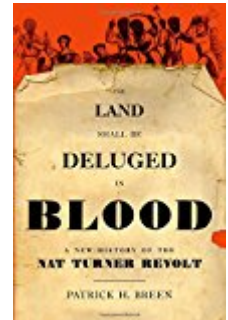


**Patrick H. Breen.** *The Land Shall Be Deluged in Blood: A New History of the Nat Turner Revolt.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 320 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-982800-5.



**Reviewed by** Robert Paquette

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**Commissioned by** David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

On Sunday, August 21, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia, a thirty-something enslaved religious enthusiast named Nat Turner unleashed an insurrection that would pile up more white corpses (fifty-five) than any other slave insurrection in US history. The rebels, which at peak probably numbered fewer than sixty slaves, killed mostly women and children. Although crushed within forty-eight hours, Turner's smallish band succeeded in striking more than a dozen households and terrorizing a large swath of whites in more than one state, well beyond the revolt's restricted ambit. Indeed, no domestic slave insurrection had a more profound impact on the southern United States. From Virginia to Louisiana, slaveholding elites reacted to the uprising by taking a variety of measures to tighten up security, targeting not only slaves but free persons of color as well. Some proslavery southerners on the road to secession would look back at Turner's bloodletting as a kind of crossing of the threshold in their thinking about slavery and on the principles needed to defend it.

Precisely because slaves rank as one of the most disadvantaged groups in history in organizing resistance to oppression, slave plots that did get off the ground prove most illuminating targets of analysis. Patrick H. Breen has researched Turner's rebellion for more than a decade. He has unearthed important new information on the content and course of the insurrection. Inspired by the work of the late historian Eugene Genovese, Breen asks important questions about Turner's thinking, his goals and those of his followers, and the responses of both blacks and whites in Southampton County to the event.

Whenever authorities anywhere use the word "spontaneously" to describe the eruption of any act of collective violence, listeners should immediately be cautioned to suspect that either the authorities do not know what happened or are engaged in purposive deception about what happened. Although Breen raises questions about Turner's capacity as a strategist, fighter, and leader, design and planning went into the uprising. In touch with the Holy Spirit and with visions of race

war dancing in his head, Turner had originally planned to strike on July 4, but sickness caused him to postpone action. He wisely kept his plan confined initially to a small group of four others. The rebels started by attacking households with which they were quite familiar, to get recruits and to seize money, weapons, and munitions. Some of the rebels clearly knew how to handle guns. Newspaper reports claimed that many white men in Southampton County, for generations a hotbed of religious revivalism, had departed shortly before the outbreak of violence to camp meetings across the border in Gates County, North Carolina. If true, perhaps Turner's calculations were affected by the perceived weakening of the balance of forces against him. "In some cases," Breen concludes, "the torture after Nat Turner's revolt produced useful intelligence" (p. 80). The flogging of Turner's wife yielded an incriminating list, which also revealed design in Turner's mind.

The bloodletting began with Joseph Travis, a decent fellow, according to Turner's own testimony, owner of the farm on which Turner worked, and stepfather of the adolescent (Putnam Moore) who actually owned Turner. In seeking to terrorize whites with indiscriminate slaughter of the nits as well as the lice, Turner hoped to recruit on the march by forcing the hand of slaves reluctant to enlist. On that score, as Breen demonstrates, Turner had miserable success. Numerous slaves helped whites survive the rebellion, and on the plantation of Dr. Samuel Blunt, armed slaves helped fend off Turner's band. If his endgame after plundering the county seat of Jerusalem was the securing of some sort of "foothold" in the region within which to negotiate a settlement with whites to end bondage (p. 33), then it is difficult to credit Turner's conscious terrorism as part of any kind of coherent, credible strategy. At any rate, the goals of leaders and soldiers do not always mesh. Turner clearly had trouble keeping his followers in line, several being captured after getting dead drunk on the apple brandy for which the county was famous. After the decisive confronta-

tion with two fortuitously converging white forces at the estate of James Parker, Turner had little success on the run trying to rebuild his scattered force.

Breen's substantial study should be read in conjunction with David Allmendinger's *Nat Turner and the Rising in Southampton County* (2014)—a book that Breen did not have a chance to consult before his went to press. Both authors could have done more in exploring the religious context and dimensions of the revolt led by the premillennialist, antinomian Turner. Allmendinger proves superior in clarifying the intricate networks of kith and kin involved in the revolt. Breen proves superior in thinking of the revolt in the context of the historiography on slave resistance. Both reach similar conclusions about the authenticity of Turner's voice in the *Confessions*, the pamphlet that contains the result of Turner's transcribed jailhouse interrogation as to what motivated him to do what he did. Both corroborate important findings originally made by historian William Drewry in a book published in 1900 and too often written off by postmodern scholars because of its Jim-Crow-era racist coloring. Both credit attorney William C. Parker with providing a very accurate description of Turner, down to the balding spot on the top of his head. Both agree that the Thomas Wentworth Higginson/Herbert Aptheker estimate of more than one hundred slaves summarily killed in the frenzy of repression that immediately followed Turner's defeat should probably be cut by more than half. Breen has a particularly good chapter on how elites in Southampton and beyond stepped forward to clamp down on white mob activity, proceed to orderly trials, and control the narrative of what happened.

Four years after the revolt, the citizens of Southampton County gathered at the courthouse to address growing concerns about the threat posed to their security and property by nefarious agents of organized abolitionism in the North. The committee formed to devise a plan of action in-

cluded Jeremiah Cobb, the presiding magistrate in Turner's trial; Colonel Parker, the local attorney and militia leader who provided Governor John Floyd with Turner's description; and Thomas R. Gray, the down-in-the-pocket lawyer responsible for seizing the opportunity to interrogate Turner while in jail and producing the singular document known as Turner's *Confessions*. Nowhere in the resolutions composed to rally slaveholders in resisting a fanatical enemy did the authors once mention Turner. Curiously, unlike other southern observers who were quick in jumping to the application of post hoc logic in placing the blame for Turner's rebellion on outsiders, the principals of the Southampton committee, at least on this occasion, drew no explicit causal connection between creeping abolitionist agitation and the insurrection of 1831. Trusting the evidence of their own senses, Cobb, Parker, and Gray would have had difficulty in locating Nat Turner's revolt outside the mind of Nat Turner.

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