnold Artes, a free Black man, where the court says that “sundry witnesses were sworn and examined and the prisoner by his counsel by the Court fully heard.”¹²⁵ And yet, none of this information was recorded or left in the historical records. In these moments it becomes blatantly obvious that a primary purpose the court records served was to create a highly simplified version of events that could be spread and accepted throughout the society. This version sought first and foremost to depict the Southampton rebellion as the acts of savage enslaved peoples who were a malignant presence in their communities. Such malignant influences were then met with either execution or sale out of the state, but either way they were punished in ways severe enough that their communities would likely have mourned them. Information not directly fitting this purpose was omitted from the records so as not to clutter up the story being publicly supported. Testimony proving that some enslaved peoples were not involved would have distracted from this version of events, by possibly creating doubt that others might have not actually been involved either. Instead, the

¹²⁴ I believe that the “testimony” referenced to have been heard by the court could not just be the not guilty plea, as other enslaved peoples in these cases pleaded not guilty as well. If there was truly no other information presented to the court in Tom’s defense, the difference in outcomes from two different not guilty pleas would be extremely nonsensical. It thus seems very probable that there was information presented to the court beyond Tom’s plea.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 93.

court records denied any of this information from being recorded, and instead simply recorded that these people were not involved. Through doing so, they demonstrated a lack of interest in anything but spreading a simple story of violence and then punishment.

The trials following Nat Turner's rebellion and their results display that control over information in Virginian society was a central goal of the criminal justice system. The trial evidence and testimony was either significantly simplified or entirely omitted from the court records, in an effort to shape a clear and undeniable version of events. This version of the rebellion's history prioritized the notions of barbaric violence amongst those involved and the return to social stability through spreading a seemingly official and complete list of who was involved and who was not. This effort was furthered through the criminal justice system identifying and spreading in society which enslaved peoples were the alleged corrupting forces amongst the enslaved communities, which once again allowed for enslavers to feel safe and that their society was stable once those influences were removed. In all these efforts, it has been evident that the criminal justice system was prioritizing presenting clear and simple accounts of the information through their status of official documents. Once again in the Southampton courts, control over information was a central goal of the enslavers in their response to the organized resistance of enslaved peoples.

The Court Appointed Defense of Southampton Defendants

In a notable difference between the trials following Gabriel's rebellion, the trials after the Southampton uprising did attempt to appear more legitimate, through the enslaved peoples having some manner of "defense." This pretense of a defense for the enslaved peoples manifested in the shape of a defense lawyer being appointed for a majority of the enslaved

peoples. For the 54 enslaved peoples who faced trial from August 31, to November 21, 1831, only four of the records do not reflect the presence of a defense attorney appointed for them.¹²⁶ Indeed, the only class of people who stood trial and were all seemingly denied any representation were the four free Black men.¹²⁷ It is entirely possible that these peoples, both the free Black men and the four enslaved peoples, actually did have a court appointed defense attorney and it was simply not included in the record. Regardless, a majority of those put to trial after the Southampton rebellion were seemingly given some form of representation. How effective was the legal defense provided by the court appointed lawyers for the enslaved peoples? The records are often so sparse as to make it difficult to completely grasp the strength of the defense, but there are some details to suggest that it meant little to nothing. To assess the effectiveness of the legal defense appointed to the enslaved peoples, I categorized the trials based upon whether an active defense occurred (witnesses were called) or not status and the outcome of those cases. From there, I compared the outcomes across the two groups, and I discovered that there was not any apparent significant difference between the verdicts and sentences given to the enslaved peoples across the two groups. Through this fact, it becomes further apparent that the courts trying enslaved peoples were not intended to be legitimate triers of facts based on the structure and conditions of the trials that occurred. Instead, it becomes clear that a primary objective of the court and court officials was to control information in Virginia.

There were 17 cases involving 19 enslaved people in which witnesses were called on behalf of the enslaved peoples to testify, in a majority of those instances stating that the enslaved person had been forced or coerced into participating in the rebellion.¹²⁸ And yet in these trials there were only 6 enslaved people to have a commuted sentence and escape execution, all of

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 109; 113; 120.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 93; 105; 122; 108.

¹²⁸ Ibid, p. 72-74; 79-81; 85; 87; 105.

whom wound up getting sold out of the state.¹²⁹ The other 13 were killed by the state, as there was not a single instance of a trial in which a witness testified on behalf of an enslaved person which resulted in a not guilty verdict. The 6 who had their sentences commuted had initially been sentenced to death, but the magistrates recommended the Governor commute the sentence. It is important to remember when understanding the results of these trials that an enslaved person being sold out of the state was still totally removed from their friends, families, and communities, quite likely forever. And so while their lives continued, it was still an immensely traumatic fate for the courts to administer. The legal defense of the enslaved peoples resulting in that outcome is likely an assessment of the enslaved person having somehow been less involved or less culpable for the planning of the rebellion- based on such statements making up the majority of the lawyers 'defense strategies from their called witnesses. Such enslaved peoples were seemingly deemed less responsible for the rebellion, and so intrusion into the enslaved person's history to instill a definite end was not as necessary given their lower involvement in planning the rebellion.

On the opposite side of the 'legal strategies' employed by the assigned defense attorneys, there were 30 cases involving 31 enslaved peoples in which no witnesses at all were called on behalf of the defendant. Of these cases 12 enslaved peoples were executed, 7 had commuted sentences and were sold out of the state, and 12 were discharged entirely from the courts.¹³⁰ Over half of the enslaved peoples in the cases without witnesses, then, were found guilty and faced extreme punishment. When comparing the outcomes of cases without witness testimony compared to the outcomes of cases where witnesses were called, the overall efficacy of the defense provided to the enslaved peoples seems dubious regardless of whether witnesses were

¹²⁹ Ibid, 72-74; 79-81; 85; 92-95.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 72-129.

called on behalf of the enslaved person or not. This is further strengthened when the fact that four people put to trial for involvement in the rebellions who seemingly did not have legal representation, at least no representation that was included in the records, were all discharged at the end of their trials.¹³¹ When all of this information is combined together, it seems that the court provided defense for the enslaved peoples in the trials following the Southampton rebellion was not a substantial benefit for the enslaved peoples in their outcomes. While the trials following Nat Turner's rebellion may initially appear to have had a higher level of protection for the enslaved peoples facing the courts based upon the assignment of defense attorneys, this does not appear to have been true. The attorneys who called witnesses do not appear to have been significantly more effective in securing not guilty verdicts or commuted sentences than the attorneys who called no witnesses. Thus, whether these trials had any increased legitimacy as true fact finding bodies then those trials following Gabriel's rebellion seems doubtful. However, as discussed previously, regardless of whether the verdicts they reached were the genuine truth or not the court records similarly laid out simple and useful versions of events regarding the rebellions. The trials following the Southampton rebellion clearly seems then to have been an effort at creating and spreading a version of events that favored the maintenance of slavery in Virginia.

Unlike the records from after Gabriel's rebellion, there are no direct records of public claims issued for reimbursement from the enslavers of those executed by the state. However, there are details which support the notion that it may have continued to occur. First, the estimated evaluation of enslaved peoples was universally the final piece of information included in the court records of someone found guilty.¹³² Beyond this, there is also some proof of enslavers

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 93; 109; 117.

¹³² Ibid, 72-129.

seeking to be compensated for enslaved peoples killed during the process of the rebellion being quelled.¹³³ While these enslavers did not ask the state for reimbursements for those killed directly by the court system, that only strengthens the notion that reimbursement for executed enslaved peoples was also a likely option. If those killed randomly or even occasionally by roving bands of angry white Virginians were eligible to be compensated, it seems that those directly killed by the state would likely have been eligible as well. Finally, it seems likely that such an avenue would have remained open since Gabriel's rebellion just 31 years earlier given the lack of any records discussing or mandating its cessation.¹³⁴

Similar to after Gabriel's rebellion, after Nat Turner's uprising the Virginian criminal system worked off of the verified version of events produced by the trials to drive changes which promoted the continuation of the slave society. Indeed, some of the suggestions followed the same paths of those three decades earlier. A law passed in Fauquier county implemented a system of significantly increased patrols across the area, citing the need as the "the large and frequent meetings of the slaves in this neighborhood and other parts of the county (some of them for purposes unknown to us)..." and the "increasing boldness and insolence of the negroes generally of late."¹³⁵ The influence of the courts narrative in the motivations behind the passing of this law is apparent- the uncontrolled movement and gathering of enslaved peoples, and the spreading of information unknown or uncontrolled by their enslavers was inherently dangerous to society. And so they implemented increased readiness amongst their community, with more

¹³³ Petition of Peter Edwards, November 21 1831; Petition fo Levi Waller, December 12 1831; Petition of Richard Porter, December 12 1831; Petition of Piety Reese, December 29 1831; Petition of Elizabeth Turner Estate, December 29, 1831; Petition of Thomas Fitzhugh Estate, December 29 1831, in Library of Virginia, Southampton County Court Papers, Reel 184, Box 234), Accessed online via <https://www.natturnerproject.org/claims-and-petitions>.

¹³⁴ I have looked into it, and I cannot find any documents of enslavers seeking reimbursement. But, I also see no one saying it had ended. And the courts gave an estimation of the value of the enslaved peoples, which suggests that it would have still been an option.

¹³⁵ *Richmond Enquirer*, Oct. 7 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn84024735/1831-10-07/ed-1/?sp=2&r=0.281,0.715,0.242,0.136,0>.

patrols and members of those patrols having muskets always ready to meet any possible gathering or illicit information exchange with deadly force.

Governor John Floyd felt similarly on the threat of enslaved gatherings or the possibility of information spreading, as he discussed his particular fear over religious meetings in a letter to James Hamilton, governor of South Carolina. Floyd felt that enslaved congregations were the locations for preparing enslaved peoples for rebellion and for cultivating leadership amongst themselves.¹³⁶ Floyd then set out his proposed reaction to be carried out through the criminal legal system:

“To confine the Slaves to the estates of their masters – prohibit negroes from preaching – absolutely to drive from this State all free negroes – and to substitute the surplus revenue in our Treasury annually for slaves, to work for a time upon our Rail Road etc etc and these sent out of the country, preparatory, or rather as the first step to emancipation”

This reaction further demonstrated the ways in which the criminal laws were tightened following identification of the threats to society in the court records, as Floyd must have read a great many of the court records, given the recommendations for commutation. In fact, Floyd ended his letter with a depiction of events that did not include a single detail not included in the testimonies in the court records.¹³⁷ There was also the desire to control the movement or locations of the enslaved peoples, and the desire to increase the state’s role in controlling the slave institution by seemingly renting them out to construct railroads. Such increased control by the state also followed the fear over different enslavers allowing different levels of leniency in the rules on gatherings, which would then pose a danger to any and all enslavers across the area.

The recommendations for laws by Governor Floyd were heard and headed by the General assembly, which on March 15th 1832 passed a law which asserted that all Black people, free or enslaved, were prevented from preaching in any fashion and empowering that “any person

¹³⁶ John Floyd to James Hamilton, November 19, 1831, https://www.loc.gov/item/mss37283_01/.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

desiring so to do, shall have authority, without any previous written precept or otherwise, to apprehend any such offender...”¹³⁸ Not only were the regulations on the spread of information by Black people and enslaved peoples in particular enforced, but any white member of society was given approval to become an arm of the criminal justice system to break up meetings. Further, enslaved people had to get express written permission from their enslaver any time that they would wish to attend the preaching of a white minister at night.¹³⁹ Once again a balancing act can be seen, between the desire to control the information able to spread in the enslaved communities and the interests in paternalistic enslavement which called for the religious instruction of enslaved people.¹⁴⁰ But the state came down on the side of greatly restricting the ease with which enslaved people could be given any instruction or information, even if by approved white ministers. Such was the effect of the court’s narrative identifying the spread of information and the meetings of enslaved people as the main cause of the rebellion.

The law also made illegal the possession of any firearms by any free Black person, and for any Black person (free or enslaved) to sell alcohol within a mile of religious gatherings.¹⁴¹ These measures once again reflected the events in the court records, which routinely described participants gathering to plan the rebellion at “preaching events” and getting drunk while there. Such a limit on alcohol in specific may connect back to the acknowledgement of those enslaved peoples who were coerced or manipulated into participating, though it is also possible that a general dread of decreased fear and forethought was discouraged among any of the enslaved peoples. One of the strongest and most interesting inclusions of the law was the ban on any information or printed material being spread amongst the enslaved communities that could be

¹³⁸ An act to amend an act entitled “An act reducing into one the several acts concerning slaves, free negroes and mulattoes, and for other purposes” March 25, 1832: Accessed in *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, Virginia: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 20–22.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Clarke, 250.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

perceived as “advising persons of colour within this state to make insurrection, or to rebel...”¹⁴²

This ban could likely have implicated any written materials being spread amongst enslaved peoples, so massive was the fear of information and communication going uncontrolled between Black peoples or enslaved communities in Virginia.

Across both the Richmond and Southampton court records following the respective incidents, this chapter has demonstrated an effort by the criminal justice system to shape the information entering Virginian society. This was done through the creation of a seemingly official version of events through trials which did not truly seek to determine facts but instead to create a verified and simple to follow story. The testimonies of witnesses were heavily distorted and reduced into barebone details and the trials of those found not guilty were left out from the records entirely. The trials also were not independent events able to stand alone, as most provided testimony only sufficient to detail the specific involvement of any particular enslaved person. And the court records also seemed to prefer an account of events that emphasized the violence and savagery of the rebellions. This simple version of events induced in Virginian society reactions against the communication networks and control over information implicated in the records. These reactions included executions and sales out of state, limits on attendance of events, limits on publishable materials, and increased armed patrols amongst the enslaved communities.

These efforts by the criminal justice system, and the reactions to further suppress the enslaved peoples, reveal just how significant the control of information was in Virginia. The criminal justice system created a version of events so significant that it drove changes in the laws and society. That these versions of events were so similar 31 years apart in Virginia speaks to the elements of the stories that were most important to the enslavers who sought to restabilize a

¹⁴² Ibid.

fearful society. The simplicity of the stories likely contributed to the easy understanding and adoption of the criminal justice system's narrative regarding the rebellions. The appeal to barbarity and simple violence, as well as the identification of corrupting influences, strongly speaks to the need for information control regarding the perception of enslaved peoples in Virginia. The criminal justice system sought to spread the notion to the wider white public that such rebellions were not indicative of higher minded organized fights for liberation but instead manageable instances of socially accepted racial differences. And finally, the stories around the rebellions both identified communication and information networks amongst the enslaved communities. This could be attributed to fear of organization as well as the acknowledgment of tension over the control of information in their society, and both would further the notion that the officials in the criminal justice recognized their institutions as significant in stabilizing society through controlling information. The results of the references to the enslaved peoples' information networks in the court narrative was clear: The enslaved peoples' information networks had been implicated in the creation of the rebellions, and so were targeted.

Chapter 3: Enslaved Peoples Narratives

Despite what the Virginian newspapers and criminal laws sought to enforce upon their society, enslaved peoples were able to acquire and spread information between themselves over communication networks. The communities involved in the Richmond and Southampton rebellion were no exception, and the involvement of this information in the history of those events is crucial. The coordination of resistance necessitated networks of information flow, and such acquisition and movement of ideas occurred because of the dedicated efforts of creating and maintaining these connections. However, these pathways for information were not only pivotal for resistance, but also for the life and survival of the individual enslaved person as well as their communities. The previous chapters have dissected how the wider white population of Virginia as well as the criminal justice system sought to control the information surrounding enslaved peoples and their ability to spread it themselves. And though the agency of enslaved peoples has been prioritized in the understanding of the previous sets of archives, this chapter dedicates its entirety to their perspective in order to further the information available on how the attempts of the enslavers impacted enslaved communities' control over information and their influence on its spread.¹⁴³ These communities created and maintained networks of information that learning heavily prioritized biographical information of other enslaved peoples, information about their enslavers and Virginian white society as a whole,

To provide for a more in-depth analysis of these enslaved communities' ability to control information, the autobiographical narratives or biographies of other enslaved peoples from Virginia were consulted in order to help conjecture in the areas left blank by the archival documents from the rebellions. These 'external' life stories were selected carefully, from

¹⁴³ Johnson, 8. Johnson used the notion of Agency as the ability to impart information in the archives today, and called for studying every perspective and source of such agency. I use the term agency in this context to convey the ability of enslaved peoples to impart information into the historical records or spread it between communities.

amongst all the narratives of enslaved peoples from Virginia available in the UNC Documenting the American South collection. Life histories in which an enslaved person was born and or was enslaved in Virginia for part of their life were read and analyzed. The narratives selected were those that helped broaden our understanding of how enslaved peoples worked to spread information and how the enslavers' criminal justice system worked to exert control over or disrupt their information networks. During the reading of these stories, I constantly checked and thought of how unique or unusual any of these person's stories might have been. Additionally, I remained alert for any signs that the events (especially in the non-autobiographical materials) may have been edited in the interest of pleasing an audience, especially northern ones in the early 19th century. Finally, I asked myself what they told about information in Virginia while their subjects were enslaved and how those time periods might have been different from the times of the two incidents. In working to use these narratives to create a more complete image of the communities involved in the respective rebellions, care has been taken to not exaggerate the implications of similarities. They are not used, at any point, to create a point out of nothing but instead are meant solely to support a likely version of events as well as demonstrate how the events and conditions displayed in the Richmond and Southampton enslaved communities were not exceptions but instead the norm.

The confessions of enslaved peoples in the trials begin to reveal the ways in which information was able to enter into the enslaved communities around Richmond in 1800, which principally involved close observation of their enslavers and white society in general. In the planning of a rebellion, Gabriel and the other enslaved people involved utilized various types of information. While there were numerous pieces of information collected and involved in the planning of the rebellion, one piece shared by Solomon (Gabriel's brother) provides particular

insight into the processes at play. Solomon stated in his confession that Gabriel believed a rebellion more likely to succeed than at any earlier moment because “the discharge of the number of soldiers, one or two months ago, which induced Gabriel to believe the plan would be more easily executed.”¹⁴⁴ This understanding very likely came through listening and watching their enslavers— as the other option, that being some member of white society directly telling an enslaved person that the number of troops in Richmond was lower and a rebellion was more likely to succeed, seems nigh on fantastical. Solomon also mentioned another instance in which information can be observed entering the enslaved communities via listening to their enslavers, when Gabriel told Solomon that he was afraid their planned rebellion may become less likely to succeed based on a supposed rebellion going on elsewhere in the South.¹⁴⁵ Once again, it seems dubious that the enslavers would have voluntarily told any enslaved person of other ongoing or previous resistance in the South given the general fear that such knowledge would lead to increased resistance amongst the listening enslaved person.¹⁴⁶ It seems highly likely then that this too was a piece of information gleaned by an enslaved person from the enslaver class without the former knowing or willing for such a spread of knowledge to occur.

It is, unfortunately, impossible to say whether these pieces of information were directly learned by Gabriel himself, or if they were first obtained by another enslaved person and later communicated to him. Regardless, however, there is an observed start of information from enslavers, and the flow towards other enslaved people. The beginnings of information in the Richmond community of enslaved people is crucial to understand how information was shared and where, all of which combined constituted the information networks of the enslaved peoples.

¹⁴⁴ Confession of Solomon, in *H.W. Flournoy, ed., Calender of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts from January 1, 1799, to December 31, 1807*. Available online at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h494t.html>.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁶ *Phenix Gazette*, Sept. 6 1831, pg. 2.

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/sn85025006/1831-09-06/ed-1/?sp=2&st=image&r=-0.037,0.396,0.624,0.317,0>

A complete understanding of these processes then illuminates the impact of information networks on the rebellion and the enslaver's efforts to control the flow of information.

The beginning of information amongst enslavers and then its later flow into the information networks of the enslaved peoples, observed in the beginning of Gabriel's rebellion, is reflected within the narratives of other enslaved peoples, such as that of William Grimes. Grimes was a man born enslaved in Virginia in the 1780's, but experienced slavery in several southern states before finally escaping to Connecticut where he lived free.¹⁴⁷ Grimes wrote of an instance in which another enslaved girl told him what she overheard, after Grimes' enslaver heard him speaking with hatred about his condition of being enslaved. Grimes wrote:

“My master went into the house and went up stairs, when he told my mistress what he had heard. Whilst he was telling her, one of the servant girls happened to overhear him. She came directly and informed Jack and myself of it, saying our master was quite angry with us for it.”¹⁴⁸

It was clearly a very significant task to report the information one had gleaned that might help another enslaved person or enable resistance in some way. While William's story does not itself display the sharing of knowledge fueling resistance, it goes to further an understanding of how information was important to enslaved communities and the importance of its relatively efficient movement. The information that enslaved girl gave to William helped him prepare and seek to escape the punishment their enslaver sought to inflict on him.¹⁴⁹ William's story describes information not only enabling survival and life for enslaved peoples, but also simultaneously demonstrates the processes which may have facilitated resistance. Considering the information obtained by those involved in Gabriel's rebellion and the story of William Grimes, it seems

¹⁴⁷ William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave: Written by Himself*, (New York, 1825) <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/grimes25/grimes25.html>, iii.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 49.

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*.

apparent that there was a continual process amongst enslaved communities of listening and observing their enslavers, and disseminating that information out to those whom it concerned.

Another clear area of interest in the knowledge transported along enslaved communities' information networks were the various backgrounds, experiences, and conditions of the other enslaved peoples nearby. In the previously mentioned testimony of Solomon, he described how Gabriel told him of an enslaved man who was at the siege of Yorktown 19 years earlier and thus had some level of military experience.¹⁵⁰ Further evidence of this awareness of people in their community can be observed from the testimony of Ben at Gabriel's trial. Ben stated that Gabriel had told him that, among the enslaved people he expected to participate in the rebellion, "he had 400 horsemen."¹⁵¹ In this moment it becomes even clearer that Gabriel had knowledge of these people's access to and knowledge of how to ride a horse in their fight for freedom- the access to horses was a position of notable interest to be spread in the information networks of the enslaved peoples.¹⁵² It is not known when or how Gabriel acquired this information, but it seems very likely that it would have travelled along some pathway before arriving to him, given that he and his co-conspirators were speaking to large numbers of enslaved peoples across various plantations in the area. The enslaved communities not only were interested but also able to spread such information amongst themselves, demonstrating agency over pieces of information in Virginian society and the histories of members of their communities. Their control over information clearly enabled them to organize resistance and seek out their liberty through the ability to consider and plan around the abilities of different peoples.

¹⁵⁰ Confession of Solomon, in *H.W. Flournoy, ed., Calender of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts from January 1, 1799, to December 31, 1807*. Available online at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h494t.html>.

¹⁵¹ Commonwealth v. Gabriel &at. Oct 6th 1800, No. 11, in Governor's Office, Letters Received, James Monroe, Record Group 3, Library of Virginia.

¹⁵² Sidbury, 65.

Once again, this occurrence leading up to Gabriel's rebellion can be reinforced with an instance found in the published narrative of William Walker. Walker was an enslaved man born in Southampton, Virginia in 1819 or 1820, who was eventually sold first to an enslaver in Louisiana, and then once again to a man in Missouri, before he finally escaped to freedom.¹⁵³ In his life's history, Walker described a moment during which he was held in jail with 23 other enslaved peoples after being caught in Mississippi while attempting to flee from Louisiana to freedom. While confined, Walker spoke with another enslaved man who told Walker his life story up to that point:

“He had escaped from a planter in the northwestern part of Louisiana by the name of Robert Johnson, and was captured while crossing the Mississippi river at Lake Providence and was jailed at that place. His master had seen the advertisement and had come after him. I had frequently heard him say that he would never be carried back alive; and surely he was justified in his declaration, for from the crown of his head to the sole of his feet it would have been impossible to have found a square inch that was not gashed with the lash, and his clothing was glued to his flesh with the exudation from running sores.”¹⁵⁴

Despite these events not having taken place in specifically a Virginia penal facility, they have been included as they would likely have been representative of any other penal facility holding more than one enslaved person. Through having obtained and remembered so much information about this fellow imprisoned man, Walker clearly demonstrated the ways in which biographical information about those around them was significant simply for its existence. Walker did not directly utilize this information for resistance, or seemingly for any other purpose besides something to listen to. Information regarding the life of another enslaved person, when passed onto him, was important enough to remember clearly 50 years after the fact when he was

¹⁵³ William Walker, ed. Thomas S. Gaines, *Buried Alive (Behind Prison Walls): For a Quarter of a Century. Life of William Walker*, (Saginaw: Friedman & Hynan Publishers, 1892), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/gaines/gaines.html>, 9; 14; 57.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, page 26.

writing.¹⁵⁵ The information was significant to him for having been the story of someone else, information to hold onto regarding a person he may never see again.

This reality was clearly apparent then and was later amongst William Walker's thinking as he constructed his own life story. He opened his narrative with a description of why his memories of his own life and those important to him were so significant, since he experienced being sold away from his parents in Virginia at the age of 20. He wrote of this experience that "[y]ou can rob man of his love, friendship, honor; you can deprive him of his liberty, justice; rob him of the light of the sun; rob him of the gentle zephyrs that kiss the wildest flowers and sway the forest oaks; but you cannot rob him of his parental memory."¹⁵⁶ Walker made clear in this moment the reasons why maintaining the memories and histories of those around oneself was important for enslaved communities, since the threat of forced separation perpetually loomed over them. Such a notion is reinforced in the earlier mentioned history of George Henry, who had no memories of his parents since they passed away early in his life. Because of this, he relied upon the other enslaved people in his plantation community to tell him stories of his parents, which he then recounts to the audience.¹⁵⁷ It seems apparent, then, that the work of learning and holding onto life histories of those around them was a necessity for enslaved communities based on the potential for people to suddenly leave the close proximity of those important to them. This work was an exercise in preserving culture and community histories, in which social survival amidst the institution of slavery had to be prioritized.¹⁵⁸ Enslaved peoples and communities had many reasons to care about the information available around them, and just as many reasons to try and collect or control the spread of information. Walker's story reinforces the importance of

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 24.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 10.

¹⁵⁷ George Henry, 5-6.

¹⁵⁸ Vincent Brown, Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery, *The American Historical Review*, Volume 114, Issue 5, December 2009, Pages 1231–1249, 1244; 1246.

information about other enslaved peoples to their communities, and that such information was collected and mentally held onto when available. The planning that went into Gabriel's rebellion, then, did not seem to involve the generation of any new pathways for information, but seems to have occurred through the preexisting networks in their community that served to preserve and maintain the knowledge of individual identities and the communities' culture. And much of the information Gabriel seemed to have utilized might have already been circulating amongst enslaved peoples, simply as the stories and experiences of others around them.

As opposed to any of the enslaved peoples after Gabriel's rebellion, Nat Turner produced orally (transcribed by Thomas R. Gray) a confession which went about telling his life story as well as his time running from the law. Historian Christopher Tomlins has convincingly argued that the first section of this confession was heavily Turner's own words and experiences, while the description of the rebellion itself was likely mostly created by Gray.¹⁵⁹ While I agree with Tomlin's argument about the first section, I feel that he does not address the clear necessity for the end of the confession regarding Turner's time evading capture to also have been almost entirely from Turner himself. Up until the moment of his discovery, there was not a white member of society aware of Turner's location and thus no one capable of detailing those events besides Turner himself. It is possible that these events were first told to someone else and then to Gray, rather than Gray fully learning about the events from Turner at the time of the "confession." Either way, however, this information must have originated with Turner himself, and so I argue for Tomlin's bifurcation to be adjusted to acknowledge at least increased authorship of Turner in the section after the Turner's fleeing from the rebellion to his capture.

¹⁵⁹ Tomlin, 44.

Amongst Turner's story of his life before the rebellion were constant references to the importance of sources of information and information networks amongst his community. Turner made the decision to begin his history with the following story:

“Being at play with other children, when three or four years old, I was telling them something, which my mother overhearing, said it had happened before I was I born--I stuck to my story, however, and related somethings which went, in her opinion, to confirm it--others being called on were greatly astonished, knowing that these things had happened, and caused them to say in my hearing, I surely would be a prophet, as the Lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth. And my father and mother strengthened me in this my first impression, saying in my presence, I was intended for some great purpose, which they had always thought from certain marks on my head and breast.”¹⁶⁰

In this moment, Turner made clear that the possession and display of information which he should not have been aware of was so remarkable that it demonstrated to his parents and his community that he was a divine prophet. Whether one believes in the truth of these spiritual occurrences, it is undeniable that this moment was incredibly important for those present, as well as Turner himself who reported constantly thinking of it as the start of his insurrection in the time when he was imprisoned.¹⁶¹ Such a moment represented a new source of information in their community, one that the enslaved people who witnessed it seemingly felt there was no other explanation for. This association with himself and higher intelligence persisted throughout Turner's telling of his history, as demonstrated when he explained that other enslaved children brought him into their plots of theft so that he could construct plans for them.¹⁶² In this moment, it can be observed that Turner garnered greater trust amongst other enslaved peoples in his community for his reputation of divinity and heightened intelligence. I argue that Turner gained

¹⁶⁰ *The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray* (Lucas & Deaver Print: Baltimore, 1831), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>, 7.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 8.

increased status for having opened up a new source of information that could flow into the networks of his community.

The work of Turner's community through telling and maintaining the knowledge of his moment of prophetic revelation also created a lasting impact on Turner himself in his own mind. As Turner told it, he remembered once having heard a sermon that involved the phrase "Seek ye the kingdom of Heaven and all things shall be added unto you," and then he later heard this same phrase spoken to him by an unembodied voice while he prayed.¹⁶³ This idea eventually combined with the story told about him as a source for divine information and evolved in Turner's mind, until he eventually felt that he had been specifically destined to end the institution of slavery.¹⁶⁴ And once again, Turner reflected that he had increased trust amongst his community due to his "communion of the Spirit," and he used this trust to prepare them for the upcoming conflict by saying that "something was about to happen that would terminate in fulfilling the great promise that had been made to [him]."¹⁶⁵ Turner's confession repeatedly made it blatantly obvious that his personal status was heightened because of his link to divine information sources, and that status enabled him to more easily spread information, from himself, amongst his community.

This trust and ability to spread information was later put to work with the planning and inaction of his rebellion. When Turner felt compelled to begin the planning of the rebellion, he first went to just four others (Henry, Hark, Nelson, and Sam), and the five of them eventually convened a gathering with an unknown number of attendees to fully plan and establish their plot.¹⁶⁶ While Turner did not address it specifically, it seems highly likely that his preexisting status of heightened trust and ability to spread information played a factor into the ease with

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 8; 11.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 9.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 11-12.

which this meeting was called together and occurred. Turner's previous statement that he began the work of preparing those who listened to him for such an act of rebellion comes to mind, but it also seems likely that an increased amount of information and specificity would have to be shared for organizing the meeting. Turner did not discuss any efforts made to contact those invited to the meetings in ways unfamiliar to him, which seems to support that he was operating along existing information networks. The ability to contact those across plantation boundaries and communicate plans was not novel enough to have entered the archives through Turner at this point. It becomes apparent once again that the information networks amongst enslaved populations in Virginia were always there and constantly maintained rather than created for the organization of resistance. Turner simply utilized information pathways which already existed to arrange a meeting.

As the rebellion moved forward from its beginning, there was clearly further communication of Nat Turner's history or an understanding of who was involved in the rebellion as the event carried on. This can be seen in the testimony of the enslaved peoples at the trials after the rebellion, as many of them seem to have previously known those involved in the rebellion when they saw them. Venus identified Andrew and Jack when they approached her enslaver's home, and knew them well enough to openly and calmly discuss where the white family was and where the other enslaved peoples from nearby were.¹⁶⁷ Beyond this, Turner seems to have known the enslaved peoples involved in the rebellion well enough, even as it expanded throughout the region, to know who was "the best armed and most to be relied on," so that they could be placed in the front of the procession.¹⁶⁸ The specific qualities or experiences

¹⁶⁷ Court Minute Book, Southampton county,.

https://www.brantleyassociation.com/southampton_project/gallery/min_bk_1830-35/index.html, 72-74.

¹⁶⁸ *The Confessions of Nat Turner, The Leader of the Late Insurrection in Southampton, Va. As Fully and Voluntarily Made to Thomas R. Gray* (Lucas & Deaver Print: Baltimore, 1831), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/turner/turner.html>, 14.

that Turner was thinking of when deciding who was and was not reliable for this purpose are unknown, but it seems very likely he was working off of his previous knowledge of these people to make the determination. And so just as was seen before in Gabriel's rebellion and the other narratives of enslaved peoples, Turner too seemed to rely upon the various histories and details about enslaved peoples around his community throughout the rebellion. The existence of pathways for information and personal histories of enslaved peoples to flow in the region were thus just as pivotal to the Southampton region as it was in the Richmond rebellion. The Southampton plot, however, brings into light the importance of both trust and reputation as having been linked to these personal histories and experiences spread throughout the communities. This makes it apparent, especially when linked with the impact of Nat Turner's reputation, that the information being passed along the community pathways was not only deep and substantial, but it was also actively utilized in constructing relationships.

Thankfully in Nat Turner's confession, there are far more details available about the end and collapse of the rebellion than is available from Gabriel's conspiracy. From amongst those details, it becomes clear that Turner still highly valued continuing his effort at the beginning of the confession in crafting his own personal life story. During the time between the collapse of the fight and Turner's discovery, it seems that Nat Turner kept track of his experiences, and it appears that he did so for recounting it later. The end of his rebellion was significant enough to him that he went into detail in its account, with specific descriptions of the time periods he spent and in what condition. Turner described his decision to hide as him having "gave up all hope for the present."¹⁶⁹ He specifically did not state that he had given up all hope in general, or even just all hope for his rebellion, but instead just for that time. Turner was defining that moment of his rebellion, even after witnessing the general collapse of organization and effectiveness of the

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 17.

enslaved peoples fighting for freedom, more akin to a setback or pause than an end. And whilst he was hiding, he kept track of the days and what he did during them- possibly with the intention of telling the story to others later. When he was given that chance in the confession being referenced, he did not display having had any regret or reflection on his rebellion in the time of his hiding. One might assume that, whilst hiding for over 7 weeks, his mind might have wandered to the failure of his fight for freedom, and doubt or sadness might have hung about his thoughts. And yet he made no reference to such ideas or times, and he instead detailed his attempts to gather information from the plantations around his hiding spot.¹⁷⁰ Turner's telling of his history, even at its lowest and most endangered hour, was free of shame or regret. He worked to weave the information surrounding his rebellion and his life in ways that would contribute to his reputation as a revolutionary prophet leading a war for freedom. Despite prompting by Thomas Gray, Turner likened his status in prison to that of Jesus on the cross in Rome instead of feeling like an ashamed or foolish person for hoping to succeed.¹⁷¹ And in doing so, he worked opposite the criminal justice system's narrative that those involved were rotten to their core, bloodthirsty savages that would corrupt those around them. Turner utilized his confession, when possible around Gray's imposed middle section, to deliberately weave his own personal telling of his life story to fit his vision of it, and in that way asserted some control over his life history.

Such an effort was not unknown amongst enslaved peoples in Virginia. The efforts of enslavers to control the information and accounts of history amongst enslaved peoples and their communities stretched beyond utilizing punishment or the criminal justice system. Some even went so far as to try to directly shape the history telling of those they enslaved and sold away. Henry Parker, a man born into Virginian slavery in 1835, wrote his autobiography after escaping

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 11.

to freedom.¹⁷² Parker was just a child when his brothers were sold away from their plantation community by their enslaver Benjamin Cooper. Parker recalled being greatly, and justifiably, distressed at the loss of his brothers, but Cooper reacted by telling Parker that “when [he] grew to manhood [he] would forget that [he] ever had any brother.”¹⁷³ Whether Cooper truly believed this himself or if it was simply an attempt to silence and dismiss a grieving enslaved child annoying him, his words are undeniably a deliberate attempt to enter into Parker’s telling of his life story and disrupt his natural vision of himself and of his family. Parker did not forget his brothers, as evidenced by their inclusion in his autobiography published after he escaped to freedom.

Through this, Parker made a similar effort as that done by Nat Turner when he fought to project his own version of his life into his narrative. While writing from freedom, and thus having more control over his story, Parker displayed the efforts of staying true to how he thought of his life in his head and resisting the efforts of enslavers to change that account. Parker also once again exhibited the importance for enslaved peoples of maintaining information about those who mattered to them and spreading it when possible, since that was unfortunately the only part of his brothers remaining in his life.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, the memory of Cooper’s theft of his family and attempt to intervene in Parker’s history telling was centered in his telling of his life story. Because of this incident, Parker vowed to himself that he would help his mother and sisters run away with him to Canada, so that they could live together. Parker then deliberately skipped over the rest of his life story from his childhood to when he ran away in 1859, and told just the story of his escape to freedom.¹⁷⁵ Parker himself identified his desire for freedom as a direct reaction to the lies of

¹⁷² Henry Parker, 1.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Montalvo, 41.

¹⁷⁵ Henry Parker, 1-8.

Cooper, and so his version of his life story ought to be understood as a reactionary telling of his life in opposition to the efforts of his enslaver to interfere in that field.

The lies of Cooper were not unique, however, and not every enslaved person seems to have reacted so directly and forcefully against the notion of forgetting those sold away. London Ferrill was born enslaved in Hanover, Virginia, in 1789 and was freed by his enslaver upon her death, at which time he travelled to Kentucky and became the pastor of the “First Baptist Church of Colored Persons.”¹⁷⁶ A group of Ferrill’s friends and congregation members wrote a biography of him in 1854, and I regard it as a fairly reliable account of Ferrill’s life given the long distance from his birthplace. For his early history to have made it into this account written in Kentucky, the details must have come from Ferrill himself at some point. This telling of Ferrill’s life story began with an account of how his mother was forced away from him and sold away because their enslaver Ann Winston died. This introduction was then followed with the clarifying detail that “thus separated from his mother at eight or nine years of age, but the kindness of his owner buoyed him up, and childlike, he felt but little the want of a kind mother.”¹⁷⁷ It seems highly doubtful that an enslaved child would have his mother stripped away from him at such a young age (though old enough to have developed an incredibly close bond) and not miss them significantly. It does seem possible that Ferrill would view his enslaver with a modicum of kindness after being liberated upon their death, which might have influenced Ferrill’s view of his own history. Thus, as he recounted his life story to his new friends in Kentucky, who then produced this biography, the details regarding his missing of his mother may have been affected by any retrospective views on his enslaver.

¹⁷⁶ *Biography of London Ferrill: Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Colored Person, Lexington KY*, 1-3.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 1.

It does not seem unreasonable, however, that such an idea could also have begun with some member of white society telling London Ferrill a similar idea as that told to Henry Parker. Perhaps Ferrill's enslaver truly was so kind that he felt cared for, but that does not dismiss the fact that a child would very likely miss their mother. This seems likely to be an instance in which the enslavers were successfully able to shift the narrative around Ferrill's life, and which eventually (possibly combined with the later act of his emancipation) shaped the way that his history was told. It is not possible to say with absolute certainty that Ferrill was told he would not miss his mother, nor how much he truly did. However, as ought to be understood by anyone familiar with young children of the age Ferrill was, sudden and permanent separation from his mother should be seen as highly unlikely to result in barely missing them at all. In combination with the story of Parker's life, these two elements in their respective narratives display that there were at least attempts by enslavers to enter into the telling of enslaved peoples' personal life stories. Such interference would have promoted the perception that an inherent element of slavery (forced removal of close family or community members) were not that bad for the enslaved peoples. This downplaying of the brutality of enslaved peoples' experiences clearly sought to promote passiveness amongst the oppressed population and the continuation of the system through mitigating and dismissing stories of harm that might otherwise spark resistance. Through spreading and supporting that notion, the intrusion into enslaved peoples' understanding of their own history would have promoted the stability of slavery in Virginia and the control of enslavers over enslaved peoples. And the enslaved peoples responded by choosing how to shape their story around this intrusion, much like how Turner shaped and curated his confession around his vision of his life's history.

Anthony Burns' biography transcribed by Charles Emery Stevens, mentioned previously in this thesis, had another recollection of ways that Virginian whites sought to twist the ways the personal histories of the enslaved peoples were disseminated into society and generally extract information out of them to benefit the institution. Burns observed markets held, often even directly outside the Courthouse itself, where enslaved peoples were gathered for potential renters or hirers to pick from. Though not directly run by the criminal justice system, the positioning of these events before the courthouse would have physically served as a reminder for the deep connections between the institution of slavery and the legal system. At these gatherings, enslaved peoples were expected to actively work in telling their life stories in ways that appealed to the enslavers shopping on that day.¹⁷⁸ This was done through being expected to alter how they presented their life experiences and what skills they had (driving a coach car, caring for horses, etc.), in a way which seemingly didn't matter to anyone but the enslaved person who "feared god" and didn't want to deliberately distort their presentation about their own lives.¹⁷⁹ Through this encounter, it can be observed the ways in which the slave society worked to interpose into the information and presentation of enslaved peoples, to further the interests of the institution. However, Burns resisted these distortions and made it apparent that enslaved peoples were not passive in this forced infusion of information over them- and at times they suffered punishment for doing so. Burns juxtaposed that those who feared god and refused to alter their experiences would suffer brutal beatings by their enslavers, and yet he spoke with knowledge that such instances did happen.¹⁸⁰

From this, it can be seen that for some enslaved peoples it was so important to remain true to their own versions of their life stories that they endured immense physical pain. Anthony

¹⁷⁸ Johnson, 130-131.

¹⁷⁹ *Anthony Burns*, 160.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Burns himself was not given the option, as his enslaver answered an inquiry into what work he was capable of for him, and stated that he was able to do any work. Thus Burns wound up working at a saw mill plant maintaining a steam engine, and his biography stated that “to this new and strange business the young and inexperienced slave felt a natural aversion.”¹⁸¹ While the narrative lacks further detail regarding what this ‘aversion’ entailed, Burns was quickly hired out to a different enslaver and was promptly put into a different field of work.¹⁸² It seems as though Burns made his own version of his life history, and its distaste for operating machinery, known in some manner strong enough that an enslaver who had paid to hire him found him unserviceable. He had communicated, in some way, information that usurped the version of his life told by the enslaver hiring him out and forced the man hiring him to acknowledge his own perspective. Through whatever means this was, Burns had acted in opposition to the imposed version of his life and had certified his personal control over the information in the world about him. Such an effort reminds one of the ways that Nat Turner constructed his confession and the narrative of his life story to be true to his feelings of a religious call to fight for the liberation of enslaved peoples, or the ways that Henry Parker denied his enslaver’s attempt to construct an alternative and twisted version of his life. More broadly, it becomes apparent that the efforts of the enslavers to control the information available and circulating about enslaved peoples did not go blankly unopposed amongst the enslaved communities. The example of Burns serves as a reminder that the life stories of enslaved peoples, when enslavers sought to shape them, were often still within their agency to control and contest in promoting their version of their histories.

While up to this point the discussion of the control of information seen through Gabriel’s rebellion and Nat Turner’s rebellion have been discussed separately, the experiences of those

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 161.

¹⁸² Ibid.

who faced the criminal justice system will be discussed jointly. This is because the individual story or information of any particular enslaved person who was imprisoned for a time, executed, sold out of Virginia, or released are nearly impossible to parse out from amongst the records. Instead, the various intrusions of the criminal justice system into the control and spread of information amongst enslaved peoples will be better understood when considering and understanding the available comparable examples from the narratives of other enslaved peoples. The narratives of other Virginians who spent time in penal facilities will be utilized to help conjecture what those imprisoned after the rebellions might have experienced. For those who were imprisoned, the criminal justice system at times boosted and at others disrupted the ability of enslaved peoples to transfer information. William Grimes, who was previously mentioned based on his interaction with the badly beaten enslaved man, had that discussion in a jail. The jail was a location where enslaved peoples of various plantations and communities were held together, whether before being sold or whilst being punished for some act, and often were held within such close proximity that they were able to speak with one another. William Grimes wrote of being held within a penal facility and watching other enslaved people be beaten every day, fearing when it would be his turn. During this time, he seemingly learned the history of the enslaved man being forced to whip them, as well as the story of the man “Reuben.”¹⁸³ While William Grimes does not recount these stories to the reader, it is clear that he learned at least the bare details he mentioned in his book, which strongly implies having heard some biographical information about their respective lives. While imprisoned and punished, Grimes was suddenly put into contact and able to learn about enslaved peoples who he might otherwise have never heard from.

¹⁸³ William Grimes, 36.

The life story of Anthony Burns, previously discussed, also involved a similar description of imprisoned enslaved peoples being able to communicate with one another regarding their life stories, encapsulated with the phrase, “There were other slaves in the jail, who were allowed more or less communication with each other...”¹⁸⁴ The criminal justice system’s containment facilities for enslaved peoples seemed to have been a pivotal location where enslaved peoples were able to exchange information about their life stories across plantation community boundaries.¹⁸⁵ Based on these further occurrences, it seems highly probable that those imprisoned after Gabriel’s or Nat Turner’s rebellions would have been able to learn and share information amongst themselves regarding their lives and experiences. And while many of these people were fated to be executed following their trials and sentences of imprisonment, some were eventually released, pardoned, or had their sentences commuted to sale out of the state. In those people the oral histories and details gained in the penal facility would have had the chance to spread and remain within the information networks of the enslaved communities. Indeed, the reach of the information networks may have been expanded by the penal facilities, as they brought enslaved peoples into contact with others whom they might never have met or been able to speak to.

Such communication was not always constrained to just the enslaved people imprisoned together. Bethaney Veney, an enslaved woman born in Virginia in 1805, remained there until she was emancipated after the Civil war, at which point she moved to the North. In the autobiography written when she was 74, she recounted being allowed to approach a jail in which her husband Jerry was held before being sold to settle his enslaver’s debts.¹⁸⁶ Veney and Jerry’s mother were allowed to speak to Jerry through the metal bars in the window, though Veney made clear that they “were denied even the consolation of privacy. This was a necessary part of the

¹⁸⁴ *Anthony Burns*, 190.

¹⁸⁵ Johnson, 16-17.

¹⁸⁶ Bethaney Veney, 20.

system of American slavery. Neither wife nor mother could intervene to soften its rigors one jot”¹⁸⁷ Whether such an occurrence was commonplace is hard to tell, but Veney does not write of it with novelty or that it was a once in a lifetime occurrence. She even described her enslaver and Jerry’s mother’s enslaver giving them permission to travel to the jail to speak with him before being sold, suggesting that this was at least somewhat normal and not seen as a threat towards the institution of slavery in Virginia.¹⁸⁸ It seems possible, though we may never be able to say with certainty, that the permission granted to these two women to visit Jerry was based on their gender and the perception of less threat posed by maternal and matrimonial relationships.¹⁸⁹ Historian Jennifer Morgan depicted the ways in which enslavers sought to utilize the gender of Black enslaved women to “mitigate” or be an “outlet” for the Black male volatility they perceived.¹⁹⁰ The trip of Veney and Jerry’s mother seems to fit into this lens of their femininity in the eyes of their enslavers, as their relationships to Jerry could likely have been perceived as working in the interest of the slave society to maintain order in the plantation community and somehow tame Jerry and other enslaved men. If this was true, then there would have been a distinct space and crucial role for women in the information networks of enslaved peoples amongst their communities. Through embodying elements of their enslavers' perceptions of Black womanhood, it seems as though Veney and Jerry’s mother, and perhaps other enslaved Virginian women, would have been able to gain greater access to information through their relationships. It would be inappropriate and clearly incorrect to suggest that enslaved women’s involvement in the information networks of enslaved communities was strictly limited to continuing maternal, matrimonial, or other familial relationships; Throughout the new world

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 18-19.

¹⁸⁹ Vanessa Holden, *Surviving Southampton: African American Women and Resistance in Nat Turner’s Community* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 34-35.

¹⁹⁰ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 156.

system of slavery, enslaved women engaged in resistance of all kinds and worked to facilitate the spread of information.

In Gabriel's rebellion, Isaac testified that an enslaved woman named Nanny (identified as Gabriel's wife) helped facilitate communication between Solomon and Gabriel in the planning of the rebellion.¹⁹¹ 31 years later in Southampton, an enslaved woman named Lucy was executed for her participation in the rebellion and was not recommended for commutation.¹⁹² These women clearly resisted the systems of enslavement in Virginia in various means, and did so without being bound by the family-gender roles projected by their enslavers. Building upon the ability of Bethaney Veney's and Jerry's mother to speak with an imprisoned man, and thus gain access to otherwise contained and restricted information, these instances of women facilitating information travel whilst planning the two rebellions demonstrated their particular significance in the information networks. The perception of Black masculinity and femininity resulted in different conditions being imposed upon them by their enslavers.¹⁹³ Yet enslaved women, in the area of information, were both able to operate within and outside of these expected statuses. When operating within the expected statuses, they could exploit the assumptions of their civilizing effect on enslaved men in order to gain access to and spread information where it would otherwise have been forbidden. And so it becomes clear that while enslaved women were not limited to their enslavers desired versions of themselves, they were able to utilize those perceptions to further construct or operate information networks.

The penal facilities were not intended by the enslaving class as a location for information exchange, but as a center for containment and punishment. They did seem aware of the fact that

¹⁹¹ Evidence Adduced Against Solomon, The Property of Thomas Henry Prosser in his Trial on the 11th of September, 1800 pg 1. in *Death or Liberty Documents: Gabriel's Conspiracy*, Library of Virginia.

¹⁹² Court Minute Book, Southampton county,.

https://www.brantleyassociation.com/southampton_project/gallery/min_bk_1830-35/index.html, 103.

¹⁹³ Camp, 28.

information was spread in these facilities, though, and at times worked to control the spread that occurred. These efforts took the form of working to prevent enslaved peoples from speaking in penal facilities, forcing enslaved peoples to share alternative (and distorted) versions of their life stories, or using the enslaved people's bodies as communicators of information they wished to inject into the enslaved communities shared information base. The first method is rather clear and operated directly through the criminal justice system, though was of dubious effectiveness in the lived experiences of enslaved peoples. Anthony Burns' autobiography of his life, previously mentioned, included the description of other enslaved peoples getting to speak with each other regarding their lives- but that section was immediately followed with an explanation of why he himself was barred from such communication: "but between them and Burns all communication was strictly prohibited. The taint of freedom was upon him, and infection was dreaded."¹⁹⁴

Burns' life story was deemed far too dangerous to be allowed to enter or spread amongst the Virginia enslaved population because it contained stories of his living as a freeman before being caught in Boston and brought back to Virginia, and the enslavers feared that notion entering the minds of other enslaved peoples. Burns was the target of a deliberate (and unsuccessful) attempt at silencing. The failure of such attempts are made apparent by the information previously included regarding other enslaved peoples that Burns met and saw. Burns' example should be taken as the norm though, as it seems probable that the efforts to silence imprisoned enslaved peoples had varying levels of effectiveness at different times. While some may have been silenced completely, others like Burns would have remained able to communicate. What all of these instances would have contained, however, was the desire to silence the enslaved peoples and disrupt the flow of information. In the instances of Gabriel's and Nat Turner's rebellion, there is no direct evidence whether any of the imprisoned enslaved peoples were or were not

¹⁹⁴ Anthony Burns, 190.

prevented from communicating with others whilst held before and after trial. It seems distinctly possible, though, that similar efforts might have been made. If, in the 1850's when Burns was imprisoned, such a practice was seemingly established and normal, then perhaps the idea of sequestering enslaved peoples with influences promoting resistance and liberty was already around even during the 1830's and 1800's. And if an enslaved person who had just run away was considered to be tainted, then it does not seem to be a stretch to imagine that enslaved peoples involved in active, violent, organized fights for freedom would have been as well. Once again, it is impossible to say with certainty that such things occurred after the rebellions. But it was a method tried on Anthony Burns and could very likely have been attempted previously.

These were not the only attempts at seeking to shut down the spread of information from enslaved peoples deemed too dangerous that occurred in the criminal justice system, as discussed earlier in the previous section of this chapter, with the decisions to execute or sell away enslaved peoples from their communities to remove their influence. The trials after Gabriel's and Nat Turner's rebellion produced a gradient of responses based on the enslavers' perception of the danger posed by that particular enslaved person's influence. In the autobiographical narrative of William Grimes, previously discussed in this thesis, he recalled being sent to jail by his master and told the reader that:

“I was convinced he did not wish to have me imprisoned, but only for me to make an acknowledgment and ask his pardon, for merely my asking him the question I did... all he wanted of me, to set me at liberty, was for me to ask his pardon, and promise never to ask him to sell me again.”¹⁹⁵

In this instance, Grimes' enslaver 'Doctor Collock' can be understood to be using the jail space to separate Grimes from other enslaved people in an effort to remove his negative influence from his community. By asking his enslaver to sell him away, done out of open hatred to Collock,

¹⁹⁵ William Grimes, 47.

Grimes had engaged in an open form of resistance to his condition on Collock's plantation. In response, Collock severely beat Grimes and then sent for a constable to take Grimes away—though apparently with the understanding that if he counteracted his public resistance with a form of public fealty and asserted that his enslaver was superior in status to him, he could return or not even leave in the first place.¹⁹⁶ Through doing so, both Collock and the criminal justice system were seeking to remove the influence of an enslaved person from his community, unless Grimes put on a performance for those around him. Doing so would have been generating an image, memory, and potentially a piece of history circulating in the enslaved information networks about Collock and Grimes—one that would have reinforced the stability of slavery on that plantation and in the state generally.

As shown previously in this thesis, another result of the criminal justice system to Nat Turner's rebellion after it ended were harsh limits on their abilities to attend religious meetings or to learn how to read and write. These actions were remembered by James Lindsay Smith, who was enslaved in Virginia and escaped to freedom in 1837, later publishing his autobiography in 1884. Smith remembered Turner's rebellion occurring, as well as the reactionary restrictions. Smith described that "Nat Turner was one of the slaves who had quite a large army; he was the captain to free his race."¹⁹⁷ In this quote, the description of Turner seems to carry with it the image of a martyr who was meant to bring about liberation but died for the cause. Clearly the attempts of the criminal system, through executing or selling away involved enslaved peoples, did not succeed in shaping the memory of Nat Turner amongst the enslaved communities as a futile attempt. While Smith spoke of Turner with the definite end forced upon him by the execution, he also spoke with what appears to have been hope. In that way, it seems apparent that

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 45-46.

¹⁹⁷ James Lindsay Smith, 30.

the version of Nat Turner's history surviving amongst the enslaved communities of Virginia was not one of doomed failure or painful demise, but of aspirational efforts and martyrdom. Smith also remembered that after Turner's rebellion enslaved people were forbidden from holding their own religious meetings, and he implied that such measures were attempted to be enforced in his community as well. However, Smith wrote that "notwithstanding our difficulties, we used to steal away to some of the quarters to have our meetings."¹⁹⁸ Once again, Smith and his community seem to have subverted the attempts of the courts and laws to control the enslaved peoples, this time through maintaining avenues by which information networks were able to operate. This was a method of deliberate control over information networks that the enslavers sought to enact over the enslaved communities afterwards. As shown in the planning of Gabriel's rebellion, meetings for funeral sermons were instrumental in planning the revolt. For Turner, his religious gatherings were the origin of his preparing the community to revolt and of spreading the notion of fighting for liberty. Yet despite the clear significance of shutting down such meetings for maintaining the stability of the slave society, Smith made it apparent that such methods failed to prevent them entirely. Thus, the information networks of the enslaved communities remained present in those spaces, though seemingly it was more difficult.

The criminal justice system can also be observed inserting itself into the communities and histories of enslaved people through working to forcefully inject information into Virginian society. Anthony Burns, whose autobiography transcribed by Charles Emery Stevens was mentioned earlier, when discussing the ways in which his imprisoners sought to prevent him speaking with any other enslaved peoples due to his "taint of freedom." However, those same people would routinely force him outside of the jail in front of a crowd of gathered white people and make him tell parts of his life story. This happened every day, and was described as follows:

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

“[T]wenty or thirty persons in a day would call to gaze upon him. On these occasions, his fetters were taken off and he was conducted down to the piazza in front of the jail. His visitors improved the opportunity to express their opinion of his deserts; having no pecuniary interest in his life, they were anxious that it should be sacrificed for the general good of slaveholders.”¹⁹⁹

There was no interest in hearing his real life story, only the parts of his life that interested the white public and would serve to bolster the institution of slavery. Burns was being forced into delivering information to audiences, but he was barred from telling his history in his own way. The criminal justice system clearly had an interest in inserting information that supported stability, and did so in ways that disrupted the spreading of enslaved people’s information or life stories. Sections of his story were all that the white society was interested in hearing, and they forced him to retell those parts at least once a day, every day, for 2-3 weeks by his memory.²⁰⁰ Such instances call to mind the testimony produced by the enslaved peoples at the trials of those involved in the rebellion, during which the questions asked and true words of the enslaved were removed from the records. There too, the enslaved people’s actual experiences and words were not deemed important to record or listen to. Instead, the information that would work to promote the stability for the white society and institution of slavery was drawn out, and anything else was deliberately discarded. These were efforts by the criminal justice system to control the information enslaved peoples were able to introduce into Virginia. Such occurrences necessitate the critical analysis of any account of an enslaved person’s life told by a white person in southern society who did not have the direct and consensual collaboration of that enslaved person. The methods by which information was obtained by white society, and thus often the only way is entered into the archives, was built and heavily prone to distort in ways which support the stability of a slave society.

¹⁹⁹ Anthony Burns, 190.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

The information suggested about the experiences of the enslaved peoples involved in Gabriel's conspiracy and Nat Turner's rebellion through studying the narratives of other enslaved peoples is complex but strongly points to tension over the control of information in Virginia. The archives regarding the rebellions themselves make apparent the well-established and maintained networks of information and their use for organized resistance, but the addition of speculation supported by the narratives suggests that these networks were crucial for the organization of communities, the preservation of personal histories, as well as the survival of individual enslaved peoples. The Richmond and Southampton communities were very likely already connected across property lines to other plantations, as information networks seem to have been crucial for enslaved communities. The enslavers' and white society sought to interfere in these networks however, which was principally done through the criminal justice system. Execution, sale out of state, sequestration in penal facilities, or forced distortion of one's personal history for the presentation to whites were all demonstrated in the narratives, and likely experienced by those involved in either of the rebellions as well. Enslaved people who encountered the criminal justice system, however, were still able to maintain and even expand their communication networks beyond their original reach, through encountering new people or information within the walls of the penal facility. Overall, while enslavers' efforts to influence and control the information in enslaved peoples' communities are apparent in the archives, so too are the responses of enslaved people to further their access to knowledge and pathways of information.

Conclusion

William Grimes ended his autobiography with the following proclamation:

“If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave[,] I would in my will, leave my skin a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious happy and free America. Let the skin of an American slave, bind the charter of American Liberty.”²⁰¹

Grimes’ hesitance to have his skin actually bind the constitution seems unlikely to have been based upon the look of his scarred back, as that would only have added to the statement of American hypocrisy he sought to make. Indeed, I suggest that his statement was one of regret that his scarred and damaged skin would be unable to become leather due to its damage. In that way, the institution of slavery in Virginia once again robbed him of his wishes and ability to communicate freely. Grimes chose to end the story of his life with a direct and poignant message on the inherent hypocrisy of American law at the time. The document which “established justice” and “secure[d] the blessings of liberty” had stood watch over his repeated beatings and torture, and Grimes called out the blatant discrepancies between his lived history and the words of white America. Throughout writing this thesis, this quotation from Grimes’ writing constantly came back into my mind, and it has deeply impacted my understanding not just of his personal life but of enslaved peoples’ perspectives of American law at the time. Grimes made clear that the hypocrisy amongst the laws in America was apparent, and appalling, to enslaved peoples in 19th century Virginia.

But he also reminds those of us looking back on the period today of the silence of the hundreds of thousands of other enslaved Virginians whose histories would have contained other stories, those that have not been preserved in the archive or those which the enslavers intentionally sought to prevent from ever being spread. It was the initial goal and aim of this

²⁰¹ William Grimes, 68.

thesis to help suggest what might likely have been thought, said, or done amongst the enslaved peoples in Virginia. When setting out to research and write on that topic, the importance of information control in Virginia, information networks amongst enslaved peoples, and the criminal justice system were repeatedly and unavoidably connected throughout the archival documents. The cases of the Richmond and Southampton resistance plans became central, as clear and (comparatively) well documented instances where enslaved communities' information networks and the criminal justice system were put into heightened levels of interaction with each other. As this paper has demonstrated, these two rebellions sparked fear amongst the white Virginia population and this fear was quelled through seeking to control the information and history of the rebellions. This effort then stepped into the courtroom, with official accounts of the events being certified through Magistrates gavels, including enslaved people's perspectives and information only so far as it aided the efforts at promoting the institution of slavery. These stories were put to work, supporting and justifying various increased methods of control over enslaved peoples' access to and influence over information. The control of information and communication pathways amongst enslaved populations was pivotal not only to planning these rebellions but also to the general life and survival of enslaved peoples and their communities. These networks were also heavily impacted by the criminal justice system before and after the rebellions. Through analyzing these events, it becomes apparent that information and its spread in the 19th century Virginia slave society was incredibly important to enslaved communities as well as their enslavers. Our understanding of American history must include a focus not only on the events but also on the pathways and methods which facilitated the events. In other words, a focus on who was able to influence or control information, and how, is necessary to better understand the events which unfolded. Additionally, our understanding of how the archives were

shaped and formed regarding otherwise heavily discussed events will only further promote better scholarship and understanding of the events themselves.

Gabriel's conspiracy and Nat Turner's rebellion have been some of the most widely discussed instances of resistance to slavery by enslaved Americans. But both incidents, when studied together, have helped to speak to the nature of slavery and enslaved people's lives in 19th century Virginia generally. During and after both rebellions, the information networks of enslaved peoples and the control of information was heavily contested by white Virginians. I believe that this thesis has contributed to the historiography of these two events by centering the where, what, how, and who of information pathways in their communities. Historical works which focus on the pure facts and occurrences of these rebellions have been pivotal to this thesis, and are necessary for the broader field, but they had previously lacked dedicated efforts to understand the conflict over information in Virginia more broadly. Regarding both of these events, this conflict over information has shaped the current day archives through which to study them, and so careful analysis of how and what happened can enable more informed understandings of the communities involved. Finally, though this study has been restricted to Virginia, I hope that its ability to illuminate the lived realities of enslaved peoples working to establish and maintain information networks can help or prompt future understandings of similar processes in other areas that experienced chattel slavery. The tension and conflict regarding control of information, often fought with references to or inside the criminal justice system, has impacted our ability to understand the past. To acknowledge it and address it is necessary to advance our understanding of those who suffered being enslaved. That more broad goal, in turn, I believe is necessary in order to fully understand Atlantic history and thus the world today.

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